

Better Culture, Better Civilization: Rethinking Multiculturalism

Dharamdas M. Shende, Ph. D.
Professor-Department of English
Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj
Nagpur University, Nagpur-44 00 33 (India)
E-mail: dmshende@yahoo.co.in

(S)ociety is a matter of life and death, but culture is a game.

—J. Habermas

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle may be least concerned to disseminate their ideas among the citizen of antiquity, but “it is certainly true that they were deeply worried over the question of how to live a good life” (Lucy, 167). There would be no doubt to see that all human cultures that have animated whole societies over considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings. And it would be nothing but the peaceful existence of the human beings belonging to different race and cultures in human world. It is just like the peoples of different cultures working together the way the different fingers of our hand work together to complete the assignment with a view to achieve the better result. Needless to say, the same hand also can use those fingers even to drop the bomb and trigger the gun to destroy humanity.

For Plato, human beings were no different. Their characteristic mode of perfection consisted in realizing the potentialities of their nature and living up to the idea of a man. Human nature remains the same while social customs and practices are different. It may be because of Plato’s view of life that believes “ Human nature was composed of three basic element, namely reason, spirit and desire” (Parekh, 19). But level of these elements varies from person to person. Aristotle’s view of human nature was somewhat different from Plato’s . He did not assign the spirit a distinct status, and though desires to be less chaotic and unruly than Plato did. However, he too believed that reason was the highest human faculty, and was both theoretical and practical in nature. Theoretical reason was divine and immortal and, although it was an integral part of human nature, it entered it ‘from outside’ (Ibid., 21). Since human beings were unequally endowed, Aristotle thought that only a small minority was capable of leading the highest life. Many more were capable of the next best life, most others feted to lead the third best, and some were only fit to be slaves. For Aristotle a properly constituted society should respect this hierarchy and create conditions in which each way of life received its due recognition and importance.

The view expressed by Aristotle reminds me of the Casteism in Indian civilization which on the one side believes that we are the children of the God, but on the other it also believes in discrimination amongst those children of God on the ground of their belonging to different Varnas. It is this casteism or Varnas in which the first (higher/superior) varna used to exploit the rest of the varnas for its self-centred concern to life. The issue of distinctions and differences amongst the people on the earth must have raised debate over the issues of different cultures maintained by human beings over a thousands of years in human world. Augustine asked why God did not make all things similar and replied, *non essent omnia, si essent aequalia* (if all things were similar, all

things would not exist). Let us imagine for a while that the fingers are made of the same size. I believe that it is going to create certain trouble in accomplishment of the assignment. Thanks to God's infinite and overflowing love of His creation, He conferred the gift of actuality on all possible grades of goodness. He created diversity not as a vehicle of His self-realization, for He was already self-sufficient, but out of his love of his creation and as part of his design to create a perfect world. Each species in it was endowed with a unique nature, occupied a distinct place in the universe, and contributed to its perfection and harmony by attaining its own characteristics mode of perfection. This may be true if we believe in the existence of the God as the creator of the universe. But the postmodern situation in today's life speaks of a different truth. It is full of diversity.

Mill was most sensitive to the value of diversity . He thinks that "the absolute and essential importance of human development is in its diversity". For mill the diversity of individual character, lifestyles, and tastes was both inescapable and desirable, the former because each individual was unique, the latter both intrinsically and instrumentally. Diversity added richness and variety to the human world and made it aesthetically pleasing. It stimulated imagination, creativity, curiosity and love of difference. Diversity also led to progress because it created a climate conducive to the emergence of exceptional and original minds, provided new sources of inspiration and encouraged healthy competition between different ways of thought and life. (Ibid, 41)

There are some other views on human nature. Vico, was one of the first to take a historical view of human beings and emphasise the uniqueness of every society. He believes: Human nature was a product of history... and was differently developed and express in different epochs and societies. "Although all human beings shared a common nature, Montesquieu thought that each society also developed distinct human capacities, desires and so forth, and gave rise to a second 'national' nature. (Ibid. 56). For him , human beings were also endowed with the unique capacity of reason, and hence capable of understanding and controlling the natural and social worlds.

