



Collective identity in culture: An evaluation

Shyamalima Borgohain

Centre for Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract

The premodern times witnessed hostile treatment towards the minorities, indigenous people, immigrants, etc. which also took shape in form of racism in the society. These groups were confined to the facilities (be it social, economical or political) provided by the dominant groups. However, with the spread of democratic ideas of equality of status and rights, the minority groups' demand for the same gained momentum. The state developed various policies to enhance societal peace and unity. Two of the most prominent policies were "assimilation" and "integration" which came with their own shortcomings. However, the state accepted cultural diversity to be a permanent feature of modern life that led to the adoption of a "multicultural" policy. The multicultural policy or multiculturalism is a complex phenomenon involving contestation and debates regarding its meaning. Multiculturalism is about affirming cultural difference within a political community. Various concepts like collective identity, community right, social goods, etc. in multiculturalism rejects the idea that the individual is prior to the culture, and that the value of social goods cannot be reduced to their contribution to individual well-being. The existence of collective is central to the discourse of culture focusing basically on plurality.

Keywords: minorities, indigenous people, immigrants

Introduction

"I do not want my house to be walled in on sides and my windows to be stuffed.

I want all the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible."

M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, June 21, 1921

Culture gives rise to affinity resulting in 'identity' in the spheres of language, history, geography, people, art, architecture, etc. By virtue of identity, culture creates diversity with other cultures. Multiculturalism provides collective identity to people who share same history, language, geography, art, architecture etc. Will Kymlicka in his book *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, defines culture as "well bound, well integrated entities which gives meaningful life to its members"^[1]. He tries to protect a "societal" sort of culture whose membership depends on a shared history, geography, language etc^[2]. He distinguished between the "structure" and character". The first one is needed in order to keep a culture alive, while the latter includes rules and regulations of a culture. But what is essential for a culture to flourish is society's own struggle over power and meaning. Such conflicts can be resolved by having a systematic dialogue between different cultures^[3].

However, Kymlicka's definition of culture was opposed by the "social constructivists" view which claims that it is the

individuals that gives meaning to culture. The importance of the values associated with a culture depends upon its members. Further, to get a cultural difference one needs to look at the history and geography of the culture, its members' relation with the culture, the initiatives taken by the state to preserve it, etc. The constructivists view maintains that one needs to be self-critical about one's own culture. Even though one may be a part of a particular culture but may not feel a sense of belongingness and acceptance from his culture^[4].

Kymlicka in *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*^[5] put emphasis both on the rights of national minorities or indigenous people and the immigrants whereas earlier works were more centred on the rights of the immigrants. The end of the cold war saw the dominance of ethno cultural disturbances in the political arena throughout the world. Kymlicka through this book approaches such disputes by giving his own theory. He maintains that resolving such issues is difficult but one needs to investigate the history and the circumstances of such disputes before providing any solution. Being a liberal multiculturalist, Kymlicka believed that by issuing civil and political rights (human rights) to every member of a society and following them in an actual manner would resolve such disputes^[6]. Even though he focused on human rights, he did not undermine the importance of a culture. He goes on to make the claim that, mere human rights are not sufficient to regulate the matters. The traditional

¹ Kymlicka, Will, (1995), *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, p. 76.

² Ibid.

³ Song, Sarah, (2005), "Majority Norms, Multiculturalism and Gender Equality" in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 4, American Political Science Association, pp. 474-475.

⁴ Ibid., p. 475.

⁵ Kymlicka, Will, (1995), *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 7.

⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

human rights need to be supplemented by a theory of minority rights.

The need for such minority rights is evident from the issues of Europe and Soviet Union. In this context, Kymlicka writes:

“It is not surprising, therefore, that minority rights have returned to prominence in international relations. For example, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) adopted a declaration on the Rights of National Minorities in 1991, and established a High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1993. The United Nations has been debating both a Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1993), and a Draft Universal Declaration on Indigenous Rights (1988). The Council of Europe adopted a declaration on minority language rights in 1992 (the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages) [7].

Even though certain measures have been taken for resolving such conflicts, the outcome surely remains controversial.

