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THE ROLE OF ACADEMY, MEDIA AND POLITICS IN RESOLVING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: A STUDY OF MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

Abstract:

The tsunami of globalization in our times has brought about the interface of various cultures in the world. While the social and political actions taken in some countries in the interest of creation of a homogeneous multicultural society are appreciable, education in schools and colleges needs to be attuned to that end. Drawing primarily on the findings of sociologist Bhikhu Parekh and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, my paper discusses related issues and stresses the fact that the goal of a truly multicultural society may not be achievable on the basis of commonality of economic interests, but the appreciation and interiorization of the sentiment of vasudhaiv kutumbukam, i.e., all the world is one family, can certainly help mankind.

Keywords:

culture, globalization, multicultural, acculturation, integration, assimilation, diaspora

JEL Classification: F01

Introduction

The contemporary world order has undergone a drastic change what with the unprecedented tsunami of globalization sweeping the world. That the world is fast turning into a multicultural society goes without saying. In any society, one can see there are differences with regard to the number of people belonging to other cultures as also the variety of degree of their assimilation and integration in it. Various terms coined for denoting the multicultural society like mosaic, melting pot, flowerpot, rainbow, symphony, quilt, salad bowl, kaleidoscope, etc. indicate these aspects. Also the process of adjustment or nativization has been sought to be demarcated by terms like acculturation, adaptation, integration, assimilation, etc. In terms of human history, multiculturalism has many dimensions: it came about through voluntary displacement, compulsions of livelihood, threat to life, wars, imperialism, etc.

But the relevant point is that we have not created a perfectly homogenous society. Politics is at the helm in any society and despite all this tall talk of democracy and equal rights, we have a lop-sided structure. How can minorities of different shades be given equal rights is a perplexing question. Let us take a look at the US Congress as visualized by a scholar which throws light on the prejudiced mindset that is so common:

“Row upon row of white men over the age of fifty, interspersed with the occasional white women and the even more occasional Black, Latino or Asian man or woman. I further envisaged the following scenario: the self-appointed or otherwise not democratically chosen leaders of cultural or religious groups appear before Congressional committees, In the process of seeking exemptions or rights to practice their cultural norms. They are told by the august committees of our Congress – even more white, male and old in their composition than its general membership – that, in order for their claims to be heard, they must go away and come back with the women and other less powerful people of their groups, who must be directly involved in discussions about such rights and privileges” (Okin, 2005: p.89).

What kind of cultural engagements do we have in a multicultural society? Leaving aside the primitive tribes which refuse to have any trucks with the outside world, interaction between the mainstream society or the major community and the minority community may be limited, as in case of the Amish people of America or the gypsies of India, or positive and serious engagement as in case of the immigrants. The debatable issue is whether multiculturalism aided by globalization has the potential to transcend the fragmented multicultural scenario and bring about a more stable globalized outlook – a situation where the attitude of one cultural group towards the other group is not merely of passive tolerance but of positive engagement.

Such an engagement is a necessity. Concern has often been expressed regarding whether the globalization process would swamp the non-Western culture? One view is that impelled

as it is by economics, globalization process will swamp the non-Western cultures, but even on the economic front, we see cultural mores demand their homage. Take, for example, a food – pizza coming from Italy has to have Indian combination of chicken tikka and not beef to make it popular here. Conversely, the non-Western cultural practices like Yoga and Ayurveda make inroads into the West, thanks to the liberalization brought about by globalization.

Culture and Community

Let us start with ironing out some of the basic constructs. What is culture? While traditionalists like Mathew Arnold and T.S. Eliot identified culture with elite social norms and thoughts, the Marxist school represented by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall identified it with mass culture represented by popular habits of dress, food, consumption patterns, and popular music, movies, etc. Thus, there are two extreme positions here. Without going into much detail, we can agree with Bhikhu Parekh that it is a “system of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of human beings understand, regulate and structure their individual and collective lives” (Parekh, 2006: p. 143).

