Pluralism and Its Evolution in India

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Abstract

The plural character of Indian society has been a subject of study by a good number of sociologists and political scientists. Different scholars have laid emphasis on different aspects of this pluralism. For example Nehru described India as a country where centuries co-exist. of course this is one aspect of pluralism Factors making for diversity are apparent even to a casual observer. The population of India is racially diverse, all the great religions of the world are represented in this country. The tribal groups enjoy varying degrees of contact with one or the other of the great religions. The major literary languages alone number eighteen. Diversity is seen in the patterns of rural as well as urban settlements, community life. In kinship, marriage rites and customs, inheritance and general mode of living, there are striking differences between groups. In the given conditions, it was imperative that the Founding Fathers should have devised a federal constitution for the country. This paper examines the concept of Pluralism and how it manifests in Indian society, a Society that is characterized by its rich historical cultural, and social diversity.

Keywords

History, Dynasty, Bahmani, Rulers.

Pluralism is a term, which is frequently misunderstood. It is defined as "the respect of our differences and the identification of what we share in common". Pluralism means two things. It means, first, that we recognize that there are many different belief systems and many different sorts of cultures in contemporary societies - we recognize that there is a plurality of viewpoints and groups. It means secondly, that we ask how these groups can get along together. Without losing their own identities and without weakening what holds society together? In other words, pluralism means that we intend both to respect differences and to identify what we share.

But we should also say, what the term does not mean because the 'ism' in the word 'pluralism' makes it sound like an ideology - which is certainly wrong. The term pluralism sounds as if it's about advocating that there ought to be lots of different beliefs and opinions and perhaps, too, on that basis it sounds like that other ism, relativism, the view, roughly, that anything goes and that no view is better than another, and probably that none of them is right.

But this is emphatically not what pluralism means. Pluralism does not deal with the true claims of religion and other systems of belief and practice: instead, it asks how such systems can co-exist successfully in civil society. The assumption of pluralism is, therefore, that there is a plurality of religions, and because of their common existence, and the threat of competition between them, those religions needs to co-exist. Pluralism concludes that the consequence of the failure of co-existence (the 'lesson of history') is intolerable for the future of mankind. Genocide and crimes against humanity are the inevitable consequences of the failure of co-existence.

Once we accept and recognise the existence and the legitimacy of diversities and the need for a measure of autonomy for them we are close to a sense of pluralism in a civil society. Pluralism has theological, ethical, societal and cultural aspects. The term pluralism can be widely interpreted. In political terms, it is the belief that power is, or should be, distributed among many groups and interests in society in contrast to the belief in monism. In sociological terms pluralism denotes the social condition in which a variety of ethnic groups and subcultures maintain autonomy and develop their cultural traditions within a single complex society. A society can, therefore, be pluralistic in terms of the existence of cultural differences between different groups, and also in terms of the presence of a number of ethnic groups. Above all in pluralism there is a willingness to accept diversities and to create a framework in which diversities can live together and flourish.

The Webster's Collegiate Dictionary contains the following definition of pluralism: "a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their

traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization.[1] In the 'Everyman's Encyclopedia', pluralism is defined as "the theory which regards society as an aggregation of social groups formed for various purposes and composed of overlapping membership. Political decisions are seen as the outcome of competition between such interested groups."[2] According to 'The Cambridge Encyclopedia', "Any metaphysical theory which is committed to the ultimate existence of two or more kinds of things."[3]

The origin of the concept of a 'plural society' is customarily linked to the anthropologist, J.S. Furnivall. Furnivall was particularly interested in colonial milieus in which indigenous, colonials and non- indigenous peoples who had been imported by the colonials lived side by side. Such a unit he called a plural society:

"It is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling... There is a plural society with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit."[4]

J.S. Furnivall analysed the British regime in Burma and Indonesia using the 'plural society' concept. By plural society, he meant a multi-ethnic one, assembled under colonial auspices for the purpose of generating profits for stockholders back home. When the British conquered Burma, they opened up a previously isolated country to large-scale immigration from India and China. The deeply religious Burmese Buddhists preferred their traditional life, centered on the village and temple; they were largely unwilling to take up the kind of work a modern society required. So Indians became lower- level civil servants, dock and construction workers, agricultural laborers, policemen, doctors, engineers and postmen. Chinese became shopkeepers and entrepreneurs. Burmese farmers grew the crops for the colony's flourishing rice export economy, but were otherwise marginalized. The British and other Europeans commanded the heights of the colonial state and business world. The most salient feature of the plural society was that these different ethnic groups lived alongside each other, interacting in the business and administrative sphere, but did not live together as a single national community. Furnivall comments that public spirit was non-existent: "self-government was impossible, because there was no self to govern itself." Each group jealously guarded its culture and way of life.[5]