Kymlicka mentions about the national minorities and the immigrants. The national minorities are those who involuntarily are incorporated into a state (or a territory). As a result they demand self-governance to maintain themselves as a distinct society. For example- the national minorities of United States such as Puerto Ricans, native Hawaiians, American Indians, Chicanos etc. In relation to this, Kymlicka writes:

“Many other Western democracies are also multinational, either because they have forcibly incorporated indigenous populations (e.g. Finland; New Zealand), or because they were formed by the more or less voluntary federation of two or more European cultures (e.g. Belgium and Switzerland). In fact, many countries throughout the world are multinational, in the sense that their boundaries were drawn to include the territory occupied by pre-existing, and often previously self-governing, cultures [8].

There are also the immigrants who voluntarily integrate into a society and do not demand any form of self-governance. They want existing laws and institutions to get modified so that it accommodates their distinct cultures. The United States of America, Canada and Australia witnesses a large influx of people. The period prior to 1960s mainly focused on shedding the distinctive cultural importance of the immigrants and to assimilate them within the dominant culture. The process can be termed as ‘assimilation’ policy or ‘melting-pot’ or ‘ethnic mosaic’ etc. Even though there may be slight variations among these processes, their fundamental aspect is same, that is, to make the minorities adopt the culture of the majority (along with the advantages and the shortcomings a culture carries).

The beginning of 1970s saw a drastic change. The above mentioned countries rejected such strict processes and adopted a liberal pluralistic policy whereby immigrants were allowed

to retain some of their cultural practices like food, religion, costumes etc. But they have realized that immigration is an unavoidable and not a ‘New World’ Phenomenon [9] which led them to adopt a ‘multicultural’ policy model. Since then, many countries opened their boundaries for immigrants. The minorities or the immigrants do not want a parallel society for them; instead they want the larger society to accept them with their distinct differences.

However, this new model provided the minorities with the right to maintain their distinct unity in the new society. The cultures which share a common language, history, geography, cuisine etc. are given a collective unity by this policy model. For example, the Indians that reside in Canada were given a collective identity of being Indian where they were allowed to follow their own cultural practices. But the most intriguing case is of the Hispanics. In this regard Kymlicka writes:

“Since the 1960s, the US Census has treated ‘Hispanic’ as a common ethnic group or origin, but most Hispanics themselves view their ethnic or national identity in a more particular way—as Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Cubans, Mexicans, Spaniards, or Guatemalans—reflecting the very different histories these groups have experienced in the United States. It will be interesting to see whether Hispanics develop a common identity and political agenda that transcends these differences. If they do, and if it takes the form of a separate national identity, then the issue of national minorities will move from the margins to the centre of American political debate. At present, however, ‘Hispanic’ is little more than a statistical category covering a range of national minorities, immigrants, and exiles, all with their own distinct identities and demands” [10].

Even though such recognition for identities was taken after the adoption of such policy model, the precursor of the multicultural model can be found in the case of New Mexico.

Joan W. Moore maintains that:

“On the elite level, Spanish or Mexican leadership remained largely intact through the conquest and was shared with Anglo leadership after the termination of military rule in 1851. The indigenous elite retained considerable strength both in the dominant Republican party and in the state legislature. They were strong enough to ensure a bilingual provision in the 1912 Constitution (the only provision in the region that guarantees Spanish speakers the right to vote and hold office). Sessions of the legislature were-by law-conducted in both languages. Again, this is an extraordinary feature in any part of the continental United States. Just as in many Asian nations controlled by the British in the 19th century, the elite suffered little-either economically or politically” [11].

Further, Kymlicka claims that immigrants can also acquire the

⁷ Kymlicka, Will, (1995), *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press p. 5.

⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

⁹ Kymlicka, Will, (1995), *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 17

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 16-17

¹¹ Moore, Joan W., (1970), “The Case of the Mexican Americans”, in *Social Problems*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Oxford University Press on behalf of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, pp. 463-472.

same benefits as the national minorities if they settle together without having internal conflicts. As mentioned, the conflict among the Hispanic obstructs them in forming a community whereby they could have acquired self-governing powers as the national minorities. But such benefits do not come so easily. It would only be possible if government would indeed be supportive towards their demands. It is a different matter whether the immigrants want such benefits or not. But the same is not applicable to the Afro-Americans. They don't fall either into the category of national minorities nor into the immigrants. The reason lies in the fact that since they were brought involuntarily as slaves and were not allowed building their own culture, they could not demand for any benefits. Moreover, the hegemonic culture never really allowed them to be a part of their culture. Whether the Afro-Americans wanted to assimilate or not was out of the question. There were also some Africans who wanted to form a 'black state' in southern USA. But since they were not concentrated at only one place but spread throughout the world, they never actually could form such a state^[12]. And even if they could have, the government would never have accepted their demand. The reason could be insecurity among the larger society. That such acceptance of demand may hamper the "national culture" or may create some social disharmony.

