Prospects and Challenges of Multiplicity and Plurality in Contemporary India

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Abstract

The advent of Globalisation and Postmodernism has drastically changed the way human beings have understood the world. These two together have changed the contours of the world for ever. In India too, our centuries old habit of coexistence was questioned by the unbridled flow of ideas related to identity and religiosity, a product of post modernism and Globalisation. This paper is an attempt to construct the future of two notions like multiplicity and plurality in the context of the emerging geopolitical order at one level and the emerged postmodern bend of mind, promoting all sorts of identities.

Multiculturalism as an idea is synonymous to 'unity in diversity' in India. It is a judicious combination of the existence of multiplicity and plurality. It reveres cultural diversity and imagines a society in which different communities shape a common identity while retaining their cultural provenance. When modern democratic societies hold multiculturalism they demonstrate a deeper and more profound egalitarian impulse within them than the mere presence of plural cultures. Multiculturalism recognises the existence of diverse communities, but what is more important is that, it accords positive value to the collective identities of all ethnic communities. It pictures a society which is characterized not by multiple cultural solitudes or endemic cultural strife, but by communities living together and participating as equal partners in national political life. As such, multiculturalism represents a new kind of universalism – one where integration of individuals into the state is not predicated on a total disengagement from particularistic community ties. Rather, people are included into the nation state as members of diverse but equal ethnic groups. And the state recognizes that the dignity of individuals is linked to the collective dignity of the community to which they belong. This radical redefinition of a democratic polity makes multiculturalism a normative value that is applicable as much to the modern liberal democracies of the West as it is to modernizing polities like India. This paper is an attempt to critically engage the prospects of multiculturalism, what is commonly

read in India as unity in diversity, in the context of political and cultural majoritarian tendencies in the body politic of contemporary India.

Hinduism is not a religion as per the western, Christian framework of a religion, having a universal doctrine, texts, practices and Gods. In T N Madan's view, "Hinduism is a federation of faiths, which has a horizontal as well as vertical distribution rather than a single homogenous religion."(Madan 1) The people who lived on either side of the river Sindhu were described as Hindus. It was an all-inclusive term, undermining all the differences in terms of texts, doctrines and practices. The colonial administrators later used the nomenclature Hindus / Hindooism to refer to these people, to represent the Indian reality in an essentialist manner to control the colonized. The religion that existed in India, at the initial stages of colonization, was diverse one with internal plurality as its chief feature. There was diversity in text, rituals and practices and even Gods. Having a Christocentric notion of religion, the Europeans identified the diversity as an intimidating factor and attempted to homogenize the Indian religious tradition. This homogenisation attempt has drastically altered the contours of Hinduism. But in liberalised India, contrary to the general expectation, community identities have not dissolved in market economies or liberal democracies. No society is so completely modern or homogenized that collective group identities cease to be of relevance to its members. The democratic citizen remains simultaneously embedded in a variety of particularistic ties. To believe that he is a deracinated individual, unconstrained by previous loyalties and identities is to grossly misread the human condition. Given this reality, multiculturalism, in India attempted to initiate policies that allow citizens to maintain their cultural distinctiveness. It sustains cultural diversity and helps in the forward movement of societies by engendering a broad-based acquiescence which is not thwarted or prejudiced by religious or cultural intolerance.

The coexistence of multiculturalism and democracy is neither fortuitous nor accidental. Only democracy can reach out and explore formats of interaction that presume equality and respect. It is this concern for equality that precludes the possibility of democracy being ever associated with majoritarianism – either of the political or cultural type. The dangers of political majoritarianism are by now widely accepted. They have become an assimilated ingredient in the metabolism of modern democracies. Multiculturalism adds to this awareness by sensitizing us to the dangers of cultural majoritarianism. In particular, it points to the way in which cultural majoritarianism disadvantages minorities, alienates them, enhances conflicts between communities and limits self-understanding.