According to Furnivall, 'Nationalism within a plural society is itself, a disruptive force, tending to shatter and not to consolidate the social order. That is, in a plural society of Furnivall, the co- existence of the different segments, usually of racial collectivities, one native and the other alien, is not voluntary but through the force

imposed by the colonial power from outside. Nationalism and plural society cannot co-exist harmoniously.[6] In his work, 'Colonial Policy and Practice', he slightly changed his opinion and said that nationalism may provide the cementing bond in such society.[7]

Though Furnivall was describing a very particular form of society, one now largely passé, his terminology was soon applied by others to describe any society containing heterogeneous characteristics.

It was M.G. Smith who made the theory of plural society more universal in character by detaching it from its colonial matrix. He analysesd the notion of plural society and extended it, lists three basic deficiencies in the conceptualization made by Furnivall. First, its total identification and restriction to modern colonial situation and multi racial societies. Second, its correlated confinement to tropical latitudes. Third, its restriction to the phase of individual expansion and 'laissez-faire' capitalism by Europeans.[8]

Smith expands on the notion of plural society and refers to pluralism as the condition in which there is formal diversity in the basic system of institutions such as kinship, education, religion, property & economy and recreation but not government. This is so because, "given the fundamental difference of belief, value and organization that connote pluralism, the monopoly of power by one cultural section is the essential pre-condition for the maintenance of the total society in its current form." That is political hegemony; by the dominant cultural segment is the characteristic feature of plural society.[9]

Ghurye's conception of a plural society is entirely different. He said that there is a difference between cultural pluralism and a plural society. There may be a society with plural features but not a plural society. The dividing line between the two is a vital one. A society based on 'cultural pluralism' or on 'pluralistic features' does not entirely lose its homogeneous base. But a plural society, as envisaged by Furnivall, is not a society at all; it is an assemblage of functionally unrelated communities. Infact, the word 'plural society is a contradiction in terms. [10]

Another important contributor to the debate on pluralism, Vanden Berghe, contends that there are two types of plural societies: democratic and the despotic. The latter type is ruled by a despotic minority whose rule lacks "... consensus on both values legitimizing the existing polity and norms regulating political behaviour. Plural societies... are primarily held together by coercion and the latter largely results from, the superiority of the dominant group in the technology of violence."[11]

By contrast, democratic plural societies have a consensual value system enshrined in their constitution and articulated through their institutions. While

constitutional guarantees are important what matters is the substantive realities of life. It is the actual state of affairs, which is decisive for sociological purposes. Therefore, what matters is not legal formal guarantees, important as they are, but praxiological gaps which are bound to exist even in a democratic plural society. Hence Berghe concludes: "I believe that pluralism is intrinsically associated with conflict and relative lack of consensus and integration."[12]

If Furnival's conceptualization of plural society was anchored to the empirical situation of the tropical, colonial, multi-racial societies Smith and Berghe refined the notion of pluralism and extended it to other empirical contexts such as slave and multi-racial societies, both colonial and non-colonial. In contrast the second conceptualization of pluralism is based on an entirely different type of empirical situation, which grew out of a multiplicity of collectivities competing in the political arena through the instrumentality of parties and associations, institutions and mobilizations. The typical cases, which represent such situations, are capitalist liberal democracies of United Kingdom with its multi- national and migrant populations, and the United States of America, which is polyethnic and multi-racial

Two outstanding initial exponents of this notion of pluralism are shills (1956) and Kornhauser (1960) but their intellectual ancestry can be easily traced to Alexis de Tocqueville (1956). Having observed the persisting turmoil in France, the country of his birth, Tocqueville was eager to locate the sources of stable and successful democracy, which was obtained to the US. He found that there existed a number of secondary powers, that is, voluntary associations, and these associations along with the autonomy of local authorities (eg.municipalities) served to prevent the authoritarianism of the central state and helped to stabilize democracy.In today's parlance civil society is widely recognised as a counter veiling power to the state which sustains political pluralism in democratic societies.[13]

Theorists refer to the despotic type of pluralism as the conflict model and the democratic type as the equilibrium model The essential source of conflict in the despotic plural society is located in the fact that a demographic, racial and cultural minority dominates over the majority in every aspect of life. This domination is made possible through their economic and technological superiority. This situation necessarily breeds conflicts between the two parties and the resolution of conflict is possible only by doing away with the very source of conflict namely, the domination of the minority over the majority. But viewed historically a large number of such societies have continued for a long time as stable societies, the dominated majority rarely revolting against the dominant minority either because the value of self-governance was not internalized by them or because they did not have the requisite striking power.

