

Revisiting the Idea of Multiculturalism in India: Accommodating Muslims' Religious Identity in Public Sphere

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Abstract: *India is among the most diverse societies in the world. Various religions, cultures, faiths, languages and social milieu of India reflect a very fine aspect of Indian multiculturalism. The Indian multiculturalism is not defined by any particular, community, religion or region rather it is a matrix of different values, traditions, customs and languages of its heterogeneous cultures, religions, sects etc. As a liberal democracy it provides recognition to its vast diverse ethnic and religious groups with group-differentiated rights. For the Muslim community in India, both recognition and equal opportunity within the public sphere are keenly desired notions that tend to mobilise them politically and religiously. This paper explores the salience of Indian multiculturalism and issues of marginalisation of the Muslim minority in liberal democratic polity. The objective of this study is to reflect upon the issues of representation of the Muslims in public sphere in India. This paper will examine the factors which help or hinder in shaping the attitude and participation of the Muslim minority in public sphere in India.*

Keywords: *Multiculturalism, Group-differentiated Rights, Cultural Identity, Minority Rights, Social Spontaneity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural differences are natural phenomena and a fact of the contemporary world. No society is free of differences and, in fact, all of us live in societies which have a variety of traditions and ways of living life. The main aim of democracy is to accommodate all the diversities as well as protect and nurture the creativities of different cultures present within. One of the important ideals for a democratic nation state is the notion of cultural diversity. It is argued that no discussion of the definition and measurement of democracy today can be satisfactory unless it is grounded in and informed by a full appreciation of the inescapable reality of cultural pluralism.

The idea of formal equality is simply intended towards individual equality. It does not always take into account the cultural differences that are present in the society. Differences present among various cultures, social status, religion, language and ways of life are neglected. By treating unequal equally, 'marginalised' groups are pushed aside by the dominant group. This encourages assimilation of marginalised groups into the culture of the dominant group. Such treatment of minority groups and marginalised communities pushed them further in the condition of deprivation and discrimination. Given these sorts of concerns like discrimination and deprivation and socio-economic inequality of minority communities, multiculturalism as a policy has been adopted by modern democratic nation-states to ameliorate their conditions. It addresses various issues regarding cultural identity, pluralism, minority rights in public space, individual and group rights and recognition. It stresses on equality of different cultures and argues that all cultural communities must be entitled for the equal status in the public sphere. It is the perspective in which diverse cultures are represented as equal in the public sphere.

2. MULTICULTURALISM: VALUING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Cultural diversity, diverse ideas, perspectives and beliefs enhance our vision for a better society. Different cultures provide a different system of meanings, values and conception of good life; therefore, broaden our understanding of the world. "To say that almost every modern society is culturally diverse or multicultural is to say that its members subscribe to and live by different though overlapping systems of meaning and significance" (Parekh 2008, 80). Parekh maintains that since each culture has a limited range of human capacities and emotions and grasps only a part of the

totality of human existence we should respect-worthiness of each culture. He asserts, “*However rich it might be, no culture embodies all that is valuable in human life, and develops the full range of human possibilities. Different cultures thus correct and complement each other, expand each other’s horizon of thought and alert each other to new forms of human fulfilment*” (Parekh 2002, 168). All it means is that no culture is wholly worthless and it deserves respect. So each culture should be protected and deserved to be represented in the public sphere. The diversity of culture is therefore viewed as an important source of enhancing our options and choices, expands our vision of life and deepens our self-knowledge. Kymlicka argues that diverse cultures provide individuals with meaningful options. As each culture incorporates a specific model of social life and organisation, diverse cultures present options and concrete alternatives from which individuals can choose. If ‘*cultural diversity was to disappear then there would be no concrete alternatives left for human beings to explore*’ (Kymlicka 1991, 165). The diversity of thoughts offers an alternative understanding of history within which the lifestyles and worldview of marginalised people can be valued positively (Mahajan 1998, 210).

In this sense, Multiculturalism emphasises the importance of cultural diversity and collective identities. It begins with the belief that different cultures represent the divergent conception of what is good (Mahajan 2002, 57). It is primarily a political concept about equality and inclusive citizenship centred on culture. For Taylor in a multicultural society equal worth and recognition should be given to all cultures to prevent their members from forming negative images of themselves. He stresses for equal recognition because “*the projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress to the extent that the image is internalized*” (Taylor 1994, 36). For him, survival of a group is essential for its members’ development. To give an equal worth or value to a culture needs an open-ended process of evaluation and a positive judgement of the culture. The recognition given to a culture allowed its members to involve in equal dialogue with other cultures and to articulate their particular vision of the good (ibid. 40). Multiculturalism accords positive value to the group/cultural identity. It recognizes the dignity and importance of the collectivities and individual identity, which allows individuals to maintain their cultural distinctness. It sees individual not simply as an autonomous entity but also locate him within the community. It emphasises the importance of collective identity in an individual life. It acknowledges the value of cultural community in the life of an individual which is an essential feature of self-esteem.

