

## MULTICULTURALISM AND ITS CRITIQUE

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"Different but equals", this is the hallmark of multiculturalism. The term multiculturalism generally refers to an applied ideology of racial, cultural and ethnic diversity within the demographics of a specified society of polity. While living with differences is a fact of our social existence, multiculturalism reflects upon the status of difference cultural communities within a polity and advocates a society that extends equitable status to distinct cultural groups, with no one culture predominating. The equality in the realm of public domain is the prism through which multiculturalism examines the subject of democratic citizenship. As such, multiculturalism is opposed to mono-cultural projects of nation state, homogenization and has the context of special minority rights. It speaks of minoritization cultural discrimination lies at the center of multicultural debate.

Through multiculturalism began as philosophy in the pragmatic movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and then as political and cultural pluralism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (The idea of "plural society" of William James in his pluralistic universe - 1909). There are dissimilarities between pluralism and multiculturalism which will be explained later in the paper.

It is also connected with communitarianism but here also multiculturalism goes beyond mere group rights.

### **THE EVOLUTION**

Multiculturalism is best understood neither as a political doctrine with a programmatic content nor a philosophical school with a distinct theory of man's place in the world but as a perspective on or a way of viewing human life. The multicultural movement emerged only in recent past. The 1970's saw this emergence first in Canada (in the context of Quebec Question) and then in Australia, USA, UK and even a conservative nation state like France which takes no official note of citizens' ethnic cultural affiliations even in decennial census. Multiculturalism in Canada was first attempted by a Senator Paul Yuzyk in 1964 and it was officially introduced as a policy in 1971. The American "Melting Pot" theory which implies that all the cultures are mixed and amalgamated in a melting pot without state intervention and it creates an assimilated American culture, was seen as destroying the cultural diversity. Multiculturalism, in its place, celebrates this diversity with emphasis on unrestrained expression of equality. Multiculturalists also criticize the Australian policy of ethnic selection which has historically barred the non-Anglo-Saxon settlers. The 1990's saw a resurgence of multicultural theorists and thinkers like Will Kymlica, Amy Gutmen, Joseph Carens, Bhikhu Parekh, John Horton, Dipankar Gupta, Charles Taylor, Gurpreet Mahajan and others bringing to the fore a critique of liberalism insofar as nation state and minority rights are concerned. Will Kymlica, through his "context of experience" asserts that self identification with a community provides a framework to evaluate one's position within the society and crucial for personal development.

Multiculturalism questions the idea of universal citizenship and instead speaks of differentiated citizenship and group differentiated rights. Bhikhu Parekh views multiculturalist perspective as the creative interplay of three important and complimentary

insights - the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability and desirability of cultural pluralism and the plural and multicultural constitution of each culture.

The first i.e., cultural embeddedness means that citizens grow up and live within a culturally structured world and organize their lives and social relations in terms of a culturally derived system of meaning and significance. Secondly, different cultures represent different systems of meaning and vision of good life. Since each is limited in its realization of human capacities and existence, it needs other cultures to help it understand better and expand its intellectual - moral horizon. Third, every culture is internally plural and reflects a continuing conversation between its various traditions of thought.

### **A Critique of Liberal Formulation**

Multiculturalism is critical to the basic premise of liberalism and formal - legal equality extended under the constitution and 'rule of law'. The liberal notion of nation state with emphasis on 'creating' unity and monoculture is also not appreciated by the multiculturalists. The equality in all public spaces is a major part of contemporary discourse on multicultural democratization. Democracy values the principle of non discrimination and ensures that socially ascribed identities such as caste, race, gender etc. do not become a source of discrimination. Multiculturalism is not just about minority right, but about special rights to assert the identity differences. It argues the community membership gives individual an specific history and context and hence community identities are important and constructive of self.

### **Multiculturalism, Pluralism and Communitarianism**

Cultural Pluralism is not a modern phenomena. The history is replete with many instances of peaceful co-existence of many cultures within a polity like Roman, Egyptian and Persian Empires. The Ottomen Millet System provided a firm scheme of legal pluralism and tolerance. But it lacked multi-cultural ethos because of "dominant cultures". It is the stress on equality in the domain of public and symbolic that distinguished multiculturalism from pluralism.

In pluralism, there is a clear and visible system of hierarchy and dominance between the competing cultural groups. Tolerance and peaceful co-existence remains till the dominance of a pre-dominant group is unambiguously accepted. The moment this implicit structure of dominance is challenged openly or even indirectly, tolerance and peace swiftly evaporates. Then, it leads to forceful assertion of supremacy such as desecration of holy places which symbolizes community dignity and prestige. Hence, even in modern liberal constitutionalism, the presence of close interaction and co-existence have latent signs of inequality. The example of Germany, which till recently, had no formal Islamic mosque, is an eye opener in this regard. Unlike, multicultural the dominance in plural societies is frequently expressed in political and symbolic terms like the issue of Saraswati Vandana and Vande Matram in India.

