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C O N T E N T S

Pluralism and Identity Politics: A Look into the Indian Centre-State Scenario

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Abstract

Constructed ideas of identity have been posing a threat to humanity in the pluralist notion of India. Shared concept of class, clan and culture get politicized by a small group of people, often driven by self-interest, and turmoil the democratic set up. Most of the time identity politics ends up with some patches on the minds and mentality of the commoners where the actual goal of the so-called identity-seekers catches veil of ignorance. How the demand to determine identity of a minority group threatens the broader concept of pluralism is the central theme of this paper. This paper also tries to underline the interwoven character of identity politics and pluralism in Centre – State relation of India. Starting with the theoretical genre, it will end with the practical hiccups and way-outs.

Keywords : *Pluralism, Identity Politics, Ethnicity, Minority, India.*

Constructed ideas of identity have been posing a threat to humanity in the multiculturist notion of India. Shared concept of class, clan and culture get politicized by a small group of people, often driven by self-interest, and turmoil the democratic set up. In spite of the serious efforts to safeguard freedom and liberty to the minorities in maintaining their identity, Indian government fails to control this separatist mentality of the communities. Most of the time identity politics ends up with some patches on the minds and mentality of the commoners where the actual goal of the so-called identity-seekers catches veil of ignorance. How the demand to determine identity of a minority

group threatens the broader concept of pluralism is the central theme of this paper. This paper tries to underline the interwoven character of identity politics and pluralism in India. Starting with the theoretical genre, it will be ended with the practical hiccups and way-outs.

Being the second most populous country with social and cultural diversity pluralism is obvious in India. It has prevailed here through tolerance in different spheres of culture, like religion, language, race, ethnicity and so on. Unlike in the West, where it is virtually equated with atheism, pluralism in India is a celebration of religions not their denial. The edicts of Ashoka, himself a convert from Hinduism to Buddhism in the third century B.C.E., promulgate a norm of mutual respect and toleration (Martha, 2007). Even the Mughal emperors observed Diwali and Nauroz. Until the early twentieth century, Hindus routinely took part in the Mohuram processions. To emphasize this aspect Gandhi had passages read from the holy books of all the major religions before his prayer meetings. When the Zoroastrians of Persia felt that their religion was in danger from the invading Muslims, where else could they go but to India! The Tibetans felt similarly in their homeland, they chose India.

India has emerged as a model of pluralism and secular democracy in the post-colonial world. Nehru was not, however, opposed to assimilation because without it a nation could never be built, particularly in a society like India (Harihar, 2003). But his idea of assimilation was not a forced or externally imposed one (Harihar, 2003, 156). He said that such an assimilation process would develop of its own accord through education and contacts, without any special effort (Harihar, 2003, p. 156). In such a process, he emphasized, every care should be taken to retain the individuality of cultures, much of which was, for him, retainable. Further clarifying his ideas on this issue, he said that people living in India should feel that they have perfect freedom to live their own lives according to their wishes and genius, and that India should signify for them a protecting as well as a liberating force. He pointed out that the policy of the state was not to interfere with tribal affairs but to offer the largest measure of autonomy. He also

attached great importance to the valuable customs of ethnic groups. Nehru believed that the legal guarantee of equality of citizenship regardless of religion, caste, creed or other social attributes would render communalism obsolete (Mishra, Palai, & Das, 2006). Nehru's approach to the problem of the management of ethnic conflicts, and to the issue of nation and state-building, thus was at once democratic and pluralist. But, in spite of the efforts of national integration we see statehood demands for ascertaining different cultural identities - like language, religion, or ethnicity. Most of the political demands for self-determination are centrally linked to the idea of a distinct identity of an ethnic group.