Multicultural public policies are intended to achieve or help us to build a new relationship, a sort of democratic citizenship in place of prevailing ethnic hierarchies. The multiculturalism is not a bad static perpetuation of cultural traditions; it is about creating new relationships of citizenship in place of hierarchies. The majority has to give up its fanaticism of superiority of defining civilisation and similarly the state needs to acknowledge that other marginalised groups also have equal rights of participation and recognition in public space. Therefore, multicultural policies stress on the change in hierarchical citizenship to accommodate interests of the minority communities. These acts simply brought about the realisation that plural cultures need to be respected and validated through explicit acts of recognition.

Multiculturalism has been beneficial in two different ways. First, it helps in creating better relations between the citizens and the state, and secondly citizens of different ethnic origins are more likely to have trust in public institutions and offices. The multicultural policies help to create and nurture relationships between ethnic minorities and the state. It also helps in building a more horizontal level of norms and solidarity amongst citizens themselves and the civil society. In such multiculturalism, all minority communities can maintain their pride in their identity along with a sense of proud citizens of the nation. Such societies are more likely to have trust across various groups and participation between different communities and less likely to have prejudice and stereotypes. Different but equal that is the fundamental idea behind the concept of multiculturalism.

Thus, multiculturalism stands for heterogeneity instead of homogeneity, diversity as opposed to unity. Multiculturalism recognises and respects rich diversity and encourages the contribution of each group present in the society. It is an inclusive process in which all cultures are valued with dignity and respect. No group is allowed to be dominated in a way that excludes other cultural distinctness or identity. In this sense, individuals are considered as a part of collectivities and multiculturalism supports these collectivities. Multiculturalism can be understood as a self-conscious affirmation of the equality of different groups in the public sphere, a feature that differentiates it from cultural pluralism.

In short, multiculturalism pleads for and maintains the existence of cultural heterogeneity. The very premise of this idea is based on equal democratic interactions among all these groups. In addition, individual identity is not undermined, rather enhanced in the cultural ambience of community and collectivities.

3. INDIAN MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Various religions, cultures, faiths, languages and social milieu of India reflect a very fine aspect of Indian multiculturalism. The Indian multiculturalism is not defined by any particular, community, religion or region rather it is a matrix of different values, traditions, customs and languages of its heterogeneous cultures, religions, sects etc. The historical reality of India and the civilizational contours of Indian nation state are quite different from the Western forms of multicultural society. The idea of nation has emerged out of the conflict in the whole of the modern world whereas in India it has emerged as a result of pressure exerted by the socio-cultural reality of the society. This is a synergy of its diverse cultures, religions, traditions, languages, societies etc. The continuity and heterogeneity of Indian civilization and its composite and syncretic culture make it a unique and distinct from the rest of the world. Therefore, the idea of multiculturalism in the case of India is well synchronised with its historical-social evolution of the idea of nation.

In India, a conscious attempt has been made to reconcile individual and group claims/rights. The political imagination of the leaders of freedom struggle was to create a modern nation with the judicious blending of cultural rights of the people following their different culture, religion and tradition. When India got its independence it was thought that its vast cultural, religious, linguistic diversity will impede the development of a democratic liberal state. However, our political leadership and the Constituent Assembly took note of this plurality and diversity at that time and carefully framed the Constitution that provides ample provisions to accommodate this vast diversity. It recognizes and provides fundamental rights for its religious and cultural minority groups. It was a creative concept which combined the rights of an individual with the collective rights of communities. Unity in diversity was the basic vision of Indian political leaders. "*The Constituent Assembly debated at length the issue of cultural majoritarianism and it also incorporated a framework of minority rights to safeguard religious and cultural minorities*" (Mahajan 2002, 16). In short, there was no conflict in granting rights both individually and collectively, the idea of multiculturalism was adopted at the time of independence to safeguard minorities. Precisely this was the reason that a scheme of reservation and fundamental rights of religion was included and given special significance in the Indian constitution. In other words, the goals of liberty and equality were not dichotomized but sought to be simultaneously achieved. In this broad scheme of things, it is believed that the Indian society is not only structurally multicultural but its cultural diversity is also recognised, represented and made the basis of multiple entitlements of the people in the overall functioning of the polity.