On the other hand, it is not true that societies grouped under the equilibrium model, the democratic plural societies, did not have any conflict. In fact the thesis of political pluralism which propounded the idea of integration being achieved through multiple affiliations of individuals to a variety of institutions and associations almost entirely, ignored the non-white, particularly the Black populations of these societies. Consequently, conflict, which is almost endemic in these societies, has been ignored. In fact, conflict is more visible in the democratic plural societies as compared to the despotic one. Thus, conflict and equilibrium are common to both types of plural societies. Therefore, to label these societies in terms of one of these features is inadequate. In the words of T.K. Oommen, "I suggest that we need to distinguish between two types of societies based on the quality of equilibrium which obtains in them. The despotic plural societies are characterized by coercive equilibrium and the democratic plural societies are informed of consensual equilibrium. Admittedly, the real challenge faced by a democratic plural society is to create and sustain a consensual equilibrium."[14]

According to T.K.Oommen, "Pluralism is not a fact, but a value-orientation, which indeed is based on the fact of diversity/heterogeneity. While in homogeneous societies, individuals, occupational groups, classes, gender and age groups constitute the building blocks, in heterogeneous societies, racial, religious, caste, regional and linguistic collectivities will come to constitute additional building-blocks, thereby rendering them more complex. What is at stake for the latter category of society is not only equality but also identity."[15]

From the foregoing discussion, it is quite clear that a plural society is necessarily a society in which people of different diversities live. These diversities may be of ethnicity, religion, language or culture etc.

In the previous pages we have tried to understand the concept of pluralism and plural society. From the definitions discussed earlier it is manifest that characteristics of a plural society are essentially present in India.

From time immemorial, India has been the meeting place of diverse races and civilizations. India is a vast country surrounded by natural barriers and there are considerable variations of terrain and climate within her borders. Geographical factors have, to some extent, influenced unity in diversity but there is some basic element in India's genius, something in its 'genetic code' as it were, which has always moved towards an underlying unity despite apparent diversity. It is true that India in the past, achieved political unity only for short spells of time, but always attained unity of spirit or mind in a broad sense after initial difficulties. This is a unique feature of India's chequered history. Ours is perhaps the oldest civilization of the world with an

uninterrupted history. We have survived the vicissitudes of time but maintained, developed and enriched a continuous culture. The history of Indian Civilization and culture is a story of unity and synthesis, of adaptation and development, of fusion of old traditions with new values.

Wave after wave of peoples of different races poured into the Indian sub-continent, settled here, and made it their homeland, barring a few exceptions. Before the Muslim invasion from the northwest, Hindu society was sufficiently homogeneous despite the heterogeneity arising out of its social set up and the continental character of the country. There had earlier been invaders and immigrants from outside, the Hunas, Scythians, Bactrians and others. Invariably, they brought with them their own faiths and cultures. They were all absorbed and lost their separate identity with the passage of time. As in the case of the meeting of the Aryans and the Dravidians, the religio-cultural changes were a two-way traffic though the predominance of the older indigenous Hindu culture was maintain. Whatever may have been the socio-political problems encountered, they were transitory. There were only a few minor cases of non-absorption-the Syrian Christians of Kerala who date back to the second century A.D., the Arab settlers in the South from the ninth century onwards, and the Parsi refugees who came to India at the close of the tenth century. They were, however, acculturated and indigenized to a great extent, and fitted neatly into the society.

A sea change occurred in the situation with the invasion of Muslims and the rise of the Muslim power in India. The coming of Muslims to India meant the contact of two different and distinct cultures. Arabs introduced the new Islamic or Muslim culture in India. In the middle of the seventh century the Arabs made an attempt to enter India but failed miserably. However, it was in 711-713 A.D. that Sind and Multan were conquered for the Arabs by Muhammad-Bin-Kasim. The death of Muhammad-Bin-Kasim meant the end of the first Muslim occupation of Sind. Next followed the Muslim conquest of the Punjab by the Turks of Ghazni. Inspite of the previous repeated attacks of the Muslim powers, foundations of the Muslim Empire in India were laid by Mohammad Ghori (1175-1206). It was followed by Slave Dynasty, Khilji Dynasty, Tughlak Dynasty. Sayyed Dynasty and Lodhi Dynasty.