Regarding human nature, Herder thinks, "nature had put tendencies towards diversity in our hearts.. Each culture had a singular wonderful, inexplicable, ineradicable, identity, embodied a distinct vision of human life., realized different human capacities, cultivated different virtues and temperaments. (Ibid, 68). Every nation speaks in the manner it thinks and thinks in the manner it speaks. For Herder, the influence of culture permeated the individual's ways of thinking. Since no man could be human outside his cultural community, membership of it was basic human need just as much as food and physical security. For Herder all cultures were equal not because they were equally good, but because they meant much to their members and best suited their needs.

Each culture, according to Herder , was valuable because of what it was, and not as a stepping stone to an allegedly higher culture or as a stage in a grand historical teleology. Its sole concern should be to be true to itself and live by its own highest values. (Ibid, 71). His theory of culture was a remarkable intellectual achievement. He rightly insisted that cultures were not results of geographical circumstances and stages of mental development ...but products of human imagination, creativity and the search for self-understanding. Cultural diversity was a permanent feature of human life and could never

disappear as long as human beings remained what we have always known them to be , playful curious , inventive, capable of dreaming dreams and probing the limits of their knowledge and experience.

Human beings share a common nature , common conditions of existence, life experiences, predicament and so on. They...however, conceptualize and respond to these in quite different ways and give rise to different cultures. (123-24). No theory of human beings can give a full account of them unless it is accompanied by a theory of culture. (124). As thinking begins who seek to make sense of themselves and the world, humans create a system of meaning and significance or culture and organize their lives in terms of it. And since they face different natural and social circumstances, are heirs to different traditions, think and dream differently and so on, the cultures they create are inescapably diverse in nature. Therefore cultural diversity is an integral feature of human existence.

The social movement that came to be known as multiculturalism seems to be associated with the projection of the rise of cultural studies in the Canadian, American and western academics. Culture emerged as a catchword of public discourse in the 1980s and a new kind of cultural politics was built upon the phases of cultural difference and cultural relativism.

The meaning of culture, Turner says, is undergoing a historic transformation due to globalization, the information revolution, consumerism, and other such phenomena typical of this age. He argues that the 'culture' in multiculturalism cannot be viewed entirely as a throwback to the romantics or Boas. The conscious creation of cultural identities within multicultural politics, and the political efficacy of the idea of culture itself, suggest that the concept of culture that is emerging along with multiculturalism contains new elements which are connected with the context of its emergence:

[C]ulture has come to serve as the basis both of imagined communities and individual identities deemed to be 'authentic' in contrast to repressive, alien, or otherwise 'inauthentic' normative codes, social institutions, and political structures. This historical unwedging of culture and society as political-economic structures has converged with , and greatly reinforced, the idealistic culturalism...of the disciplines and thinkers primarily involved with multiculturalism (Turner, 1993:424, Deb, 181)

Some anthropologists viewed multiculturalism as a kind of democratic pluralism in which different cultures are presented as discrete, neatly bounded and timeless entities—a view that ignores the complex historical processes through which cultural and social formations are produced and transformed.

Many anthropologists thought that multiculturalism vulgarizes the key anthropological idea of cultural relativism by essentializing cultural differences . Linkage between culture on the one hand, and community, ethnic group and nation on the other, is crucial for understanding the career of the culture concept. Evolving as it did from the 19th century romantic and conservative thought, classical sociology posited a dichotomy between traditional community and modern society. Particularly races or nations were thought to be characterized by their own unique cultures, which were understood to be discrete, bounded and internally well integrated. Such traditional communities were seen as natural groupings based on ties of shared blood, language , history and territory and

were therefore regarded as more authentic than other kinds of groups or language communities is echoed in the present-day multiculturalism.