The multicultural conception of individual self and community bears a strong resemblance to communitarians. Both locate the individual in community, both cherish community membership and both begins with a critique of liberalism. However, there are few points which differentiates the two communitarianism sees individuals as being constituted only by their communities, but several theorists of multiculturalism dissociate themselves from this idea of a constituted self. For them, community membership does not foreclose options of questioning or revising the existing way of life. So, unlike communitarianism, multiculturalism abandons the notion of a 'radically situated self'. Then there a difference of opinion on nation status as committed to shared conceptions of good. Multiculturalism believes in an accommodative nation state. While communitarians give primacy to participation, multiculturalists favour a regime of special minority right.

### **A CRITIQUE**

Skeptics of multiculturalism often debate whether the multicultural ideal of co-existing cultures that interrelate and influence one another, and yet remain distinct is sustainable, paradoxical or even desirable within the parameters of a national polity. The critics point out that the contemporary discourses on multiculturalism and mostly silent about the community as a site of discrimination and, that privileging community against the nation state creates a sense of insecurity among the citizens. Related to this, the critics also point out the reducing of individual in the multicultural scheme. The communities fix roles and identities, encourage conformity and suppress the growth of individual self. By putting a high premium on adherence to collective norms and goals, communities stifle the creative dimension of human self. Here, the critics assert the right to exit and the right to non-conformity.

Then, the multiculturalist attempt to identify minorities and give them special rights is also very problematic in the sense that as Dipanker Gupta says, minoritisation is not fixed and is a continuing process. So, minorities emerge according to political and social circumstance. Thus minority discrimination cannot be addressed merely by extending special rigid to some recognized minorities. Communities are not stable formations and undergo context related changes. Further, multiculturalists are not clear about the probable appropriation of minority agenda by the traditional inward looking elites within the community. One of the criticisms of multiculturalism is that the colonial discourse of dichotomies between 'us' and 'Them' persist even within multicultural discourse. This stands in the way of proclaimed goal of equal treatment and creating a psyche of equality. The liberal feminist critique is concerned with what happens inside the cultural groups. In her essay "Is multiculturalism bad for women", the feminist theorist Susan Okin argues that a concern for the preservation of cultural diversity should not overshadow the discriminatory nature of gender roles in many 'traditional minority cultures'. Multiculturalism chains people to the roots and communities get freedom to mistreat the vulnerable sections like downtrodden, homosexuals and even children in some cases. Hence, personal laws in India are also under the constant scanner of the critics.

Apart from these criticisms, the American-Western critics point out the dangers of ever-increasing ethnic identity politics, fragmentation and undermining of national unity. In 1991, Arthur Schlesinger in his book "The Disuniting of America : Reflections on a Multi Cultural Society" questions the "Cult of Ethnicity" and selective treatment of western heritage. Similarly, Samuel Huntington describes multiculturalism basically as anti-western ideology; Echoing Huntington, Patrice Buchanan describes multiculturalism as an across the board assault on our Anglo-American heritage. They argue that multiculturalism is the ideology of the 'modern managerial state'.

In his book "Culture and Equality : An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism" in 2002. Brian Barry argues that multiculturalism can divide people why they need to unite to fight for social justice. One of the severest critics of multiculturalism are the votaries of nation, state and nationalism. Thus, Leo Makinstry, a British said of multiculturalism 'Britain is now governed by a suicide cult bent on wiping out any last vestige on nationhood.' The critics feel a counter nationalist upsurge of KU-Klux-Klan variety, already visible in some countries in the form of anti-immigrant populist rhetoric.

Democratic polity presupposes the absence of cultural discrimination. But the way liberal nation state viewed cultural diversity was considered inadequate for the protection and survival of diverse groups as it did not question the pre-dominance of one group. In contrast, multiculturalism lays emphasis on equity between diverse groups in public domain and extensively talks about special minority rights. But, the complex issues of individual self and community identity have been a source of discomfort for its critics who also question its fragmenting nature. The adoption of multicultural policies by some states and counter

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reaction to this have engendered one of the most liveliest debates is the contemporary political theory which is certain to intensify in the age of globalized polity and economy. But, the champions of multiculturalism still equate our society with a beautifully decorated salad plate where difference pieces of fruits and vegetables exist side by side and can be relished without actually mixing all the ingredients in one.

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