

Understanding Diversity: A Multicultural Perspective

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“And there were never in the world two opinions alike, any more than two hairs or grains. The most universal quality is diversity”

- Michel de Montaigne

I. Introduction

Diversity is the central concern of almost all social, political and cultural theorists. The common argument of them is that thinking, perception, action and adjudication differs from culture to culture and society to society. Indicating their objections against the foundational concerns of philosophical epistemology that talks about objectivity and grounded its methodology in natural sciences to study human affairs, critics have brought forth the argument of plurality and relativity of human affairs. This claim is very much grounded in their opposition to this assumption: that certainty, not paradox and contradiction, is the foundational criterion of our beliefs to be named as knowledge. The simple reason here is that there is a genuine difference between understanding nature as possessing objective explainable phenomena and the human world rich with even deeper complexities than nature. The claim is that these complexities are either intractable or unfathomable in nature. In this sense, both the structure of our knowledge and our social frameworks are infested with diverse mechanisms. Any attempt in the name of reason and rationality to unify or synchronize them is subject to error. This is a counter argument to the very argument of error in epistemology; that our perceptions and actions have to be backed by irrefutable reason(s).

We have two views that attempt to negate each other: One, even if we admit that human world is indeed problematic because of multifarious factors, human beings ought to endeavor to resolve all kinds of paradoxes and contradictions. As individuals are judgmental in nature, the force of reason enables them to resolve these contradictions. For instance, if we are reasoned beings, then there is no reason why we cannot converge upon issues of common concern. All our differences, it would mean, are mere human fabrications. We are just driven by appearances and illusions of difference. The philosophy behind it is that we ought to attain a harmonious socio-cultural universe, corresponding to the invisible harmony of nature. On the contrary, critics point out that the mere assumption that one can resolve the complexities of human affairs is itself an illusion. They would point out that it is a fallacy to treat nature as a harmonious universe. Human world is so constituted that things like objectivity or uniformity would be mere enforcing upon human beings that would have adverse effect. Objectivity, on the other hand, is also treated as an empty concept. The force of reason or the attribution that rational human beings ought to attain the harmonious social universe in no way applies to the diverse human condition.

We have an interesting argument here. The first position mentioned in the above paragraph is grounded in the assumption that ‘a harmonious social universe’ is possible because human beings, irrespective of cultural contexts, share common ethical values of existence. This is taken from epistemology. Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of Pure Reason, explained that the possibility of knowledge is established by mere ‘minimal conditions’ of knowledge. For example, X being in Moscow is sufficient enough to explain that X is in Russia. Similarly, Kant’s moral philosophy says that despite individuals’ inability to achieve a ‘perfect human condition’ because of lack of ‘perfect rationality’, there are certain universal moral laws invariantly and categorically applicable to all human beings in all contexts. A harmonious social universe, for instance, is attainable and is also within the limits of human reason. A harmonious universe is possible because individuals share a common ground, i.e., the social framework, co-opted with common lived experiences and also shared sense of reason. What is that ‘differing’ ground human beings share?

Though the influence of Kant's philosophy is gigantic in the later period, whether to those who confirmed his ideas or those who opposed, pluralism and relativism were pitched against the categorical notion of universalism. His philosophy could not resolve the contention between the empirical and the rational. The argument for diversity begins here. Mere rationalization of human condition may not resolve the hidden contentions. For instance, Social Contractualists [Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau] proposed respective theories of social contract, where one can find different approaches to social formation - individuals leaving the condition of state of nature, entering into a social condition, negotiate their liberties within the framework of that social

condition. Nevertheless, these theories do not resolve the condition they have conceived called the 'state of nature'. The three characteristics that Hobbes attributed [power, passion and glory] to the natural condition still persist in several forms in all social contexts. There is an internal contradiction within these theories: Human beings are bestowed with liberty and equality, which would mean [in the contemporary sense] that there is recognition of the fact that human beings are gifted with the varying proportions of perception and judgment. However, as exposed by much of the critics of the enlightenment modern philosophy, diversity was treated as the given condition but they preferred uniformity. Any kind of idealization of human condition violates diversity component. According to the principle of idealization, all things being equal, human beings aim to reach certain levels of ideal collective life, which in turn is grounded in an epistemic principle of objectivity.

The concept of diversity, however, is not an invention of twentieth century and later on. This has a reference during the Greek period, medieval times and during the period of enlightenment too till the contemporary period. It is only properly addressed in the twentieth century by taking account of the events that shaped societies and cultures all over the world. In response to reason, culture has been placed as the primordial aspect into which human beings are part of. The entire perception of life and existence is accounted by the cultural processes, abstracting though manifold experiences and contexts. The idea is one cannot talk of diversity without bringing specific cultures and contexts into the framework. The argument here is that a rational representation of diversity will not serve the purpose. It needs to be understood through the lived experiences and lived cultures.