Culture is a broad comprehensive term even though modern times have delimited it by using it to denote various denominations of human activity as can be seen from the terms like business culture, youth culture, mass culture and working class culture. All the same, it remains an unorganized affair, without any centralizing authority. Also, culture has had a lot of intake from religion even though it defines religion sometimes under unconventional and contingent rubrics like Indian Jews or European Islam. But it is also true that culture is bound to economic, social and political conditions. It also manifests itself through art, literature, music, value system, lifestyle, etc.

The next construct worth considering is a cultural grouping or community. What is a cultural community? According to Parekh, “Just as a body of people sharing a common language, religion and structure of civil authority constitute respectively a linguistic, religious and political community, a body of people united in terms of a shared culture constitute a cultural community. Cultural communities are of several kinds. Some share nothing in common save their culture. Some also share a religion, especially when their culture is religiously derived. Some share common ethnicity” (Parekh, 2006: p.154).

We can of course, divide culture on the basis of location, caste, race and religion. In the context of India, when we talk of Hindu culture, we mean the cultural practices of a religious community as of now, and when we talk of Indian culture, we mean the composite culture of several religious groupings as manifest in a political entity. When we combine Hindu culture with Indian culture, conflicting voices are bound to be heard.

Cultural Difference

A multicultural society, at any given point of time, has the presence of different cultural groups based on nationality, race, religion, creed or sect, colour, etc. No society can insulate itself against external influences, Within a society, say India, we find better and faster means of transport and communication with wider sweep of business and growing penchant for tourism, the different cultures, particularly of far-flung areas like Nagaland and Arunachal have now an easier interface with other cultures. The need to understand and respect different cultures is on an all-time high in these times.

But how about the intra-group differences? Within these individual cultural groups, women are said to form another group, so are the people with different sexual orientation. Cultural differences are also based upon age, caste, class, language, location, etc. It is not merely at the macro level that multicultural situation is encountered, it could be within a family too. While the generation gap is one eternal fact, this is further heightened in case of immigrant population where first generation savours the two cultures, the succeeding generations slowly move away from the native culture of their immigrant forbears.

Finding Solution

While the differences in a family have a better chance of getting resolved, the normal approach followed in a society is based on majority/minority paradigm which is a simplified way to understand the several groupings present in any society at a given point of time. In any democratic society, it is mostly the writ of the majority that runs in the name of democracy. The minorities are expected to follow the mainstream. If there is a willing negotiation, the society progresses peacefully but if there is coercion, the minority gets frustrated and tension is generated. On the other hand, majority also feels pricked in case some hotheads from the minority community incite the sentiments of majority through their word or deed. It has happened in the case of the triple talaq and polygamy in the Muslim community in India.

The problems faced by the people from North East India speak volumes about the discrimination based on ethnicity. The young students from Manipur or Nagaland have been attacked even in the national capital Delhi. They are mocked by ignorant people for their features and charged exorbitantly for letting out accommodation. Young women from that region have been sexually abused and there have been murders also.

There is the problem of Dalit segment of society which defies the majority/minority paradigm. As in India, there are depressed classes in every society who remain at the margin even though they are not in a minority. Through a long history of subjugation on the basis of caste, they have been rendered powerless. The Dalits do not represent a different culture even though there have been attempts at presenting them as different. There are

different demographic patterns like the original inhabitants of Australia or America who cannot be judged by the majority/minority standard. But the political masters find it an easy option.

Away from the majority/minority binary too, attempts have been made to find political solution to the problems arising in a multicultural society. Thus, in the Quebec province of Canada, the ethnic French community was perceived to dominate other communities. The state policy of inter-culturalism adopted rests on agreed principles like the use of French language in public space. Besides, “Within the framework of basic principles – a commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflict, a Charter of Rights and Freedoms in order to provide legal recourse to the protection of individual and group rights, equality between the sexes, a secular state, and equality and universality of citizen access to social provisions (i.e., health) – interculturalism attempts to strike a balance between individual rights and cultural relativism by emphasizing a ‘fusion of horizons’, through dialogue and consensual agreement” (Maiz, 2005: p. 32). However, despite such policies aimed at removing the discrimination against immigrants, and in other contexts, against compatriots, the fact remains that societal prejudices refuse to go away and it is here that other initiatives come to help.