Remedying minority discrimination does not involve an act of benevolence on the part of the majority towards the minority. This is to be addressed by framing policies that ensure full and equal membership to all communities within the state. This may, at times, require special consideration or even collective rights for vulnerable minorities who have been the victims of forced assimilation or exclusion. Group rights may also be given to preserve the diverse minority cultures against homogenization by the nation state. They must not therefore be regarded as, or confused with, policies of appeasement and containment of minorities. All forms of special consideration and group rights have nevertheless to be

justified in a democracy. Since rights granted to communities may not only fulfil expressive identity needs but also their instrumental power needs, what rights are granted to whom and under what circumstances has to be carefully examined in each instance. Further, as some community rights clash with and restrict individual rights, it is equally necessary to see whether special rights for minorities guard against cultural majoritarianism or uphold existing structures of domination within the community. So the threat to multiculturalism in India takes its origin from the politics of resource use. It can happen in the name of region, religion or community and caste affiliations. Communalism is a consciousness that depends heavily on religious identity and is used as a base for political and social purposes. It is "… the strivings of religious, ethnic, social or linguistic communities to assert their particularity against the generalizing elements in the concept of the nation." (Gottlob 149). There is a marked increase in the graph of communal sentiments in contemporary India. This paper wishes to analyze the premises on which majoritarian communal identity is created and sustained in India. It will explore the socio-psychological foundation and the political atmosphere that enables the communalists to propagate nefarious ideas, unveiling the strategies adopted by them for a religious revival in contemporary India. In India multiculturalism came along with the inauguration of democracy.

In this respect India is quite unique. While our Constitution, with great foresight, allowed for universal adult franchise, minority protection and positive discrimination for the historically deprived, India still has a long way to go. The constitutional emphasis on inter-group equality justified special consideration for segregated communities and minorities, but it left the agenda of intra-group equality unattended. Consequently, cultural community rights could be appropriated to protect structures of domination and patriarchy. The stigma left by the colonizers have developed a non-existent impression of a historical antagonism between these two religions. They also developed a habit of viewing social phenomenon in a binary way. This enabled them to develop a theory of historical hostility between these religions. Animosity became the chief trait in the mind of India and the revivalists are trying to perpetuate it. In short, the Indian people developed a habit of looking at differences and conflicts through a glass of this non-existent rage. Adapting this framework, the Hindu Nationalists developed questionable theory that in the light of minority consolidation, a sense of 'ones' among Hindus is absolutely essential. They legitimise the Hindu violence by interpreting it as a natural response of a displaced majority.

Religious violence is not a new phenomenon in India. People are instigated and motivated negatively to indulge in violence. The real reason behind the violence is masked and fabricated stories are spread to incite religious fervour in India. Besides, in the context of an underdeveloped economy where resources are few and the claims on them many, and from diverse quarters, collective identities are often mobilized for political and economic gains. This is why identities have taken on a very potent form in which the concerns of multiculturalism have been transformed into policies of appeasement and containment. Problems of this nature which have emerged in the context of economic unevenness and underdevelopment make it incumbent to be ever vigilant of special group rights that are either demanded or given under the banner of multiculturalism in India. The Hindu Nationalists have described all the others as

pseudo secularist and questioned the essence of secularism itself. They have misinterpreted it as minority appeasement. On the other hand, the rest of the political formation, of all hues, has described the Hindu Nationalist as crypto fascists. Even though the description is partly true, it undermines the circumstances which promote, sustain and nurture such an attitude in society. This division results in the collision of two narcissisms (Kakar 212). As a continuation of this trend, the Hindu Nationalists equated the question of national identity with territorial integrity with a view to exclude Muslims implicitly. The identification of India as Hindu nation implied the exteriorization of the non-Hindus (Gottlob 150). When "a group is misrecognised, denigrated, deliberately falsified, marginalized or suppressed by the state or by a dominant group in society"(Bhargava,413).

Multiculturalism is not just the acceptance of diversity and multiple solitudes without a common public agenda. It is neither a gift of liberal democracy nor an optional policy within a democracy. It is not as if a democracy can choose to be multicultural or not. Every democracy must necessarily be multicultural if the democratic and liberal temper in it is to survive. Far from being an option, multiculturalism actually gives democracy its health and vigour. Finally, multiculturalism is not only about inter-group relations but also informs relations within a community. Respect for other cultures is always premised on first respecting the individual citizen. A democratic form of government with a strong constitution and a lot of programmes for the economic development of the country was planned and executed. The first two decades gave a ray of hope to the deprived people. But as time elapsed, the people were disillusioned due to rampant corruption and administrative failure to achieve the noble aim in view. 'The bankruptcy of socialism' as described by Ashis Nandy and T.N Madan has created a vacuum in society and religious revivalists grabbed the opportunity to spread their ideas by providing alternate forms of development to win the confidence of the people. So India's new communalism has arisen during a struggle to reconstruct India politically. (Ludden 18). A perceived discrimination from the State (Kakar 360) will generate discontent among people.