The case of Indian multiculturalism is comprehensible at two levels – structural and socio-political discourse. The social composition of India is structurally multicultural. It has been a fact of social life of India for centuries. More significantly, the idea of multiculturalism finds strong articulation in social-political discourses of India during and after independence. The chequered history of India has entailed the process of heated debates on the issue of secularism and the protection of religious rights of its citizens. The Western society discovered the idea of secularism through the long and sustained struggle between the sword and the cross. Unlike them, India came to terms with this idea in consonance with its existing social reality along with emphatic need to ensure equality, justice and freedom to its plural and multicultural society. The political aspect of multiculturalism was worked out at the time of the formation of the Constituent Assembly and subsequently by the Constitution after its promulgation. The multiple diversity of India was well recognised and cultural-political rights of the various constitutive groups were constitutionally incorporated. Debates in the Constituent Assembly forcefully pleaded the case of incorporation of minority rights. Over centuries India has developed a long shared collective tradition of inter-community livings and showed its remarkable resilience. As a result, the focus of its collective life and Indian Constitution must have a basic obligation to all its citizens. There are many values that need constitutional mandate. These proliferating values have both legal and normative appeals. These include mutual respect, tolerance, peaceful resolution of differences, equality of human worth, racial and gender equality, individual liberty and free speech. These values guide us to determine the range of permissible diversity. It

implies that those practices of the minority communities or even the majority community that violate these values they might be checked or stopped altogether. For instance, arranged marriages could be allowed but not forced marriages as they violate the important value of individual equality and liberty. The permissible range of diversity also guides our common laws and values and affirms integration and social inclusiveness in a democratic state.

4. MAJORITY-MINORITY DICHOTOMY: DECONSTRUCTING THE PROCESS OF ‘OTHERING’

Right from the advent of Islam in India, the Muslim community remains part and parcel of the Indian culture and society. Both Hindu and Muslim communities shared and adopted various customs, arts, literature and traditions that overlap with each other. This process of sharing and interaction between these communities results in a composite and syncretic cultural tradition, a characteristic of Indian culture. This dynamic and creative vision of Indian society in which the Hindus and the Muslims coexisted together with harmony was appropriately portrayed by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, he said “*I have always said that our land of India is like a newly-wedded bride whose two beautiful eyes are the Hindus and the Musalmans; if the two exist in mutual concord the bride will remain forever resplendent and becoming, while if they make up their mind to see in different directions the bride is bound to become squinted and even partially blind*” (Basant 2010, xvi). Similar views were expressed by Gandhi while addressing a meeting on 24 March 1947 he said, “*Hindus and Muslims are the two eyes of mother India just as the trouble in one eye affects the other too, similarly the whole of India suffer when either Hindu or Muslim suffer*” (ibid).

The development of ‘othering’ and Muslims as a minority community was not carried out in just a particular moment rather progressed in circumstantial and collective order, constructed and reconstructed time and again in different periods of colonial history. The alienation and ‘othering’ of the Muslims from the mainstream public sphere and their community-specific apprehensions got labelled as ‘anti-national’ in due course of nationalist movement in India. The genealogical chasm between self and other initiated with the arrival of the British Rule in India. The mechanisms adopted by the colonial masters were aimed at creating fissures in the Indian society. Modern concepts were superimposed on the Indian society to weaken its communitarian collective livings. The genesis of the Muslims as a minority was firmly established through 1909 Morley-Minto Reforms which accorded separate electorates to the community for safeguarding their minority rights. In addition to this, the colonial rulers also codified personal laws of the Muslims according to their religious beliefs. This conscious approach adversely affected the harmonious and common lineage of Hindu-Muslim communities and compartmentalised them into the majority-minority framework.

Alienation and stigmatization of any community within a large national framework produce damaging effects on the social development process and impede the formation of collective and shared living among both the communities. Therefore, to accomplish the goals of nation-building and substantive social justice to all, it is imperative to provide equal opportunities to all and take cognizance of the pluralistic notion of Indian culture. For the Muslim community in India, both recognition and equal opportunity within the public sphere are keenly desired notions that tend to mobilise them politically and religiously. The Muslims are educationally underachievers and economically are among the poorest. Over half of them living in those areas which lack housing conditions, live in poverty and need state’s support. These socio-economic disadvantages are compounded by the experience of discrimination and marginalisation. Young Muslims are also alienated from their parental culture because of demeaning notions associated with their culture. Many Muslims turn to fundamental Islamic tenets to get a sense of dignity and identity a particularly noticeable trend among young Muslims. The Sachar Committee Report highlighted such aspects of discrimination and marginalisation of the Muslim community as a whole. It deals comprehensively with the different social, cultural, economic, political and psychological issues of the Muslim minority. It empirically analyses the existing miserable conditions of the community with statistical data and provides an equal emphasis on the normative aspect of the constitutional vision of the minority rights highlighting its realisation for a stable multicultural democratic society. The report highlights how the Muslims are outside the framework of governance of the Indian state. Take any indicators – education, health, employment, political representation, habitat, accessibility to the bank credit – the Muslims are far behind all other communities and in some cases, they are worse off than the scheduled castes. The condition of Muslim women is even worse than their men folk. Partly the cultural aspect of the community and partly the state apathy has greatly contributed in creating their miserable conditions. All these result into a profound sense of alienation within the community. Consequently, Muslims still

experience the sense of 'other' in the Indian society which is evident in their day to day life in the public sphere.