One of the earliest modern uses of the term, multiculturalism derives from the adjective ‘multicultural, in particular as used in the phrases ‘multicultural curriculum’, ‘multicultural education’, and multicultural society. The last term appears to give rise to the first two. What it denotes is a society in which there exist several cultures. The question of what precisely constitutes a culture is generally begged in this usage—though if pressed, those who use the phrase would probably speak of cultures as referring to a common language, a shared history, a shared set of religious beliefs and moral values, and a shared geographical origin, all of which taken together define a sense of belonging to a specific group. (Watson, p. 1)

If a nation is a multicultural society and a person’s sense of self worth is intimately and unavoidably bound up with their cultural identity, then the state, if it wants the nation to survive, can do one of the two things. It can try to destroy the multicultural dimension of the society by rooting out all cultures other than a single one which will become dominant. At the extreme this leads to the kind of genocide with which tragically we became all too familiar in the twentieth century after the events of Holocaust, the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and the massacres in central Africa. This pursuit of monocultural society can, however, take a more benign form through a policy of what is sometimes labeled ‘coercive assimilation’ by means of which, through employing the institutions of the state.

One helpful way to understand the different thinking underlying the strategy for dealing with the existence of several cultures within the nation, and one which has become a commonplace, is the analogy of the melting pot to refer to the process of assimilation. The term, *melting pot* referred to the manner in which immigrants who came to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century were encouraged to think of themselves as Americans, gradually abandoning their cultures of origin until, as in the action of the melting pot, they eventually became fully a part of the bright new alloy. Through a process of assimilation, then, facilitated by the state, all develop into Americans sharing a single common culture.

By contrast, when in the period from the late 1960s onwards social philosophy began to change and doubts were cast on not only the descriptive power of analogy—clearly different cultural groups were not simply abandoning their original cultural characteristics—but also its desirability, the analogy which emerged to take account of the new circumstances was that of the salad bowl. The comparison between the melting-pot and *salad-bowl* helps us both to imagine the difference between assimilation and integration and by extending the analogy, to appreciate the positive advantages which contemporary governments hope to gain from celebrating rather than suppressing diversity.

It has become commonplace for Western liberal democracies to describe themselves as multicultural societies, even though only a few had embraced official policies of multiculturalism. Even nation states which had traditionally been known as fiercely homogeneous such as Germany and Japan, could no longer avoid acknowledging the

ethnic and racial diversification of their populations. As a result of intensifying global migrations, “the world becomes increasingly a place of multi-ethnic states, with up to thirty percent of the population coming from other societies . Multicultural is thus often equated with multiethnic in public discourse, which in turn conflated with multiracial, indicating the extent to which debates on multiculturalism are concerned predominantly with the presence of non-white migrant communities in white, Western societies. In this context, multiculturalism is variously evoked as a response to the need to address real of potential ethnic tension and racial conflict.(Bennett, 1).

Contemporary multicultural societies are not historically unique for many premodern societies also included several cultural communities. Premodern societies minority communities generally accepted their subordinate status and remained confined to the social and even the geographical spaces assigned them by the dominant group. It is also different because of the colonialism, slavery, the Holocaust, and the enormous subfreezing caused by the communist tyrannies. Contemporary multicultural societies are integrally bound up with the immensely complex process of economic and cultural globalization. And therefore no society can remain culturally self-contained and isolated. Contemporary multicultural societies have emerged against the backdrop of several centuries of the culturally homogenizing nation-state. In almost all premodern societies cultural communities were widely regarded as the bearers of collective rights and left free to follow their customs and practices. The modern state rested on a very different view of social unity. “It generally recognized only the individuals as the bearers of rights and sought to create a homogeneous legal space made up of uniform political units subject to the same body of laws and institutions” (Parekh, 8-9).

It was only after the second world war and decolonization in the 1950s that multiculturalism began to make its impact felt in Asia, Europe and America: National Boundaries—with some critical exceptions—appeared to have become more or less fixed, and in the absence of political or economic threats states turned their attention to the maintenance of political stability and the encouragement of economic development.