But the reality is that the Afro-Americans never really demanded a parallel society nor such demands that is equivalent to the national minorities or the larger society for that matter. Their only demand is that they need to be accommodated within the larger society whereby they are not exploited by the majority in any form^[13].

Regarding collective identity, Kymlicka maintains that some identities are given in terms of descent and not by culture. For example, the German identity is based on descent. Germans based in any country, irrespective of whether they speak German or not, are given German citizenship. But the Turks in Germany, who have literally assimilated with the local culture are not identified as Germans^[14]. Moreover, according to Kymlicka, national membership should be given to anyone who is interested in learning and respecting the language, history of the society and is keen to fully participate in every institutions of that society^[15]. But such a claim is not easy to fulfil as everyone since everything has consequences and shortcomings.

This position of Kymlicka is criticized by David Miller. He explains why there should be restriction on immigration policies. Miller criticizes liberal philosophers' position on the fact that people are free to move wherever they want, but some restrictions are placed on this freedom to prevent any kind of disharmony or conflict. Even though liberals advocate freedom, there are areas in a liberal democracy where such freedom is restricted. For Example- traffic rules whereby one cannot drive a car as he wants may be because of police control or one cannot occupy a place which is occupied by someone else^[16]. The only reason a liberal can give is the

harm principle which maintains that one cannot act if it harms others. And all these restrictions are followed to maintain a control among the public so that they may not harm each other. Miller gives two reasons to maintain his position. First is the culture. In any case, immigration somewhat affects the existing culture. The reason lies in the fact that since immigrants also want some opportunities to avail; it may become difficult for the state to decide what kinds of demands need to be fulfilled. Moreover, a huge flux of immigration would definitely affect the existing culture. Second, is the population. If the population of a state is beyond the control and capacity of the state, then its residents are the worst sufferers. They would not be able to move as they like or consume as they like or to get a job that one wishes etc^[17].

Hence, the onus of whom to allow entry lies on the state. One migrates only if his country cannot take care of his basic rights i.e. if he cannot avail his needs and interests etc. But the interesting fact is that he can only migrate to another country if that country wants him to be its member in turn. Generally, a country does not have any obligation towards anyone to make him its member. It can only be possible if that person proves to be in the interests of that country. For that, a society needs to involve in a dialogue with the natives to make sure that accepting people from outside would never hamper their condition in any form^[18]. Hence, Miller suggested the above conditions that need to be fulfilled by any society before allowing immigration to take place.

For Charles Taylor, recognition is of utmost importance for anyone's identity. One's identity is formed 'dialogically'. As Taylor puts "we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us"^[19]. But this does not mean that we will be dependent on others for our identity. We just want others to recognise for what we are. However, it may not seem to be an easy task. Others may recognise for what we are objectively even though subjectively we may differ. And moreover, there may be a case where we may fail to recognise our own identity. There, then, arises the case of "misrecognition"^[20].

One of the examples of the objective misrecognition is discussed by Derek Edyvane. He takes the case of a tamed housewife whereby her identity depends on the recognition given by her husband. If he recognises her as a person whose only duty is to serve him then he is objectively misrecognises her identity. But if the housewife accepts such recognition, then it leads to subjective misrecognition. So one needs to be recognised for what a person is and there should also be a subjective self-understanding of the agent. But if this objective and subjective recognition cannot coincide, then a case of clear recognition is difficult to attain^[21].

Derek through Taylor presents the importance of recognition. However, he too gives a real example of jazz musician Milton

¹² Ibid., p. 24.

¹³ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁶ Miller, David, (2005), "Immigration: The Case for Limits", in *Contemporary Debates In Applied Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing, p. 195.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁸ If the person is skilled enough to meet the requirements of the country, if he is interested in learning, respecting and keen to be an honest part of that society etc.

¹⁹ Edyvane, Derek, (2011), "The Varieties of Cultural Perception: Multiculturalism after Recognition", in *European Legacy*, Vol. 16, No. 6, pp. 735-750.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 737.

²¹ Ibid., p. 739.