It looks as if the concept of multiculturalism is an elite one in the sense that it is the ignorant man on the street who mocks an African. How to deal with the perception of the common man? The problem is how to keep tempers from rising high in a society. It all boils down to the individual’s educational level and attitude, prevailing societal discourses, world politics, etc. If the people are well educated, (and by this I mean, scientific modern education), they can agree to accept reason as the touchstone for cultural practices. But that in itself is a limited guarantee. We have seen highly educated western societies falling prey to cultural clashes. If only, these may not be as many as we might find in the so-called third world. It is here that the role of mass media becomes important.

The celebration of Cultural events like festivals organized in educational institutions or public places can also help even though they tend to present the exotic side of a culture. Material aspects of culture like food play an important role in bridging the gap between different communities and nationalities. Decades ago, the south Indians were not acceptable the way they are now in north India. Over a period of time, their food has become hot favourite in the north. Their movies are liked. In the South too, Hindi movies have made inroads. Inter-regional marriages are no longer frowned upon. All this bespeaks understanding and agreement. Taking up the case of the north-eastern region of India about which a lot of prejudice is seen in other parts of India. Mercifully, the north-eastern food too is also becoming popular among youth. The recent movie on and consequent advertisement roles for Mary Kom were helpful. Sourabhi Debbarma won the Indian Idol award and brought instant focus on the north-east.

While the world organizations like UNO have got bogged down in the mire of international politics, humanitarian agencies have succeeded in bringing about positive interface among people of different regions in the world. Social and humanitarian activities are another area where people meet one another as human beings. Such feelings come up at the time of natural disasters, as for example, the help rendered to Nepal during the devastating earthquake it suffered not long ago. Similarly, the initiatives taken in the field of fighting pre-emptive wars against diseases such as polio with NGOs like Rotary have contributed to creating goodwill among people.

Fallacies of understanding

Despite the above noted measures taken to foster the spirit of multiculturalism, the world is far away from the goal. The primary reason for it, I believe, is our fallacious understanding of cultural evolution and sustenance. A general fallacy is to treat culture as static, to constrict culture to antiquity of a specific date of our choice. We look to past and draw a line after which we feel the cultural change is not to be noted. The thing to be considered here is how far back in past should one go. Isn't it arbitrary?

Perhaps, the fossilization of culture in popular imaginary was considered an easy way out to comprehend an alien culture when it was thought to be "crystallized by history, like pre-ordained phenomena beyond any potential process of evolution, change or reformulation" (Parekh in Maiz, 2005: p.3). This means, as Parekh explains, imagining the people belonging to these cultures did not opt freely and creatively for their evolution. This leads to rise of stereotyping and denial of any kind of pluralism.

We have to understand that cultural change is an ongoing phenomenon; it is forever evolving – taking in influences from other cultures or undergoing changes as a result of new ideas thrown up by scholars or changes in taste and lifestyle of general populace. We look at the history of any nation or society and find that there have been innumerable shiftings, mergers and divisions of people on any geographical territory which itself has been changing over ages, what with the movement of tectonic plates under the surface of the earth. Let us take the case of England: "In England, the Romans, the Celts, the Saxons, the Engles, the Normans, etc., all of them must have had a culture of their own – their own practices of rites and rituals, feasts and festivals, sermons and ceremonies. What sort of culture precisely emerges from the various historical migrations causing mixings and amalgamations? When does a nation get formed? And when does it stop forming?" (Dahiya, 1999: p. 40). So, no culture in the world can claim to be 100% pure, because over ages, multiple mixings have taken place. Even European languages are part of the Indo-European family of languages and DNA studies showed three ancient populations from Middle East combined to make the European gene pool! (Rincon, 2014)

