

Multiculturalism and the Indian Tradition

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In order to save mankind we have to learn to live together in concord in spite of traditional differences of religion, civilization, nationality, class and race.
—Arnold Toynbee

Whence this vitality that overcomes destruction and death? Whence this wisdom that reconciles opposite truths? The story of India's culture unravels the secret of that vitality and that wisdom. It is a story of unity and synthesis, of reconciliation and development, of a perfect fusion of old traditions and new values.
—Humayun Kabir

The only thing that truly links every Indian today is a knowledge, first hand and constant, of diversity.
— Pico Iyer

Indian democracy has survived for more than five decades despite ominous predictions to the contrary, and Indian tradition has survived over five millennia despite periodic setbacks and recent challenges. Its social diversity and cultural pluralism have proved to be its strengths, in fact, its structural principles. Added to these, its stability and continuity have made it truly 'functional' at every level, social-political-cultural. India's experience of living together with different religious faiths, of accommodating diverse ethnic groups and languages might not have the linguistic denomination of multiculturalism but the fact remains that India happened to be one of the first few countries to have celebrated cultural pluralism as a way of living. The markers with which it came to be characterized are many including 'unity in diversity,' 'cultural pluralism,' 'living together separately,' 'religious neutrality,' 'honeycomb,' 'syncretistic,' and the recent 'multiculturalism', and 'hybridity.'

The linguistic denominators vary from one country to the other. Besides, ancient civilisations like India may not carry the burden of modern markers like multiculturalism and secularism, but may still have lived the experience. It is well known that each language has its own history, geography and symbols, and a specific cultural context: "One language differs from another, not only in its sounds, intonations and the meaning its words convey, but also in its 'word view.' Each language looks at the universe in a particular manner, tests it and translates it into its own meanings in a special way" (Verma 265-6).

The subcontinent has become home to a staggering array of languages and spiritual creeds, and "myriad literary, intellectual, musical and artistic traditions as well as diverse political philosophies, economic systems and ways of living" (Priyamvada 66). It believed in the Rig Vedic dictum: *Aano bhadra krataovoyanti visvatah*, ("Let noble thoughts come to us from all sides"). As a social reality in India inclusiveness and accommodation were celebrated as a way of life. If Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Bahai, Jain, and Parsi and various other ethnic communities have

continued to co-exist for many centuries now it only celebrates the multicultural nature of its ethos. Asim Roy says that the Indian ethos operated on a system of fission and fusion:

India's social diversity and pluralism had always been her strength. A vast mosaic of cross-cutting divisions of class, caste, tribe, religion, sect, language and region, each social compartment was more or less insulated from the other and compartmentalized. In this sense, society functioned on the principle of fission. The principle of fusion was, on the other hand, equally operative in that there were competing and interacting groups and interests, which held the balance of order and stability. As Indian society had not been organized on the basis of a single mega-circuit system, but as a multiple-circuit system, a breakdown in one circuit kept the others going. (Roy 19)

As a linguistic construct and a political policy, 'Multiculturalism' is a recent European phenomenon. 'Multiculturalism' was first officially introduced in Canada in 1971 under the leadership of Pierre Trudeau as an acknowledgment of their cultural and ethnic diversity. Canada was an amalgam of its aboriginal peoples, Anglophone and Francophone groups and other European immigrants since the middle of the nineteenth century, and more recent immigrants from Asian countries. It is followed by Australia, Argentina, USA, UK, Europe, Germany and several other countries. The experience of the ancient civilisations like India, and migration of populations, especially of European origin, to different parts of the globe led sociologists and political philosophers hold that cultural pluralism was crucial to social humanism which in turn would help build an egalitarian society.

The anti-colonial leaders of Indian freedom struggle while devising strategies for its independence were also trying to come to terms with the idea of India. In fact, what constitutes Indianness and what unites India are issues that have been raised time and again. Equally many answers have been attempted. The smorgasbord of diversity, it has been cited, instead of being a weak link, proved to be a pillar of strength in Indian ethos. Tolerance, the basic ethic of Indian society, provides an affirmative value to multicultural democracy. Citing the example of Asoka's ideas of secularism and tolerance nearly 2,300 years ago, Amartya Sen says, "The Indian emperor Asoka's dedicated championing of religious and other kinds of tolerance in the third century B.C...is certainly among the earliest political defenses tolerance anywhere (Sen 2006: 50) Another Indian emperor, Akbar followed a similar path of tolerance. Jawaharlal Nehru was an articulate spokesman who emphasized the unity in diversity in India: "The diversity of India is tremendous, it is obvious. It lies on the surface and anybody can see it. It concerns itself with physical appearances as well as with certain mental habits and traits...Yet, with all these differences, there is no mistaking the impress of India," (61-2)