The 1980s witnessed a series of events which was utilized by the revivalists. The country deflected from the established secular credentials. As a result, a narrow and parochial view was developed in the social mind. This helped in instigating a religious revival. The administrative measures undertaken by Gandhi administration in the light of Shah Bano case and the sati of Roop Kanwar helped in creating ill feeling, suspicion and rift in the society. The Hindu Nationalists pointed out the different policies followed by the administrators and hinted at double standard of the character of the government in dealing with matters related to faith. By strongly articulating sectarian views, the Hindu Nationalists converted the Hindus to a people with community-in-the-mind.(Freud, quoted in Kakar 361). They were made to believe that their community aspect of religious identity is threatened and the only palpable solution seems to be converting India into Hindusthan. In order to effect this change, Muslims were targeted and excluded from the mainstream. The imposition of a constricted account of historical phenomenon explains the contemporary Hindus love for Lord Rama and his place of birth. It is clear that the contemporary religious revival in India is a fabricated one as Ashis Nandy opined, "… the intolerant Hindu nationalism itself is an

illegitimate child of modern India, not of Hindu tradition."(Nandy 78) The whole body politic of contemporary India has been divided as either crypto-fascist or as pseudo secularist. (Kakar 208). It is a fact that both Europeans and Muslims came to this country and Europeans retained their separate identity where as Muslims accommodated to the existing situation. But it is strange to see that Europeans were described by Hindus as *the Stranger* and Muslims as *the Other*. Making Islam appear foreign to India is part of the project of making India Hindu. (Ludden 5). This 'otherisation' has resulted in the emergence of a lot of cultural groups among Muslims which are veiled religious fundamental organizations.

The Hindu Nationalist version of Indian tradition argues that Hinduism is indigenous and Islam is alien in India. On the other hand, over a period of time, Islam too was indigenized in India. Yet the Hindu Nationalists have undermined this aspect to develop collective antagonism and a separate communal identity in post independent India. The ideology of hate developed by them contributed to the revival of religious identities. The attempt to interpret everything in the backdrop of Hindutva ideology on all matters results in the further alienation of minorities from the mainstream. The post independent era witnessed a struggle to reconstruct India politically and culturally. The administrators devised strategies to achieve their aims. In the latter part of 1980s, systematic effort was undertaken by Hindu Nationalists to effect a topsy turvy in Indian political scenario. The Hindu Nationalists described their effort as an attempt to avenge the 'ancient humiliation' caused to the Hindus specifically by the Muslim/Mughal rulers. The actions of the Mughal emperors were positioned in a new light leaving enough room for misrepresentation. Particular events like the alleged destruction of Hindu temples by the Mughals were re-presented to alienate the Muslims from the mainstream. The mythologized and psychologised accounts were transferred to Hindus to be internalized. Misrepresenting the precepts of Hinduism was very easy as majority of Hindus are oblivious of the precepts of Hinduism. They were apprised of a 'sacred' past and the challenges posed before it by the Muslim rulers over a period of time. This selective retrieval of doctrinal belief furthered the cause of the Hindu Nationalists. Religious symbols were presented in a different cast echoing narrow sectarian connotations. The interpretations disregarded the universality of these symbols. The representation of the Orient by the West was instrumental in the revival of religious revival. The Europeans rationalized their world dominance by the creation of their own knowledge. The Oxidant looked at the Orient in stereotypes. The British account of Indian history presented Hindus and Muslims as juxtaposed resulting in cultural exclusion. The estrangement of Hindus from Muslims or vice versa proves it all. European version of Indian history was not yet been completely dismissed even after independence. An all encompassing synchronized version of Indian heritage is yet to emerge.

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