Now the question is when and how the identity gets politicized. Before going to take a look in the Indian scenario, let's have a short discussion on the meaning of 'identity politics.' The phrase "identity politics" is something of a philosophical punching-bag for a variety of critics. Although "identity politics" can draw on intellectual precursors from Mary Wollstonecraft to Frantz Fanon, it was first described briefly in an article by L.A. Kauffman, who traced its origins to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (an organization of the civil-rights movement) in the early and mid-1960s (Kauffman, 1990). Generally, identity politics refers to political arguments that focus upon the self-interest and perspectives of social minorities, or self-identified social interest groups. When members of a specific subgroup unite in order to affect political or social change, the result is often called identity politics. It is not limited to the major racial or gender divisions of our time, but extends into sexual orientation, ethnicity, citizenship status and other instances where a specific group feels marginalized or oppressed. Identity politics thus attempts to attain empowerment, representation and recognition of social groups by asserting the very same markers that distinguished and differentiated them from the others and utilize those markers as an assertion of selfhood and identity based on difference rather than equality. However, in his book, 'The Disuniting of America', Historian Arthur Schlesinger (Jr.) argues that a liberal democracy requires a common basis for culture and society to function. In his view, basing politics on group marginalization fractures the civil polity, and therefore works against creating

real opportunities for ending marginalization. Schlesinger believes that movements for civil rights should aim toward full acceptance and integration of marginalized groups into the mainstream culture, rather than, in his view, perpetuating that marginalization through affirmations of difference.

In India we find that despite adoption of a liberal democratic polity after independence, communities and collective identities have remained powerful and continue to claim recognition. Most of the time, this claim turns into the secessionist movement. Because of the ethnic diversity of India and causal complexity of the phenomenon, any study of ethno-secessionism that looks for causal uniformity is likely to be futile. Three contending theories seek to identify the causal conditions that produce political mobilization of group's identity. For the developmental perspective, which regards community or ethnicity as a primordial sentiment, ethnic political mobilization occurs when states fail to integrate ethnic groups into the national mainstream, thereby widening the socio-cultural and politico-economic gap between the ethnic group and the rest of the nation (Ragin, 1987). In contrast to this view, the reactive ethnicity perspective regards the infiltration of ethnic homeland by members of the dominant cultural group (and not its isolation) and the 'cultural division of labour' that is caused by the allocation of valued roles and resources to the dominant group as the main cause of ethnic political mobilization (Micheal, 1975). A third approach, the ethnic competition perspective, argues that the process of modernization sparks ethnic political mobilization when dominant and subordinate groups are forced to compete with each other for the same rewards and resources (Ragin, 1987).

However, a material basis for the enunciation of identity claims in India has been provided by the post-independent state and its structures and institutions. In other words, the state is seen as an "active contributor to identity politics through the creation and maintenance of state structures which define and then recognize people in terms of certain identities" (Ragin, 1987, p. 3). Thus, we find identity politics of various hues abound in India, the most spectacular however, are those based on language, religion,

caste, ethnicity or tribal identity. But having said this it would be wrong on our part to assume that each of these identity markers operate autonomously, independent of the overlapping influence of the other makers. In other words, a homogenous linguistic group may be divided by caste affiliations that may be sub-divided by religious orientations or all may be subsumed under a broader ethnic claim. These interwoven characteristics can be found in their claims also.

Starting from the creation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 on the basis of Telegu language, we see an array of new states was established on the linguistic and ethno-regional grounds. Following this trend, the Union of India is now a federation of twenty-nine states in place of fourteen states in the 1950. Even now there are ongoing struggle prevails in different places, like Harit Pradesh in Western Uttar Pradesh, Vindhyachal in Madhya Pradesh, Vidarbha in Maharashtra, Kodagu in Karnataka, Gorkhaland and Kamtapuri in West Bengal, and Bodoland in Assam. Identity politics will always be bound by differences; but it is also important to look at the broader aspect of democratic setup beyond the realm of identity politics. While the state has its rules, statutes and the Constitution as a means of guaranteeing justice, we are forced to perpetrate a sense of identity and tell others to do what they want to, within that. They seek justice within it, but basically that means beyond it. This inexhaustibility of justice is a historical product. So, there is no denying that behind identity politics there is always some hidden issue of justice.

Thus, the defenders of the right to cultural expression of minorities in plural states practice forms of identity politics that are both made possible by liberalism and sometimes in tension with it. Can liberalism sustain the cultural and value-neutrality that some commentators still ascribe to it, or to what extent should it embraces its own cultural specificity. Charles Taylor argues that the modern identity is characterized by an emphasis on its inner voice and capacity for authenticity — that is, the ability to find a way of being that is somehow true to oneself (Charles, 1994). We can hope that, through Indian pluralist notion, she will be able to establish racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding in place of hatred, discrimination and violence.

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