II. Cultural Diversity

Culture can never be absent or neutral. Human society necessarily creates and continually modifies cultural norms, goods and associations. All human beings are born into a culture and lead their lives within a cultural context, whatever it may be. Cultural neutrality is impossible, since any development of societal norms will necessarily privilege one conception over all others. Even the establishment of a minimalist libertarian state with the goal of fostering as much cultural freedom as possible would fail to achieve true neutrality, since this political philosophy must make a number of assumptions that not all cultures would accept. Culture should be properly seen as both a prerequisite for individual autonomy and a logical and inevitable consequence of the exercise of that prerogative. When cultural practices seem to restrict autonomy of individuals and communities it becomes a problem.

Diversity gives rise to a series of important and potential divisive questions. Cultural diversity may also be seen as an important constituent and condition of human freedom. Unless human beings are able to step out of their culture, they remain imprisoned within it and tend to absolutize it, imagine it to be the only natural or self-evident way to understand and organize human life. And they cannot step out of their culture unless they have access to other cultures. They are able to see the contingency of their culture and relate to it freely rather than as a fate or a predicament. Since cultural diversity fosters such vital preconditions of human freedom as self-knowledge, self-transcendence and self-criticism, it is an objective good, a good whose value is not derived its being an essential condition of human freedom and well-being (Weinstock 1994 as cited in Parekh 2000) Cultural diversity creates a climate in which different culture can engage in a mutually beneficial dialogue. Different artistic, literary, musical, moral and other traditions interrogate, challenge and probe each other, borrow and experiment with each other's idea and often throw up wholly new ideas and sensibilities that none of them could have generated of their own.

Culture and society are inseparable in sense that there is no society without culture and no culture without society. The presence of varied cultures in society brings diversity in human life. Cultural diversity or presence of variety of cultures and cultural perspectives within a society has much to be said for it. Cultural diversity creates a climate in which different cultures can engage in a mutually beneficial dialogue. Different artistic, literary, musical, moral and other traditions interrogate, challenge and probe each other, borrow and experiment with each other's idea and often throw up wholly new ideas and sensibilities that none of them could have generated of their own. Cultural diversity in modern societies takes many forms. Although members of a society share broadly common culture, they entertain different beliefs and practices concerning certain significant areas of human life. Some members of society are highly critical of the central principles and values of the dominant culture and seek to reconstitute it along with appropriate lines. Most modern societies include several self-conscious and more or less well-organized communities are entertaining and living by different systems of beliefs and practices. This is called communal diversity. Multicultural society displays all these varieties of diversities, though in different combinations and proportions.

Cultural pluralism, cultural diversity and multiculturalism are the terms very commonly used to describe societies of different cultures, religions, languages and races. In our day to day life these words are used interchangeably. The presence of many and different communities are common in these terms plural, diverse and multiculturalism. Though it is true that plural, diverse and multicultural point to the existence of 'many' but dissimilar in significant ways. Plurality talks about many but silent about the nature of many, silent

about how the multiple forms are structured and how they relate to one another. Structured plurality suggests the existence of many, diversity is the existence of many that are different and heterogeneous and not commensurable. Diversity refers to multiplicity which cannot be collapsible to one. Here many refer to separate entities which are different from one other. The concept of multiculturalism endorses the idea of difference and heterogeneity that is embodied in the concept of diversity. Diverse cultural communities are categorized as majority and minorities. In modern politics the state is usually identified as majority culture where the culture is different from this majority is categorized as minorities. Multiculturalism locates the incommensurable differences within the boundaries of state. Here diversity is no longer pushed outside the nation state rather diverse communities coexist within the nation state and hence, multiculturalism raises the issue of equality (Mahajan 1999).

Increasing awareness of the extent of the diversity in believes practices and customs of different cultures and different historical epochs has cast doubt on the universality and objectivity of individuals' judgments. After the collapse of certainties of religion, ethical and scientific arenas, the intellects tried to bring forward the concept of pluralism. Pluralism is not a new phenomenon, but the new thing about pluralism is the development and spread of pluralism in the world of ideas. Pluralism challenges the old philosophical faith that one single answer to question of what there is, what knowledge consist in and what morality is about. The pluralist world recognizes that there can be many diverse and incompatible conceptual and moral frameworks, many belief systems and ultimate values. Pluralist world gives many answers to one question without any pressure to choose one among many as truth. We live in a world where plurality in terms of different ethical, philosophical, religious, and cultural beliefs exists. Pluralism permeates our lives.