Multiculturalism Policy in Canada points out that multiculturalism was a social fact in Canada long before it featured as an issue of public policy. Even at confederation in 1867, Canada consisted of myriad groups of people comprising various aboriginal groups, the French, the British and other immigrant groups. It seems to me that Canada has a chequered history of multiculturalism. Although it was a new country without deep historical roots, people including early leaders arrived with their own prejudices and group orientations. In the early years of its formation, even courts used to discriminate against Jews and non-whites and offense and discrimination against the native population was rampant even till recent times.

In Britain, it was the novel experience of large numbers of immigrants from countries known as the ‘New Commonwealth’ who while committed to the laws and norms of the society at large, saw no need to abandon their religious traditions or their cuisines or their languages, which lead to a realization that assimilation was not the only means of incorporating immigrants into the society and that integration offered a more practical way forward, as well as a more liberal and ethically acceptable one. In both cases this led to a major change of orientation in educational thinking.

In other parts of the world, among the most dramatic of the events of the period one can recall the expulsion of Asians from East Africa and the exodus from Vietnam of the boat people, as they became known, who were largely members of the ethnic Chinese minority. Here in both cases the dominant ethnic majority was seeking to expel or discriminate against an ethnic trading minority which had been established in the country for generations. The effect of these nations was twofold . First, it led to a reopening of the debate in the international arena about the rights of ethnic minorities and the position of their culture within the country in which they had been settled for generations , with ominous echoes of similar debates about the Jews in Germany.

In Germany multiculturalism appeared on the national agenda with the arrival of the large bodies of immigrants from Turkey and elsewhere who ‘ no longer want to be assimilated as far giving up their cultural identity is concerned .The settlement of Turkish immigrants in relatively large numbers has exposed the presence of ethnic homogeneity, and consequently there has arisen a need to deal conceptually with the issues in a way which will both win public support and conform to internationally endorsed liberal democratic principles. The presence of Turks in Germany cannot be considered in isolation from the context of the global political economy which has given rise to that immigration and, most recently, made it highly problematic for some section of the population. Multiculturalism in Germany now turns on the necessity of reformulating a notion of national identity which will both take account of the changing global circumstances in which national economics operate and at the same time recognize the contingency of earlier notions of German identity.

In Japan, the plight of ethnic minorities rarely surfaces in public debates. Yet it is undoubtedly the case that ethnic discrimination exists. It affects the Korean-Japanese in several ways in both public and private domains, determining for example their career prospects, their friendships from an early age, and consequently issues such as marriage partners and family life. (Hicks 1997). Another minority group in Japan is the *Burakumin*, whose origins derive from occupational specializations established far back in Japanese history but who are still marked out in Japanese society as an inferior-status group. Not immediately physically or linguistically distinguishable from the majority population, their areas of residence are confined to specific quarters of a town or city, and when, as is the custom in Japanese society, enquiries are undertaken of an individual’s family background in matters relating to marriage or employment, once *Burakumin* origins become known this leads to social exclusion.

In China, where there exists a fierce pride in the traditions of the dominant Han ethnic group, there is an ironic twist to the debates on multiculturalism and the rights of ethnic minorities. Historically the Chinese empire expanded, various measures were taken to incorporate ethnic groups and their territories into the Chinese nation,...Recently, however, there has been an unexpected reversal of this trend of Hanification (Gladney 1997). The Chinese government, apparently responding to criticisms that it has not allocated sufficient resources to developing the standards of living and the opportunities for ethnic minorities, has established a policy of economic support and special privileges for those claiming ethnic minority status, which funds being channeled to those groups. As a consequence, those who had formerly claimed to be Han or in some way assimilated

into Han culture are now reidentifying themselves as a cultural minority with their own linguistic and historical traditions.

This is also true in the case of Indian ethnic life. But the situation is rather complicated by the issue of casteism often seen as a marker of Hindu civilization. Ever since independence the Indian Government, following the principles of Gandhi, has tried to act positively to promote the welfare of the untouchables (some of them tribal non-Hindu ethnic groups) often referred to as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and now by what is becoming their own preferred term, *Dalit*. Among them, too, there has been the same move to emulate those of higher status while at the same time maintaining caste or tribal identities (Sinha 1967: 103). The Indian government, is trying to extend opportunities to these groups, in addition to granting certain economic privileges, now sets aside places in higher education for them. However this policy has created a backlash from the middle class castes who protest vociferously against what they regard as unfair discrimination against them, since their sons and daughters are now unable to win university places. In some cases it seems also to have led some groups to redefine themselves so that the government recognizes them as falling into the category of scheduled castes.