“Mezz” Mezzrow to show how recognition can be detrimental. Mezzrow, even though a Russian- Jewish, had a profound love for jazz music and the black culture. He even went on to marry a black girl and used to hang around with black people. His love for those aspects was so immense and intense that he actually thought he had turned black physically. Now the question is: what recognition should be given to him. Whether he should be considered a black or a white? If we consider his subjective identity and consider him black, then we are objectively misrecognising; but if we consider his objective identity, then his subjective identity is misrecognised that may cause him pain ^[22]. So, how do we reconcile the issue?

According to Derek, the answer lies in the aspect of ‘attention’ which neither recognises nor rejects one’s identity, but sees the reality in a loving and just manner. Recognition is problematic as it requires one’s identity to be described. But, to attend someone or something is a selfless act which is in no way detrimental to a person’s identity. It simply sees the detail and the complexity of anything without any judgments which aims at not to hurt anyone ^[23]. But I don’t think it in any way is helpful. The reason lays in the fact that one or the other day a person may like to know his real identity. He would want to be recognised for what he is. Even though attention is helpful in short run, but eventually we need some better suggestion regarding such recognition.

Homi Bhabha, however, introduced the notion of ‘hybridity’ by which he means that we need to accept the new things or in a way welcome the change. And while doing so there should not be any comparison of it with the older principles. Since change is inevitable, new and complex things will surely crop up. Our duty is to accept it without comparison. The reason lies in the fact that sometimes the comparison makes the new aspect inferior to the older one which makes a situation stagnant. There needs to be continuous negotiations to find a way out. A third space, as Bhabha calls, must be introduced ^[24]. Regarding Mezzrow, a third aspect or space (besides objective and subjective aspects) should be provided to him without actually hampering his objective and subjective identity. He should be accepted for what he is and needs to be embraced for bringing newness. No comparison to any old measures should be drawn ^[25].

Bhikhu Parekh in his book *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, defined culture as “a historically created system of meaning and significance...a system of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of human beings understand, regulate and structure their individual and collective lives” ^[26]. He describes two approaches in order to understand culture: “monism” and “cultural pluralism” ^[27]. The root of monism lies in the western political thought which considers only one way of life

to be fully human. Parekh maintains that:

“every culture represents different systems of meaning and ways of good life. If needed, one should rise above the categories of thought and critically evaluate its values and system of meaning. Every culture needs to be respected since they have a deep belief in their language, history, customs, language etc. Moreover, one culture becomes rich if and only if it has some access to other cultures so that it can take some good from them and use it for its own betterment. Parekh argues that culture has been connected with the notion of “naturalism” which implies a uniform, universal and rationally knowable nature, which privileges individual and cultural similarities over differences. He rejects “monism” as “philosophically flawed”, “naïve” etc” ^[28].

A culture is shaped not only by the internal conflicts but also by the external conflicts. According to Sarah Song, “a culture is affected by cultural interactions through global economy, transnational communication networks and migrations of people across borders” ^[29]. Because of these conflicts one’s individual and cultural identity gets hampered.

Bhikhu Parekh in *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, looks at multiculturalism as the “value of cultural diversity to human life generally and thus the appropriate terms of relation between different cultural communities who inhabit the same territorial space” ^[30]. He considers that multiculturalism should be cherished and fostered. It is the theoretical and political dominance of liberalism in the west, with its homogenizing stress on secular individual autonomy that poses a threat to cultural diversity.

From a multicultural perspective, a good society encourages a creative dialogue between its different cultures and their moral visions. Such a society respects its members’ rights and cultivates their powers of self-criticism, intellectual and moral sympathy, and contributes to their development and well-being. A multicultural society cannot be stable and last long without developing a common sense of belonging among its citizens, which must be political and based on a shared commitment to the political community. This one might call political loyalty. But this belonging is reciprocal in nature. A citizen cannot be committed to her political community unless it is also committed to her, and she cannot belong to it unless it accepts her as one of it ^[31].

Even though they have equal citizenship, it is not enough to foster a feeling of belonging in the people- ethnic minorities, immigrants etc. They often stay away for fear of rejection or out of a deep sense of alienation. As Charles Taylor observes, social cognition can only be achieved through changing the view points of the dominant group by having intellectual

²² Ibid., pp. 740-741.

²³ Ibid., pp. 744-748.

²⁴ Bhabha, Homi K., (1994), *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, pp. 19-40

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Bhikhu, Parekh, (2000), *Rethinking Multiculturalism: cultural Diversity and Political Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p.143.