Nirmal Verma says that the desire to seek freedom in India was different from the aggressive, egoistic sentiments that lay behind the modern nation states, which came into existence only after the various races, nationalities and folk languages were annihilated as in the west. In India its roots could be traced to its cultural traditions:

That the Indian national awareness was free of a self-involved rigidity right from its inception was because it had not been forcibly imposed from above, but its roots lay deep in the Indian cultural traditions. The various dialects and languages of India, despite their distinctiveness, shared an inherent unity, and this could never obstruct the growth of national unification. (Verma 273)

II

Even as they were preoccupied with the idea of India and what constitutes Indianness, the early nationalist leaders and intellectuals who ushered Indian Renaissance understood that homogenizing models of nationalism would not suit the purpose of India. Tagore, despite his modernity, was opposed to homogenous nationalism. He considered it as an import from the west. Viewing it as ‘a great menace’, he termed it as *bhugolik apadevata*, a geographical demon (qtd in Nandy 7). Tagore rules out this kind of nationalism based on ‘a conspiracy of fear.’ In this narrow sense, he says, India “has never had a real sense of nationalism” (64). Instead, he looks back to India’s past that sustained a tradition of co-existence of diverse faiths. He also viewed debate and dissent ‘as essential to collective self-understanding’ (Priyamvada 65). Gandhi’s non-violent nationalism was in tune with the traditional Indian way of pursuing non-aggressive, non-imperialist policies. He also believed that India possessed a civilizational unity long before the British arrived countering the view that India emerged as a single nation-state as a consequence of the interventionist policies of the British. He warned against ‘simply mirroring the practices of European nation-states.’ Priyamvada Gopal observes: “Though a devout Hindu, he insisted that religion and nationality were not synonymous. This is why those who would reduce the nation to some simplistic religious formula have never been comfortable with either great man” (65). According to Ashis Nandy, Gandhi’s unbridled antagonism to the concepts of nationalism and modernism and his defence of Indian traditions carried with it “intimations of a postmodern consciousness” (2).

The freedom struggle, satyagraha and non-violence as viable modes of struggle, subsequent independence of India from colonial rule and the making of the Constitution were all processes of and pointers to the continuing tradition of dialogue and debate, the bedrock of cultural pluralism. The role and participation of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in the making of India during and after the freedom struggle is a case in point. He stood up to Gandhi and other leaders of the freedom movement insofar as social and religious matters are concerned and stood his ground for most part. But for his interventions at crucial times India would not have enjoyed the status of successful democracy that it is bestowed with now. A visionary who personified the spirit and essence of Indian thought, he looked beyond, and far ahead of, his times.

Faced with the daunting task of translating ‘history and its lessons’ into the constitution, Ambedkar more than his peers, accomplished it with gusto. It was no small achievement in that his contemporaries were overawed by the ‘fear of freedom.’ “By foregrounding freedom from fear, Ambedkar fundamentally challenged the fear of freedom that characterized the majority’s anxiety at the time of making the Constitution” (Arvind Elangovan 12). An intellectual of a rare order, he was nonetheless confined to the margins as a subnational and sectional leader for long. History has a way of correcting itself and it is fascinating to see that Ambedkar is given his due place as one who played a key role in the making of India. In a poll conducted by the magazine, *Outlook* (August 20, 2012) on the issue who could be the greatest Indian after Gandhi, Ambedkar was way ahead of others including Jawaharlal Nehru—A clear testimony to a dialogic nation where pluralism is valued.

The Constitution of India is at once a fine reflection of the Indian cultural mosaic and a practical demonstration of the continuing dialogic tradition. While recognizing the rich diversity it gave equal rights to all its citizens irrespective of creed, colour, region or language. Hitherto a social reality, the inclusive pluralism has been institutionalised and given a codified constitutional sanction. It enshrined into rights and principles the way of life of a people. As a mark of tolerance and co-existence, minority communities were given the right to preserve their culture and follow religious

practices; to ameliorate the plight of subalterns, constitutional guarantees were given to hitherto deprived communities and tribes in education and jobs; dialogue was recognized as part of social-cultural discourse paving way to healthy social practices, religious amity, cultural inclusiveness. Without terming it as multiculturalism, the constitution has celebrated, enshrined its spirit in earnest. Sitakant Mahapatra says:

Any culture like that of India, which has grown over the centuries on the bedrock of a great tradition and a host of little traditions surrounding it, generates a large number of contradictions, ambivalences, uncertainties, and dialectic oppositions within its fold. In the case of India, the latter are so many and so complex that, sometimes, it may even appear doubtful whether there is a unity which connects these apparently diverse streams—an integrity or a specific identity. Multiculturalism is the word often employed in this context. (293-94)