In France, even though as late as 1968 social scientists could say that the issue of multiculturalism was not so grave as in other parts of the world (Raveau 1968: 269). Observing the settlement of Muslim immigrants in France from former French colonies in Africa over the past two decades the extreme right led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, accepts the arguments that coercive assimilation, the preferred policy of successive government, is unjust. People should not be forced to abandon their cultural traditions and their religious duties. Thus far the right shares common cause with liberal opponents of the government on the left. But then they part company. If, says, Le Pen, the new immigrants wish to remain separate and to maintain an identity distinct from the majority population, they should be allowed to do so.

In many South American countries there are now strong movements of indigenous peoples who are engaged in creating an ethnic identity for themselves through a process which has been termed 'ethnogenesis' (Hill 1996), and in some countries they are able to mobilize themselves very effectively to win substantial concessions from governments and make realistic demands for national autonomy within the state. One of the points which emerges from this discussion of the South American examples is the way in which these local movements, thanks to globalization and the dissemination of communications technology, are not only able to link up with other groups within country itself but are also active participants in the world-wide campaigns of indigenous people and have in common a specific vocabulary of human rights which they employ in the framing of their demands. This gives them a significant international credibility and at the same time ensures a sympathetic response from human rights activists throughout the world.

In addition to these questions of special privilege and legal rights of indigenous minorities, however, another set of deep-rooted and widely ranging arguments has emerged in countries such as the USA, Britain and France, extending the debates about multiculturalism in a different direction. Although, as we shall see, there are immediate political and social dimensions to these debates, it is important to recognize them as

deriving from a philosophical discourse concerning the foundations and principles of a European democratic tradition. Prompted by the observation that there now reside in the North large immigrant populations who derive their religions and moral creeds from sources other than Christianity and the ideas of Enlightenment, the starting point of the debate is a disagreement about the degree to which Western liberal ideas should form the common core of values to which all citizens must subscribe and should be the final arbiter in disputes about the distribution of justice.

Contained within the new word 'multiculturalism', however, there lurks a potential danger in the naïve understanding of culture which it assumes, and which it has been one of the principal aims. The absurdity of much of the common misconception is demonstrated by the hard-wringing attempts to define a national culture, or even by those worthy discussions of what it means to be British or American or French and the attempt to institutionalize that national distinctiveness within educational curricula. Moves in this direction fail to understand that culture is a process of the constant adaptation of people to historical circumstances which requires them, as a condition of their own survival, to engage sympathetically with new ways of understanding the world and responding to it.

For as long as discussions on multiculturalism begin from the premise of culture as an assemblage of definitive characteristics, and governments continue to devise policy on that basis, either to accommodate what is thought of as the unchanging essence of alien cultural forms or to manufacture out of a set of cultural and historical ingredients what they seek to establish as a national culture, then the confusion surrounding the terminology is bound to persist. If we are usefully to retain the term 'multiculturalism' we must abandon those misleading associations of the word 'culture' with nations or ethnic groups or religious believers, and look much more closely at the changing ways in which the expression of identity responds to newly available local and global opportunities and how contained within those responses is an ongoing negotiation of collective and individual responsibilities which need to be configured less on a national than on a global or transnational scale. Such new culture would help mankind across the entire world have better civilization to maintain its better tomorrow in the wake of ethnic problems burning in the every corner of world.