²⁷ Ibid, these terms are used by Bhikhu Parekh in the first and second chapter.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

²⁹ Song, Sarah, (2005), “Majority Norms, Multiculturalism and Gender Equality” in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 4, American Political Science Association, pp. 473-489

³⁰ Ibid., p 475

³¹ www.india-seminar.com, “What is multiculturalism”, by Bhikhu Parekh, retrieved on 8/3/2016.

arguments and moral appeals ^[32]. Charles Taylor advocated the idea of communitarianism, which embraces ontological holism, which views social goods as “irreducibly social”. These social goods cannot be reduced to individual good. This holistic view underlies Charles Taylor’s case for a multicultural “politics of recognition” ^[33]. A healthy community is the one which maintains a balance between individual and communal interest.

Bhikhu Parekh found Taylor’s idea of social recognition, by having intellectual arguments, to be inadequate. Parekh added the idea of undertaking a rigorous critique of the dominant culture and vehemently reshaping the economic and political inequalities. But these cannot be achieved so easily; hence, it needs to be fought for and involves contestation and violence if possible. Most importantly, the role of the state should be focused at providing them with security and helping its members so that they won’t be rejected. A society needs to nurture an emotional bond among its members ^[34].

However, providing equal identity to the minorities is a two way system. Besides the state, effort must also come from the minorities’ side. The national minorities and the indigenous people need to be aware and stand by their rights. Immigrants need to acquire the language, customs, attitudes and thoughts. They may follow their own native practices but need to observe certain code of the host countries in order to ensure national harmony and peace and unity ^[35]. Moreover, since they are new to a society, misunderstandings regarding certain practices are bound to happen. The residents need to be patient, and welcome them along with their practices that are not harmful. As a result, it will provide the immigrants with confidence to reach out to a wider society and would not feel any sense of rejection ^[36]. Parekh provides certain examples that depict the picture of collective identity in a multicultural society:

“...England often evokes images of serene southern counties, church bells, quiet Sundays, dreaming spires...as a result of the work of the work of ethnic minority and other writers, artists, musicians, etc., and some of the imaginative programmes on the television, England now also evokes images of mosques and temples, elderly gentlemen walking with their children to the Friday prayers in response to the call of the muezzin, Diwali celebrations in public squares, spicy foods, saris...This makes it easier for them to take ownership of it, participate in a common but internally differentiated discourse on their shared public world, and to build common emotional bonds among themselves” ^[37].

In a multicultural society, all the individuals are free to live their social and political life. The dominant culture needs to help the new residents to cope up with a new system of life. The majority culture needs to decrease their participation in any form of discrimination against the minorities. And in the same way, the minority needs to observe minimum code to ensure national peace and harmony, participate in common life, discharge their obligations as citizens and even though they may have a home in their native land, they need to consider the country of their settlement as their home too. But as people’s choices, needs and interests change over time, no single restriction is accepted for eternity. It has to be changed and revised with the changing needs and preferences of the people by keeping national unity and peace as the sole aim at its backdrop.

References

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994.
2. Bhikhu, Parekh. *Rethinking Multiculturalism: cultural Diversity and Political Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
3. Bhikhu Parekh. *Unity and Diversity in Multicultural Societies*”, ILS Publications, International Institute for Labour Studies, P.O. Box 6, C H- 1211 Geneva 22 Switzerland, 2005; pp. 3-4.
4. Edyvane Derek. *The Varieties of Cultural Perception: Multiculturalism after Recognition*”, in *European Legacy*. 2011; 16(6).
5. Kymlicka Will. *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
6. Miller David. *Immigration: The Case for Limits*”, in *Contemporary Debates In Applied Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
7. Moore Joan W. *The Case of the Mexican Americans*”, in *Social Problems*, Oxford University Press on behalf of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. 1970; 17(4).
8. Song Sarah. *Majority Norms, Multiculturalism and Gender Equality*. in *The American Political Science Review*, American Political Science Association. 2005; 99(4).
9. Taylor C. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.
10. www.india-seminar.com. *What is multiculturalism*”, by Bhikhu Parekh, Retrieved, 2016.

³² Taylor, C., (1994), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 97.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³⁴ Bhikhu, Parekh, (2005), “Unity and Diversity in Multicultural Societies”, ILS Publications, International Institute for Labour Studies, P.O. Box 6, C H- 1211 Geneva 22 Switzerland, pp. 1-2.

³⁵ Bhikhu, Parekh, (2005), “Unity and Diversity in Multicultural Societies”, ILS Publications, International Institute for Labour Studies, P.O. Box 6, C H- 1211 Geneva 22 Switzerland, p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.