India was born a postmodern state when it attained freedom from British colonial rule. There were many doomsday predictions that didn't give much of a chance to the newly born country to survive. They were eager to announce that India could not withstand the challenges of its diversity and likely to collapse under its own burden sooner than later. But the reality in India is different. It is much too huge and complex to apply any rules here. It is beyond a rigid framework of types and categories. It is multidimensional and variegated and that knowledge percolates deep down the social surface. Pico Iyer observes: "But if independence means anything, it is that India is, and ought to be, less uniform, more contradictory...than it ever was when Britain tried to push it into straight lines and parentheses" (Iyer 98). The question of identity, nationhood, Indianness, and other definitions may sometimes turn divisive but the debate goes on. As a multicultural democracy India has stood the test of time despite occasional pitfalls and 'its share of historical hurt' (Prasannarajan 25).

Problem arises when ideologues of different parties, including extreme right and left, consider themselves benign, the divine way, even while following or advocating a path of unrelenting violence. A closer scrutiny reveals that the two extreme versions, of the right and the left, do not represent the mainstream culture or practices in India. In fact, in the past, people have expressed their disenchantment with such extreme colourings in no uncertain terms. Their holding sway over popular imagination is but transitory. Their advocating violence needs to be seen in the specific context in which these posed a challenge to the mainstream, but may not be generalized as part of the mainstream culture of India, of following a middle path.

One finds, by the same token, a middle path in cultural and religious matters too. Commenting on the theme of violence in cultural and political narratives, Prof. Kancha Ilaiah, author of the most popular and controversial book *Why I am Not a Hindu?* (1996), in a recent essay raises some important questions in respect of Indian culture and practices. He argues that Hindu gods carry different weapons and in people who worship such gods, violence is ingrained (4). If the gods are violent, and culture veered around violence, our freedom struggle would have followed a similar course; democracy would not have found a place here; co-existence of religions and cultures would not have become our way of life; and we would have flirted with dictatorships like our neighbouring countries and other postcolonial nations in Africa and Latin America; dialogue and debate would not have formed the basis of our society. The middle path or a balanced one has led us to a life full of contradictions, yet showing a way of living with them comfortably. Gods, in any religion, are benign. Hindu gods are no different. Since our way of life here gives scope to dialogue and dissent we must thank our gods. Our practice of secularism, too, is not anti-religion but advocates equal respect to all religions (*sarva dharma sambhaava*), a distinct socio-religious philosophy

enshrined in the constitution that allows religious neutrality (*dharmā nirapekṣhita*). Ashis Nandy and T. N. Madan, two of the influential social philosophers of our times, believe that religion itself could be a resource to fight against religious bigotry. They didn't attest the hegemonic potentials of ideological secularism resorting to religious delimitation and devaluation. Madan, in his significant work, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (1997), says: "The construction of an Indian ideology of religious pluralism and tolerance...had been rendered problematic by the processes of secularization which tend to, if they do not actively seek to, delimit and devalue the role of religion in society" (Madan 276).

III

Asim Roy notes that the 'assimilative and inclusive traits of the Indic culture' have assumed 'almost the salience of an unquestionable historical verity' until relatively recent times when its syncretistic tradition has been 'engaged, challenged, and undermined by various historical forces and contesting ideologies.' He identifies three major developments that undermined the fabric of pluralism. First, it is the impact of British colonialism and its attendant ill-effects such as Orientalism that created exclusive and competing models of religious-cultural traditions in the region. Secondly it is Muslim separatism, and the third one is the emergence of the radical political Hindutva. He says:

Having virtually ignored the intricate and complex processes of interaction of living religions and cultures in India, especially at a popular level, Orientalism contributed a great deal to the construction of barriers among plural cultural traditions in the end. The second serious challenge came, at a somewhat later stage, from the Islamicists or the Islamic 'essentialists' and the champions of Muslim 'separatism'....The third is the most recent and potentially the most threatening and subversive challenge. This is embodied by the proponents of Hindu nationalism with its ahistorical, monolithic, cultural, and political credo of *Hindutva* during the colonial and, more aggressively and significantly, post-colonial periods. (Roy 2)

Any discussion of Indian culture is incomplete without a mention of the caste system, its misery and curse for centuries: "Any attempt to redefine Indian culture has also to contend with the past and present of the caste system..." (Mahapatra 302). The stratified hierarchy has been, in more ways than one, proved to be detrimental to the continuing tradition. A constant stumbling block in the cherished tradition, it faced severe interrogation without the prospect of plausible answers. The fabric of the system was torn by the seemingly perennial problem. It cannot be denied that it has been a source of violence, physical and psychological, in an otherwise tolerant society. While mentioning the conflict between Indian culture's metaphysics and the social reality, a critic observes that one may preach that "all human beings are children of god and, hence, by implication, equal....But then you may practise the caste system with all its stratifications" (Mahapatra 294). Such inhuman practices as well as the binary of 'majorityism vs minorityism' stress the need for a quick change over from cultural pluralism to egalitarian pluralism in contemporary Indian situation.