Pluralism is a social fact. It is present in different believes, attitudes and ways of life. Here the attitude should be adopted to face the disagreement of pluralism, conflicts and unsure relationships. Moreover it should accept the fact and design of social arrangements which can accommodate pluralism in a just social world. This is the sagacious way to deal with conflict and intolerance that came out of differences. The process of assimilation, integration, and politicization of cultural differences are opponents in practical sense where the minorities are always the issue of dispute, their identity and claims are always under controversy. We may find that pragmatically driven impulses to accommodate difference open up a fruitful engagement between theory and practice.

From Diversity to Multiculturalism

The last four decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a cluster of intellectual and political movements led by such diverse groups as the indigenous people, national minorities, ethno-cultural nationals, old and new immigrants, feminist etc.

They represent practices, life-styles, views and ways of life that are different from, disapproved of in varying degree discouraged by dominant culture of the wider society. Their demands go far beyond the familiar plea for toleration. They want the wider society to treat them equally with the rest and not to discriminate against. It should also respect their differences. They cannot realize their identities without necessary freedom and a climate conducive to diversity, opportunities, and suitable legal arrangements. All these call for profound changes in all aspects of life. The movement associated with the term multiculturalism first appeared in countries which found themselves faced with distinct cultural groups.

Multiculturalism points to the existence of many which are equal in the public arena. Presence of different communities is not important. What is important is giving them equal treatment in public arena. Theorists of multiculturalism protest against any systematic discrimination, gives positive value to cultural diversity (Mahajan 2010). Multiculturalism is a body of thought in political philosophy about the proper way to respond to cultural diversity.

III. Emergence of Multiculturalism

It refers to a broad array of theories, attitudes, beliefs, norms, practices and policies that seek to provide public recognition of and support for accommodation of non-dominant cultural groups (Iverson 2011). The nature of non-dominant groups vary: some may be immigrant minorities (including refugees), 'historically settled' minorities such as national minorities (e.g. the Quebecois) or indigenous peoples. However multicultural approach is different from social and cultural diversity as it goes beyond the basic civil and political liberties associated with liberal citizenship to bring a differentiated citizenship that allows group to express their identities and practices (Iverson 2011).

Multiculturalism has become the central topic of modern social and political theory in particular and in contemporary social science in general. Some says multiculturalism is precisely the way to recognize the conflicts, sufferings, pain of minorities, immigrants and indigenous group and unravel the right path for them. Some others say that it should be discarded altogether. As Multiculturalism is not a phase or a concept, the attitudes, beliefs and practices associated with it discarding multiculturalism altogether is a difficult task for the

modern societies. However 'Multiculturalism' has now occupies a very central place in public culture of Western liberal democracies and increasingly in global political discourse too. Now the term has become a global term in many respects. The multicultural ideas have spread to debate over the nature of global justice and the search for global norms of human rights and redistributive justice.

In the 1960s the anti-racism march started where the arguments of Nazism that the difference between the Aryan, Jew, Slav and so on are irreducible and was defended. Martin Luther King Jr and his followers claimed that the difference between white and black were only the difference of skin colour. Gradually the imperial idea of 'White man's burden' ruling the 'lesser breads without law' was regarded as embarrassing anachronism amongst young white. This was the time for the celebration of difference. During this time people were not only encouraged to do their own things but also started the black political mobilization in America. The women started realizing their sexual difference that they are more caring and empathetic, gays also tried to find their own space without shame. At the same time the ideas like humanism, human rights, equal citizenship, claims for group differences added to the idea of racism, femaleness, gay rights and so on. This became the central focus of politics as well. It was a politics of identity, recognition and accommodation of differences. One term which came to describe this politics specifically in United States is "Multiculturalism" (Modood 2007).

The traditional model of citizenship as common-rights was deeply connected to ideas of national integration. But it is now under attack. Many groups like blacks, women, indigenous peoples, ethnic and religious minorities, gays and lesbians feels marginalized not because of their socio-economic status but because of their socio-cultural identity, the 'difference'. They argue that the common rights citizenship cannot accommodate the needs of other groups.

In 1990's some argued that it was impossible not be in favour of multiculturalism. But recent events such as the 9/11 and London bombings and controversies over immigration and asylum have led some to fear that supporting cultural diversity is bad for national identity. These critics have called vigorously for assimilation-that is, a policy that encourages cultural minorities to lose their distinct customs or norms in order to fit in more easily with the rest of the society-of all groups into a common national culture. Assimilation often involves, minority cultures losing their inherited cultural identities. Multicultural thinkers tend to find this idea problematic. They prefer the notion of integration- that is the idea that different cultural group may belong equally to the nation, while still having different social customs or rights. Whether integration can be achieved in a multicultural society depends on how the nation responds to differences of belief and custom.