Secondly, we must realize that culture is not monolithic; it is itself differentiated; it is hydra-headed. Even as Indian culture is presented as mainly spiritual, we should not neglect the atheistic and utilitarian strands like Buddhism, Jainism and Carvak philosophy. In the bid to paint the Indian philosophical tradition as mystical, we forget the rational tradition of the Upanishads. “Thus, young people who were drawn to Indian culture in the 1960s and 1970s frequently ignored the side of India that seemed familiar – the long traditions in mathematics and economics, the traditions of atheism and hedonism, the zeal for rational classification, the elaborately rhetorical intellectualism of the Bengali intelligentsia. They sought out mystical versions of Hindu religion because they felt that these supplied what America seemed to lack – spirituality divorced from economic necessity and military aggressiveness” (Nussbaum, 1997: p.124). Secondly, Nussbaum also wants us to note that in any culture, the majoritarian view may not be the view of the intellectual class and the past of any culture is not to be dissociated from its present because evolution has been taking place all along.

So, the two points that deserve our attention here are: Culture is not a monolith, and it is not all past. The desire for pristine and pure culture of the imaginary past is chimera. But the effort to recognize all that is positive in a culture and in tune with the contemporary ethos should be welcome and retained. What is obsolete and obnoxious – and there is a lot of such chaff that has come down to us with the grain, as for example, casteism – which must be rejected or modified. Not doing so will impede the process of growth of culture.

Descriptive Vices

Well-known philosopher Martha Nussbaum goes deeper and warns against two fallacies here, which she calls descriptive vices of Chauvinism and Romanticism. When we assess a foreign culture, we normally do it with reference to our own culture and try to deny its distinctiveness. This is what the Renaissance period churchmen did when they interpreted Greek thought to support the biblical concepts. Nussbaum (1997) finds similar approach in the 19th century historical description of ancient Greek culture by Americans which the role of Zeus as king of the gods was subtly distorted to produce the picture of a kind of monotheism, and notions of faith and grace were liberally imported into the reading of ritual and prayer, in ways that misrepresented their meaning” (118).

This is what Nussbaum would call “normative chauvinism” – applying own standards to other culture. Such an approach can entail likening other culture in essence to yours but then criticizing it for differences, or taking the foreign culture as “foreign and strange, the evaluator condemns it for that very strangeness” (131). This realization should take us to the native parameters rather than to the alien ones in judging cultural matters. Translations can play foul here, as for example, translating ‘dharma’ as ‘religion’, or ‘rashtra’ as ‘nation’,

'itihās' as 'history', and so on. There is no harm in comparing things but we must not forget that the two are distinct and in this postmodern age, both need to be given similar respect.

The other notion is of "descriptive romanticism" which is romantic longing for exotic experiences. Here she reminds one of Edward Said's typography of the 'other' as being strange, irrational and mystical, which uses "narrative to dispel contradictory memories and occlude violence – the exotic replaces the impress of power with the blandishments of curiosity" (Said, 1978: p.159). Amartya Sen *The Argumentative Indian*, categorizes these deviant approaches as *exoticist*, *magisterial* and *curatorial* (Sen, 2006: pp. 139-160). This vice "consists in viewing another culture as excessively alien and virtually incomparable with one's own, ignoring elements of similarity and highlighting elements that seem mysterious and odd" (Nussbaum, 1997: pp. 123-24).

Education

In this, education at an early age is the only potent tool to instil in learners respect for other cultures and help remove baseless assumptions and stereotypes about them. Out of the various subjects, it is the humanities that have the potential to create empathy for the people belonging to other cultures. Whether it is music or movies, food or theatre, dance or sculpture – the arts and the artists have always been loved across the political barriers. This is an area which brings about people-to-people contact in an effective manner. At the higher level, we find academics of all shades and colours mingling and exchanging views with academics from other cultures. Be it sciences or philosophy, humanities or medicine, higher echelons of knowledge draw people who have risen above the mundane differences.

There have been positive reflections of interaction between different cultures in literature. Indian culture was studied seriously and the ancient literature was imbibed and commented upon by the likes of Romain Rolland and Schopenhauer to W.B. Yeats, Christopher Isherwood et al. Conversely, Eastern writers have also commented upon the Western culture. It maybe added that the examination of literary texts in multicultural situation might result in creation of binaries, such as National/Regional, White/Coloured, First World/Third World, I/Other, Mainstream/Marginal, etc., but great writings always deconstruct such binaries and reveal their instability and fluidity.

