The Challenges to Indian Diversity

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Abstract

India is a land of diverse cultures and communities that gives it a unique cultural identity among the countries of the world. It is a land with largest number of religions, castes, communities and tribes. The number of languages spoken, festivals (region and religion based), myths, fairs and folklores practiced here is innumerable. Since times immemorial, Indian society is a treasure of traditions and cultures emanating from this diverse ligua-religio fraternity. Alongwith this rich tradition of diversity comes a heavy price which is paid through the challenges posed to mutual harmonial and peaceful coexistence. These challenges to diversity are visible toady in varied forms and shapes of exclusions and marginalities which are practiced through the binaries of majority and minority discourses articulated through women's struggles, farmers struggles, caste and class based antagonisms, Dalit articulations, language based struggles, regional protests and various naxaliteand separatist struggles. The present paper focuses on the various threats to this diversity.

Keywords: Cultural Plurality, Diversity, Exclusions.

Introduction

India is a land of diverse cultures and communities that gives it a unique cultural identity among the countries of the world. It is a land with largest number of religions, castes, communities and tribes. The number of languages spoken, festivals (region and religion based), myths, fairs and folklores practiced here is innumerable. Since times immemorial, Indian society is a treasure of traditions and cultures emanating from this diverse ligua-religio fraternity. Alongwith this rich tradition of diversity comes a heavy price which is paid through the challenges posed to mutual harmonial and peaceful coexistence. These challenges to diversity are visible toady in varied forms and shapes of exclusions and marginalities which are practiced through the binaries of majority and minority discourses articulated through women's struggles, farmers struggles, caste and class based antagonisms, Dalit articulations, language based struggles, regional protests, various naxalite struggles, child rights struggles, environmental issues, sex workers rights, protest against honour killings, and so on.

Homi K. Bhabha perceives this othering of binaries in the form of a deep concern for the perspective of persons from regions and groups outside the hegemonic power structure (margins), as a result it has come to be identified with the subaltern group. There is an imminent threat to this plurality of culture when power struggle comes to the foreplay as it is a struggle and will to power that makes this plurality mutually contestant. It is this contestational nature of diversity that gives birth to the discourses of majority and minority or in other words who is to dominate whom whether in the case of language, religion, region, tribe, caste or gender.

Therefore, the question of race, class, gender, ethnicity, democracy and human rights against the assertions of cultural particularity and difference is of utmost importance. In the Indian context, marginalization of certain sections of society is done on the basis of caste, religion and gender. These are the yardsticks that account for the marginalization of certain sections of society.

Caste is the major challenge faced by Indian diversity. Caste and caste based oppression plays an important role in the marginality discourse. In *Nation and its Its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee discusses at length the orientation of caste in Pre-independent and post-independent India. According to him, caste is supposed to be a unique institution. Caste (in Marxist terminology) is considered as a feature of the superstructure of Indian society whose existence and efficacy is to be understood as the ideological products of a specific society (173). The simplest interpretation of casteness is hierarchy. In his words:

Hierarchy fixes a universal measure of "casteness" so that, at any given time and place, the immediate qualitative diversity of *jatis* can be ordered as a quantitative ranking in a scale of hierarchy. The universal measure appears for each particular caste as a determinate position qualitatively fixed (higher/lower) and hence comparable, in the hierarchy of castes.

(Chatterjee176)

According to this interpretation, the essence of caste lies in its hierarchy and in terms of its 'relative purity', therefore caste was kept separate and intact. In the Indian context caste has enjoyed religious sanctity. The caste boundaries were rigid and any transgression was not permissible. People were allowed to follow any profession or occupation outside the boundaries of their respective castes. Caste based oppression and marginalization is powerfully reflected in the present day genre of *Dalit* literature in India. Caste is an inseparable aspect of Indian society. Partha Chatterjee further discusses the politics of *jatpat*as being visible in the network of kinship and community as:

The fuzziness which enabled a wide variety of solidarities ranging from subcaste to gender to nation to be encompassed under the single rubric of *jati* has come under great strain when those solidarities have been forcibly inserted into the grid of modern regime of power. (Chatterjee 224)

Surinder S. Jhodhka, in his extensive research on caste, discusses the presence of *varna*, *jati* or *zat* as corresponding social divisions and hierarchies of status (Jhodka10). Bougle identified three core features of caste system as hereditary occupation, hierarchy and mutual repulsion. According to him, different castes in a society tend to:

Repel each other rather than attract, each retires within itself, isolates itself, makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even entering into relation with neighboring groups. (65)

Caste is both an institution as well as an ideology because it provides a social structure for the functioning of a society and ideas and values that reinforce existing system of inequalities. Race also played important role in determining social loyalties. Race came to be associated with kinsfolk, lineage, home and family and acted as the most powerful and fragile marker of identity. Racial stereotyping prevalent during colonialism functions in the contemporary world too in order to consolidate global imbalances and inequities.

In a similar vein, religion too played an important role in determining the societal, political and community based loyalties. Pavan K. Varma equates caste to *auqat*that means status and a person's *auqat* was a surest way to determine his social status (23).

Rajni Kothari opines that Indian politics was not caste ridden but it was the caste that is getting politicized in recent times (55). As against the older social order, it is now the castes that are fighting against each other politically on the basis of numbers. AshisNandy, in an interview with RaminJahanbegloo shares that "it is the competitive democratic politics that redistributes power and in India it has been disempowering the entrenched elite" (89-90).