Multiculturalism is closely associated with "identity politics," "the politics of difference" and "the politics of recognition", all of which share a commitment to revaluing disrespected identities and changing dominant patterns of representation and communication that marginalize certain groups (Song 2010) Multiculturalism is also a matter of economic interests and political disadvantages that people suffer as a result of their minority status. The debate about multiculturalism is a debate in which certain differences (culture, ethnicity, faith) have come to be regarded as important and others (such as class, say, or generational), which used to be perceived as important in the past, have come to be seen as relevant.

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Henry Louis Gates echoing W. E. B. Du Bois observed in 1992 that "the problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of differences-the matter of multiculturalism" (see Powell 2003). Analysis of the term reveals many of its characteristics and factors-it stands for both positive and negative versions of accommodation, recognition, cultural (and in some case moral). The term multiculturalism congregates many interrelated themes. It accentuates the need to have a stable identity, underline the contributions of different cultural communities. It emphasizes the importance of cultural belonging and legitimizes the craving to maintain difference. Multiculturalism is about the proper terms of relationship between different cultural communities. The norms governing their respective claims cannot be derived from one culture alone but through toleration, equal dialogue between different cultures and the principle of justice.

'Multiculturalism' has being studied from two perspectives. It has been studied from both individual and group level which we can also categorize as liberals and non- liberals or communitarians and liberals. Culture is also the prime focus of all multicultural studies. However 'Multiculturalism' is the study of Individuals, groups and culture. Whether Multiculturalism tries to protect different cultural, ethnic or religious group and the practices because they have value in individual's life or encourage diversity as it gives options to individuals and increase the richness of human existence. Some may accept the first one and deny the latter one. This study accepts both the claims, considering that practices of each group has the same importance as others. It has its own value in individuals' life. The second one Multiculturalism gives richer set of choices and options also valuable if we take the minority issues of multiculturalism. Minorities are given enough choice to have a

better existence in a multicultural world where we claim for equality, justice and responsibility. Equality gives a sense of freedom. We are in equal world means we are in a free world. When we enter into a free world we find a variety of options. This is the same multicultural world which most of the modern society is looking for.

IV. The Accommodation of Difference

Multiculturalism that talks of the struggle, the political mobilization, the policy and the institutional outcomes, the form of accommodation it takes is not to eliminate differences or washed away differences rather to some extent recognize the difference. When we recognize the difference it means giving importance to the difference. So the negative difference is turned into a positive difference. Through both the ways group assertiveness and mobilization, through institutional and policy reforms address the claim of marginalized group, the character of difference is addressed, the negative differences changed into positive difference, though in most contemporary situation something of each is likely to present. According to Modood (2007) when we speak of difference rather than culture from the sociological standpoint is to recognize the difference not only from the inside (i.e. from the side of the minority culture) but also from the outside (i.e. outside treatment towards these minorities in question). It also recognizes the nature of the minorities and their relationship with the rest of the societies. It is not such that culture is only a standalone alternative to race, ethnicity, religion and so on. Multiculturalism is not, therefore only about cultural rights instead of political equality and economic opportunities also. It is the politics which recognizes the post-immigrant groups. It creates awareness that these group differentiating dimensions are central to their social construction. Demands for recognition is also not for some privileges something over and above what majority culture get but a demand for a kind of compensatory subsidy to ensure backgrounds against which to make choices.

V. Multiculturalism in India

The management of cultural diversity within state has become an increasingly prominent issue in recent times not only in developed countries but also in developing countries like India. Diversity has become the defining characteristic of our social and cultural worlds. We are now constantly confronted with a multitude of ways in which we can define ourselves, and categorize others. In fact, in itself India is a multi-ethnic and multi lingual society. The 2001 census of India reports 122 languages and 234 mother tongues (some mother tongues have been mapped to a single language on the basis of their similarity). Given these multitude diversity, India provides an interesting context to study Multiculturalism.

Most of the major religions of the world such as Hinduism and Buddhism, originated in this land while others, such as Christianity and Islam, though came from outside has remained and grown in it for a thousand years and more. This great profusion of linguistic, religious and other customs and usages was associated with a multitude of castes, communities and tribes each of which was bearer of a particular sub-culture or even sub-sub-culture which is transmitted from generation to generation (Beteille 2003). In the debates in Western democracies, the term 'minority rights' largely referred to the cultural rights of minorities, which they lay claim to on the basis of their separate ethnic, racial, religio-cultural, or national identity. In Indian context, it encompasses other factors such as language, caste, community, religion, and socio-economic factors.

As India is a multi-ethnic, multi-language, multi-caste, multi-religion country, the inclusive growth of the country depends on the development on these different minority groups and this inclusive growth demands all social groups to get equal access to services and opportunities for economic and social development. Marginalization of these groups or perceived lack of advantage of these groups is a threat to India. It may result in conflict only which does not gel well with the idea of India.

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