Within the country, the Northeastern region has for long been like another country for many people living in other parts of India. Lately, there has been a spurt in writings from the authors of that region, as the promising writer Easterine Kire says, "Literature from the area is trending in spite of resistance to including Northeast writing in many Indian universities." (Kire, 2015: p. 3) Literature, indeed can disseminate information and create goodwill among the reading public for the region.

Comparative studies are immensely beneficial because these make things clearer against the compartmentalized schema of studies. It's not merely needed to run businesses at the global level smoothly that we require comparative studies or knowledge, it is also to run the affairs of our society in a better way that we need tips from other cultures. For that the foremost thing to be done, according to Martha Nussbaum is to shed the tendency to judge others by our own yardsticks. Nussbaum takes an example from music. Indian music sounds are very different from the Western music and indeed the whole concept of a musical work of art is different. "A listener who brings that concept to a performance by Ravi Shankar is likely to miss many aspects of his creative contribution, which is that of improvisation within the limits of a classical form with long traditions of performance", and yet similarities might be located between Shankar's music and the modern jazz music. (Nussbaum, 1997: p.120).

The comparative study also provides valuable lessons in learning one's flaws and getting tips on correcting those flaws because even parameters could be out of tune with changing realities. Scientific and technological advances, for example, make it necessary to learn from one another but when it comes to society and human beings, we grapple with complex organic forms with histories of ages behind them. We require in Nussbaum's terminology, a "contextual good sense and at least some present-day plausibility" (Nussbaum, 1997: p. 119). The lifestyle, cultural mores and societal norms cannot be changed under duress or threat of violence. That leads to the all-time poser: Can a cultural community criticize another or the criticism needs to come from within only? In other words, who should speak up -- the reformer from within or somebody from outside the community? It is indeed a serious matter and the minority community is likely to feel the hurt if it is asked to change its cultural values and practices which the majority does not approve.

The teaching process undertaken for comparative education needs to be carefully mapped. Renowned philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who worked with Amartya Sen, in her book *Cultivating Humanity*, deals comprehensively with the way liberal arts education is being imparted to undergraduate students. She has analyzed various courses being taught in different American universities and pointed out the need for sustained reforms in the interest of attainment of goals. The courses ought to be interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary and it is better for more than one faculty member to teach such a course. As an example, Amartya Sen's course in 'hunger' considers both western and non-western nations. Many other types of interdisciplinary cross-cultural teaching focus on an artistic or musical genre, or a set of economic issues. Further, in order to prepare students to cope with a multicultural society that has diversity of races, gender, ethnicities, classes and religions, the courses must be broad enough to address these diversities.

Education of the soul

All said and done, one major point that needs to be added is that economic issues like trans-border business or employment driving us towards multiculturalism is still half the story. The moment a society finds its economic problems compounded due to the presence of other cultural groupings within, it is bound to breed conflict and violence. We have seen it in Europe where youth from Andhra were at the receiving end. Within our country, the animosity generated due to the reservation between the backward and general categories of caste is another example.

All this should lead us to appreciate the fact that unless we recognize the divinity of soul within every human being and thereby stress the inherent unity of mankind, the cultural differences will hardly go away. For this, an enlightened approach to religion is needed. Comparative religious studies can be very effective here. If we make a comparative study of religions, we note the structure or the framework of religion. That opens up our mind to the way the entire domain of a religion is built up. Since it is the basis of every religion, we get an insight into its commonality. Studying thus is an intellectual affair based on curiosity that gets rewarded with satisfaction when the thirst is quenched. This effort also defeats dogmatism and develops understanding and tolerance of other religions. We know that in every religion, the concepts of original sin is to be found whether as a sin or a lack or *maya*. It is the same with other concepts like renunciation, redemption, etc. That leads us to understand the way religion is constructed. After that it is a matter of different choices and the realization that, as the famous Sanskrit maxim goes: *ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*, i.e., Truth is one though scholars interpret it differently.

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