The discourse of casteism and religion can be further extended to the issue of religious fundamentalism in the Indian context where secularism is still a refuge for religious fundamentalism. In a country like India where there is multitude of religions practices and professed, there is often a threat faced by one religious identity from the other. There is a mad race to marginalize the 'Other'. In such a situation, the religious identity is attempted at gaining the nationalistic character. Love for one's community and hatred for other community is fanaticism. In Post-Colonial India, this rejection of the 'Other' is witnessed in the Hindu-Muslim divide that had its roots in partition. The incidents of Babri Masjid and the Ram Mandir at Ajodhya are an example of religious fundamentalism. In recent times, it can be witnessed in the form of Ghodhra roits that was also an outcome of religious fundamentalism. Pramod Nayar defines this 'fundamentalism' as:

While the term 'fundamentalism' is most often used to refer religious fundamentalism, it applies to any chauvinistic rejection of an alternate form of thinking. Such fundamentalisms have always existed from the beginning of human life on earth, rising with diversion of civilization and cultures, and the recognition of different faiths. (111)

India is a multicultural, microcosmic world in itself where the constitution grants freedom of language, faith and religion. There are various ethnic, lingual, religious, regional, racial and cultural groups. When certain groups are sentimentally attached to one's own group and breed contempt for the other, it gives way to fanaticism and fundamentalism. Nayar defines fundamentalism as "not the ideology of the marginalized. It develops in the situations where social, cultural, economic and political power is up for grabs" (113). There can never be a balanced co-existence as every group tries to overlap their respective group's identity over the national identity. In the words of B. S. Jamuna:

Any multicultural mosaic, even in India, often fails miserably because of the anti-accomodationist stance of the dominant community. Multiculturalism should be able to negate exclusionism of minorities through acceptance and accomodation; instead the dominant community often creates an ideology of power, thereby paving the way for the inevitability of disarticulated subalternity within the nation. (121)

Ashis Nandy, in his essay, *"A Report on the Present State of Gods and Goddesses of South Asia"* contrasts the lived experience of heterogeneity in Hinduism, with the power fixated attempts to hijack the religion by hindutva ideologues. Nandy makes a refreshing diagnosis of the contemporary move in India to remake religion in the interests of politics. The multiplicity of religious forms and identification constantly transgress the artificial barriers erected by priests. Nandy deconstructs the exclusivist ideologies of religion by providing a history of political and social uses of divinities in India. In a way what emerges from his essay is an image of interrelationship of religion *as* "the South Asian version of multiculturalism" (Nandy 132).

Neeladri Bhattacharya in "Predicaments of Secular Histories" considers how the battle against communalism in postcolonial India "shaped the agendas of secular histories - in terms of reference, its silences and erasures, its tropes of analyses, its fears and anxieties" (57), and " makes a plea for a more self-reflective history that scrutinize[s] the premises of our secular narratives" (73).

Another important roadblock to the cultural plurality is patriarchy. In South Asian Post- Colonial societies the woman's question has never been an exclusive gender issue but has to contended along with the ideology of caste, class, community and religion; as such the emancipatory movements have centered on the ideology of culture. Indian society is arguably patriarchal in nature. In the Indian context patriarchy enjoyed a hegemonic exercise of coercive authority along with subtle force of persuasion. Within the Nationalist and Post-Nationalist domain, patriarchy was not contested as it was done in western societies because of the absence of any autonomous struggle by women at the grass root level. Indian feminism is contextualized more on the premise of empowerment as compared to equality. The discourse of female empowerment fights against violence, victimization and repression. AniaLoomba is of the view that gender, race and sexuality provided metaphors and images for each other in the colonial era. The labour of the Third World women fed the colonial machine, as asserted by her in the following statement:

> If female slaves were the backbone of plantation economies, today, Third World women and women of colour provide the cheapest labour for sweatshops, the sex-trade, large multinationals as well as smaller industries, and are the guinea pigs for exploitative and dangerous experiments in health and fertility. They remain poorest of the poor in the 'post'- colonial world. Such exploitation is both a colonial legacy and the outcome of specific 'postcolonial' developments. (Loomba 145)

Gender is one of the dominant crucibles that define social relations in a given society at a given time. Jasbir Jain is of the view that one may transcend the body and its desire but cannot get out of it:

> Gender continues to govern the individual's interaction with society and gender is both a social and cultural construct. In an attempt to redefine the self, the novelist has to re-evaluate the role of sex, of love, of procreation and motherhood and freedom. The differences both in writing and in evaluative strategies are directly related to these cultural situations. (55)

The women novelists of the 1980s onwards narrativized woman's aspirations, her professional endeavors, sexual radicalism, disapproval to conventionality, new orientations to man-woman relationship and a new vision of motherhood. Feminism was the domain of the new woman that was shaped by exposure to education and was limited to the educated middle class of the post independent phase. Contemporary scholars like Usha Bande emphasize the role of power structures and its circulation as fundamental in the understanding of oppression, in justification and objectification, be it in relation to the colonized, the subaltern or gender (3). Indian woman has been conditioned to patriarchy and as such has to maintain a balance between complicity, conformity and protest. Questioning the dominant ideology is an insult, non-compliance, interrogation and a threat to power. Therefore any drastic opposition to the patriarchal discourse is unacceptable; as such it takes the alternative channel of the seemingly insignificant acts of resistance called subversive activities (Bande8). Socially unacceptable behaviour is termed as transgression. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan observes:

> Some of these transgressive practices like cross-dressing, or crossing the boundaries from one sphere of activity to another, remaining unmarried, adulterous love and economic independence does not always remain suspect. In time some of them cease to be viewed as transgressions and become socially accepted acts. (71)

Conclusion

Thus in order to conclude, it can be argued that the imminent threat faced by the diversity and cultural plurality in India is from the discourses of casteism, communalism and patriarchy. It is the cultural heterogeneity of India that makes its intellectual traditions valued throughout the world. It has been analysed how caste and patriarchy affect the subjectivity of identities in a pluraristic society like India.

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