The obvious fact that different societies understand and organize human lives differently and entertain different even conflicting conceptions of the good life has been noted and commented upon in all civilizations. In western thought, reflections on the subject go back to the ancient Greek and have given rise to several responses, of which moral monism is none of the oldest and the most influential. Moral monism refers to the view that only one way of life is fully human, true, or the best, and that all others are defective to the extent that they fall short of it. Since every way of life necessarily embodies several values, moral monism either argues that one value is the highest and others merely a means to or conditions of it, or more plausibly and commonly that although all values are equally important or some more than others, there is only one best or truly rational way to combine them. But moral monism runs the constant danger of grossly misunderstanding other ways of life and spells a hermeneutic disaster. It views differences as deviations, as expressions of moral pathology.

Culturalists make the opposite mistakes of assuming that since every community has a right to its culture, we are not entitled to judge, criticize or press for changes in it. We should respect the community's right to its culture but should also feel to criticize its beliefs and practices. In exceptional cases when these are outrageous and it seems incapable of changing them, we might wonder if we should continue to respect its right to autonomy. However, no cultural community is devoid of reformist resources, its constitutive beliefs and practices are best changed from within, and the outsider is unlikely fully to understand its complexity. (Parekh, 177).

If we are to develop a coherent political structure for a multicultural society, we need to appreciate the importance of both unity and diversity and establish a satisfactory relationship between them. Since different multicultural societies have different histories and traditions and include different kinds of cultural diversity, each needs to develop its own appropriate political structure. (Ibid, 206).

Born in the trauma of the partition of the country and the enormous intercommunal violence that accompanied it, the constitution of India wisely decided to grant its minorities several additional benefits/rights. In Canada and the USA, indigenous peoples enjoy negative and positive rights required to protect their ways of life that are not available to others. Some countries such as Australia, Canada and India place a high value on cultural diversity and give extra resources and rights to their cultural minorities to help them flourish and contribute towards the creation of a rich and plural society. In these and other cases minorities are clearly favoured and in some respects even privileged, but that is justified if it is in the larger interest of society.

Since often there is no one just or rational way to resolve the disputes of multiculturalism, they are best settled by discussion, negotiation and compromise. It is possible but it requires a very careful play with the Buddha's middle path because culture is a game and its needs to be played with a lots of precaution so that the balance between different cultures is not lost. The loss of balance between different cultures may cause the loss of human touch and the loss of human touch would cause the loss of human civilization. The problem posed by the multiculturalism could be solved by developing better understanding towards others in human world. What we do need today is that the balanced relations between these different cultural boundaries. There is therefore a need of the system which may celebrate the dignity of human life with a fair approach to accepting mankind with all its negative and positive pulls. It will help us envision human civilization as a whole. It is not very difficult if we play this game with a lots of care. It can help mankind welcome multiculturalism in the wake of new millennium. Which has faith just in the fragmentation of everything. It may not be within the reach of human being to diminish the differences between cultures but at least it is very much within its reach to promote the culture which respects the culture of every human being.

References

Bhabha, Homi. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

- Christopher, KW. (2005). *Rethinking Cultural Studies*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication
- Deb, Khushal (ed.). (2002) *Mapping Multiculturalism*. New Delhi : rawat Publications.
- Fitzgerald, C.P. (1972). *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People*. London: Barrie and Jenkins.
- Goldberg, D.T. (ed.), (1994). *Multiculturalism : A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Grillo, R.D. (1988). *Pluralism and the Politics of Difference*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Guha R. (ed.) (1982) *Subaltern Studies-I* Delhi: Oxford University Press
- Hicks, G. (1997) *Japan's Hidden Apartheid.: The Korean Minority and the Japanese*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Knight, J. (1968). *Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches*. London: J&A Churchill
- Lucy, Niall. (ed). 1997. *Postmodern Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- McDonald, M.. and Chapman, M. (eds). (1989). *History and Ethnicity*,. London: Routledge.
- Parekh, Bhikhu. (2000). *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, New York : Palgrave.
- Reuck, A. and Knight J. (eds.), (1967). *Caste and Race: A Comparative Approaches*. London: J. & A. Churchill.
- Watson, C.W. (2002) *Multiculturalism*. Buckingham : Open University Press.
- Yoshino, K. (ed.), (1999). *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism: Asian Experience*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.