One of the important features of postcolonial-postmodern nation is its identity-hybridity equation. In the realm of politics and culture it rejects a unified centre of authority. It implies multiple cultural centres in terms of not merely of nation, but also in respect of class, caste, gender, profession and beliefs. The notion of 'belonging' lies at the heart of all communities. The word has two linguistic and social connotations. A sense of belonging marks a person's identity in the sense of attachment and affection, and at another level, it is "deemed to be the possession of a place, people, or institutions" (Joshi 8). The latter implies ownership, homogeneity. Belonging, in this sense, is a source of violence which India has experienced occasionally. It is its antithesis, the core of pluralism

that veered it away from violence towards a path of tolerance. Hybridity recognizes many ‘in-betweens’ rather than ‘us/them’ binaries. Pramod K. Nayar says:

“Hybridity” is the rejection of a single or unified identity, and preference for multiple cultural locations and identities. Hybridity might take the form of a nativist revival of a pre-colonial past—such as folk or tribal cultural forms—or the adaptation of artistic and social productions to present day conditions of globalization, multiculturalism and transnationalism. Hybridity is thus a postcolonial answer to the dangers of cultural binarism (us/them) and the fundamentalist urge to seek “pure” cultural forms. (6)

The people of the country have avoided extremes at crucial times. The fact remains that “Indian unity is a repudiation of their extremities...It is never monotonous. It defies the tyranny of homogeneity. When arguments divide nations, India is united by their variety” (Prasannarajan 25). The common man has shown his discretion and wisdom a number of times. This, despite aberrations like the role of money and other inducements during election time; despite upheavals like demolition of Babri Masjid, violence in Bombay, Godhra carnage in Gujarat, communal disturbances elsewhere. But the middle path is not shaken, even if tested, by these. While stressing the nature and strength of the dialogic tradition that flourished in India, Amartya Sen observes:

The contemporary relevance of the dialogic tradition and of the acceptance of heterodoxy is hard to exaggerate. Discussions and arguments are critically important for democracy and public reasoning. They are central to the practice of secularism and for even-handed treatment of adherents of different religious faiths...Going beyond these basic structural priorities, the argumentative tradition, if used with deliberation and commitment, can also be extremely important in resisting social inequalities and in removing poverty and deprivation. Voice is a crucial component of the pursuit of social justice. (Sen xiii)

This dialogic tradition and the spirit of Indian tradition are best exemplified in the interaction between the larger and smaller traditions over centuries. Sometimes within the larger tradition there is questioning of the accepted modes. The Bhakti movement and literature is an illustration of this dialogic tradition. Movements like Virashaiva, Haridasa, Srivaishnava revolted against orthodoxy and banal ritualism of the larger Hindu tradition. The humanism and reformist zeal of the Bhakti Literature and movements represented by the Alwars, Nayanars, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Bahinabai, Ganga Sati, Janabai, Tulasidas, Chaitanya, Kabir, Mira Bai, Tukaram, Adi Shankara, Madhavacharya, Srimadramanuja, Annamayya, Kshetranya, Rudrakavi, Basavanna, Mahadeviakka, Allama Prabhu, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore added to the value of democratic social system, cultural values and peaceful co-existence.

The focus on the underprivileged sections in the pre and post-Independence Indian literatures has been a significant phenomenon. Prem Chand, Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Ismat Chughtai, Mahasveta Devi have offered sympathetic portrayals of dalits, tribals, the rural poor, and other suppressed sections of the society in their fiction. Since Independence the new voices and standpoints not only demanded attention but also became assertive making the concept of nationhood fragmented into several versions. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, different minorities, ethnic and religious sub-cultures began to assert their identity moving away from margins. Nationhood assumes new colouring because “many new voices, perceptions and locations begin to contest a mono-ethnic, monolithic concept of elitist, upper class, patriarchal hegemony” (Santosh Gupta 10). Parsee, Muslim and women writers and many submerged voices have asked for greater acceptance intervening in the consolidation of a simple dominant state ideology. The increasing space that these forces created for themselves within the existing power structure, in the

process, questioned the validity of political meta-narratives and the assertion of third world fiction as national allegories.

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