Zahir-ud-din surnamed Babar, a prince of Farghana in Central Asia, invaded India and in April 1526, defeated Ibrahim Lodhi, the Sultan of Delhi and in the following year he won a notable victory at Kanwah over Rana Sanga. This led to the establishment of the Mughal rule in India. Babar was succeeded by his son Humayun (1530-1540 and 1554-1555) who had to consolidate his hold in Northern India. To achieve this end, he attacked Gujarat and secured partial victory there over Bahadur Shah, but he was defeated in a carefully planned campaign by the Afghan leader

Sherkhan and was exiled to Persia. Sherkhan ascended the throne of Delhi as Shershah and founded the Suri Dynasty in 1540. The restoration of Humayun brought in its train the Persian influence in India. His son Akbar succeeded him and soon after his succession he defeated a great rival Hemu in the battle of Panipat in 1556. The Afghan rule came to an end and the Mughal rule began instead. Jahangir succeeded Akbar. After him Shahjahan and thereafter Aurangzeb ascended the throne of Delhi. Aurangzeb was followed by a long line of weak successors, the last of whom Bahadur Shah Zafar was deposed and exiled after the mutiny of 1857 by the British to Rangoon where he died in confinement in 1862.

The Mohammedans were the first invaders of India who were not absorbed into the elastic and ever-expanding Hindu-fold. Many invaders before them- the Greeks, Scythians, Mongolians, Parthians, etc.- a few generations after their settlement in India had been completely Hinduized in name, speech, manner, religion, dress and ideas. In fact, they had lost themselves in the ocean of the Hindu community. But the Mohammedans always remained a separate community in India. Their religion, Islam, being a fiercely monotheistic religion, could not allow any compromise with polytheism or admit a plurality of deities.

In the wake of Muslim invasions, new, different and definite social and religious ideas were brought into India and it was not possible to achieve a perfect absorption of these conceptions. Simple, clear-cut, and aggressive Islam had nothing in common with the elaborate, ritualistic and absorptive Hinduism. Its well-defined social-system, philosophy, laws and a strong monotheistic outlook that made its absorption in Hinduism impossible. But it is a fact of history that whenever two different types of civilizations and cultures come in close contact with each other and remain associated for centuries, both are bound to be influenced mutually.

The spirit of assimilation and synthesis between the Hindu and Islamic cultures led to the evolution of new styles of architecture and music, in that the basic elements remained the old Hindu, but the finish and outward form became Persian, and the purpose served was that of Muslim courts. In music, Indian 'Veena' was combined with the Iranian Tanpura' and 'Sitar' was produced. It is a popular Indian musical instrument. The 'Tabla' is also a Muslim modification of the Hindu musical instrument Mirdang. A fusion of Hindu and Iranian systems of music led to the evolution of light songs, like quwwalis, instead of only classical strains. New arts and crafts were introduced in the country. Numerous workshops were set up for gold and silver articles and embroidery

Thus, inspite of the bitterness in political relations, the impact of Hindu and Muslim civilizations had far reaching consequences. The Muslims conquerors had

brought with them definite social and religious ideas, which differed fundamentally from those of the Hindus Long association brought the two distinct groups of the Hindus and Muslims closer and closer with the result that the evolution of the Hindu culture was coloured with the Islamic tinge. But the Hindu culture in its own turn influenced the Islamic elements Infact, the Hindus and Muslims have contributed their quota to the evolution of common cultural heritage. The medieval age witnessed the fusion and mingling of cultures but not absorption of one into the other. There was conflict between the two cultures and their synthesis, was not a perfect one.

An outstanding feature arose during this period was Sikhism under Guru Nanak Dev. He was followed by a number of Gurus, notably the most famous Guru Govind Singh, who put the doctrines of this sect on firm foundations. Guru Arjun Das, the fifth in the order, was the first to transform his followers into an organised community. He completed the Tank of Immortality at Amritsar, collected the writings of earlier Gurus and many Hindu and Muslim saints, the whole collection being called the Holy Granth, an authoritative scripture for the Sikhs.

After the decline of Mughal rule the British Empire was set up in the country. The British rule in India begins with the establishment of the East India Company in 1600 for trade. However with passage of time the entire India was under the rule of Britishers.

Britishers in India brought with them western civilization and culture into the country. It introduced many new elements in the Indian cauldron. The advent of Islam influenced chiefly the Hindu princely order, aristocracy and town-dwellers. They determined the tendency and not the tone of the social setup. But the revolutionary changes, which the western culture initiated, did not stop in the towns. These gradually filtered into remote villages in ever widening circles of influence. This process was hastened with wonderful rapidity by the conquest of space and time through improved means of transport and communication, which solved easily the problem of distance and immobility. Thus, the influence of the West spread far and wide among all classes of people in towns and villages.

The first influence of the West was felt in the realm of education. Western culture began to spread through the English education, which was commenced by the Christian missionaries and encouraged considerably by the decision of Lord Macaulay and declaration of Lord Hardinge that preference would be given to the knowledge of English in all public services. The western system of education introduced in India the study of western philosophy, sciences, literatures, history, economics, sociology etc. It created literate classes, which derived their ideas not from the age-long traditions of the land but from the West. They looked to the West for every aspect of their life and imitated a good deal of the western culture.

The impact of the West and English education was keenly felt on the vernacular literatures of India. Contact with European minds, benefited Indians considerably. Through the English language the western literature was thrown open to Indians and a flood of ideas was let loose. It had an intensely stimulating effect. Before 1919, Indian nationalist leaders received inspiration from the western literature of freedom. They modeled their speeches and articles on the western thought and borrowed a good deal from the British leader and orators of repute. Numerous works in the English language provided new trends of thought and action in India. The western literature offered several brilliant specimens in the different branches of literature and Indian writers copied them. The Indian prose literature begins with the translation of English prose works. Our prose writers wrote essays in the light of the western ideology. They imitated western style and theme in their writings. The Indian drama was considerably influenced by the western drama. The details about the stage and the distinct analysis of the individual and social problems in modern Indian drama are the outcome of the study of the western drama. Indian story and novel also were profoundly influenced by the western literature. Like prose, poetry was also considerably influenced. Under the influence of the West, many Indian vernacular printing presses were setup and numerous newspapers in Indian languages were started.

On account of the impact of the western civilization and culture, our moral ideas were changed beyond recognition. Through actions and reactions, antagonism and assimilation, western ideas began to penetrate into Indian thoughts and habits. Our manners and methods, dress and diet, modes of thought and ways of living reveal western traces. The West introduced a new view of life and conduct in India. A new note of individualism, socialism, revolt and scepticism was surging the Indian society. The younger generation started becoming individualistic in its outlook. The emphasis upon the individual had tended to loosen our social bonds and shake our social solidarity and cohesion.

A new conception of religion appeared in the light of western rationalism Old beliefs, habits and traditions were critically and rationally examined. Hinduism appeared to many a bundle of superstitions and they began to embrace Christianity and assimilated many western ideas. They began to study the Bible and followed its principles.

In the realm of philosophy, we received from the west philosophies of materialism, realism and idealism. The European missionaries brought Christianity to a direct confrontation with Hinduism. It had two results; first, missionaries gained considerable number of converts to Christianity, and they created a small new class or group within the existing socio-religious structure of India The second impact of Christianity was significant. It created among the Hindus intellectuals a deep sense

of inwardness to discover in the inner core of Hinduism conception of monotheism, and all other higher philosophies to feel proud of. The Christian ideas influenced the traditional Indian society to take a fresh look at their own set of values.

Thus we have seen how heterogeneity arose in our society after Muslim invasion. The Muslims introduced their own culture and religion in our society. After Muslims. Britishers enriched our society with their culture, customs and religion.

India is a classic plural society and a massive federal polity. That indeed is its most distinctive characteristic, a hallmark of its unique personality. India's plural character is apparent in practically every major aspect of its collective life, be it social systems, economic formations, culture-patterns; or language-dialect groupings, religious communities, castes, sub-castes and sects; or local variations of commonly prevalent mythologies and commonly revered deities, or ethnic identities, regional alignments and sub- regional attachments; or diversities of history marked by moments of triumphs and tragedies and differences in heroes and villains and in the rich tapestry of folklore, folk dance, music, crafts and artifacts of life.

The population of India is racially diverse, containing elements from six main racial types: the Negrito, Proto Australoid, the Mongoloid, the Mediterranean, the Western Brachycephals, and the Nordic. Eight major religious systems out of which four originating in South Asia, and remaining four in West Asia, co-exist in India.

Thus the mosaic of Indian heterogeneity is composed of 'segments' constituting language and dialect groups, religious communities, denominational sects, castes, and sub-castes, regional and sub regional configurations, ethnic formations and defined culture-patterns. While recognising the major fact that India is a historically evolved unified civilisation, it is necessary to remember that in the making of such a civilisation many strands of races, languages, cultures and religious communities have mingled to render it the hallmark of an authentic and classic plural society. This truth that the fundamental unity of India is predicated on its capacity to coalesce its many diversities in a pattern of autonomy and harmony for the peace and progress of this continental polity requires reiteration. In India, unity itself is a federal concept. It is certainly not the unity of a unitarian polity. It is the unity borne out of the inter-dependence of diverse socio-cultural entities that pass through the stages of competition, conflict and reconciliation, and realise that in mutual confrontation they might themselves destroy each other, while in reciprocal co-operation they can thrive jointly and severally.

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