5. ACCOMMODATING MUSLIMS' RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN PUBLIC SPHERE

Despite such a huge existing plurality of faiths and cultures, Indian liberal democracy manages to accommodate these differences together with its obligation to protect minority rights. Indian constitution successfully harmonizes the notion of individual citizenship with cultural and religious collectivities. Gurpreet Mahajan (1998: 4) has noted that the Indian constitution devised a two-fold policy; on the one hand it tried to ensure that no community is excluded or systematically disadvantaged in public arena, on the other it provided autonomy to each religious community to pursue its own way of life in private sphere. Secularism is an indispensable component of any multicultural political system. In this regard, the underlying theme of Indian secularism is to provide democratic foundations to its multicultural society. Moreover, it also attaches a great significance to the idea of social justice ensuring their diverse social locations. It is based on principles of neutrality and tolerance with a vision of cohesive and integrated society. Indian secularism adopted a non-majoritarian multicultural perspective which recognizes the culturally specific needs of different communities. In conformity with above concerns, how multiple entitlements would be judiciously allocated and determined remains a big challenge for the democratic success of the polities. In the particular context of India due to its phenomenal diversity, it becomes a necessity to resolve such issues by devising systematic constitutional and institutional mechanisms.

Various instances suggest that minorities in general and the Muslims in particular, suffer discrimination and other kinds of denials because of their miniscule representation in the public sphere. The varied experiences underscore the need to re-examine the political framework devised at the time of independence to meet the multiple aspirations of the minorities in the multicultural society of India. Besides the need of social-political initiatives, the minority community is also one of the crucial components for ameliorating the existing condition of the society. This would gradually reduce their dependence on the mainstream political parties claiming to represent their interests. Although, prominent political voices of Muslim leaders are emerging, how it would shape the course of minority politics is yet to be seen. The politics and strategies of dealing with disadvantage and deprivation of the minority communities and to examine whether these pertinent issues need rethinking and reshaping in order to take them forward in the quest for equality.

Another aspect which needs to be considered is the conceptualisation of the religious minority groups. These groups required to be conceptualised as heterogeneously structured that remain in a dynamic state of flux, continuously transforming themselves with change in time and space. Not acknowledging this fact may lead to a considerable amount of injustice towards the sub-groups present within them. The gender bias for women, for instance, is the most glaring example of such discrimination. These minorities within a minority group need to be considered within the multicultural framework of substantive equality. Hence, a more rational and nuance understanding of the structural composition of these minority groups is required to formulate public policies. Inability to have such understanding will result into cultural reification and essentialisation of cultures in place of their dynamic, fluid and versatile nature. The social composition of the Muslim community presents the same picture of class stratification based on descent, castes and regions. The Muslim community in India is broadly divided into three categories as *Ashraf*, *Ajlaf* and *Arzal* which are further split into several different groups. *Arzals* are the most depressed and marginalised group within the Muslim community and are equivalent to the Scheduled Castes in matters of their socio-economic and political positions and entitlements. Such glaring disparity among the Muslims sub-groups underscores the importance of recognising different castes and status within the Muslim community instead of the fallacy assuming Islam as an egalitarian religion which denies such differentiations.

Gender justice is one of the formidable challenges before the identity politics in general and Muslim society in particular. Moreover, the gender discrimination and marginalisation of women within a cultural group emphasize the concerns of intra-group equality and proper representation to minorities within minorities. The multicultural framework which promotes inter-group equality remains, by and large, insensitive towards intra-group equalities. So, there is a need to accept these internal differentiation and hierarchies present within a cultural group. It is of much significance that how

these minority groups identify and express themselves and more specifically extend equal treatment to its own constituent members. To put it simply, cultural groups should not oppress their own internal minorities and provide them equal and gender-just rights. The Muslim women face the similar situation at the hands of their own community which imposes various gender-biased personal laws. These personal laws violate the basic individual rights of women in the name of community values. The Muslim Personal Law which signifies the distinct identity of the community is valuable only when it recognises its transitory nature. The issue of gender justice for Muslim women lies in this transitory and evolutionary nature of community personal laws. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of these personal laws needs to be done.

Certainly, the women's issue can no longer be evaded. We should try to address this issue in its entirety. However, the purpose of this analysis is neither to create a binary between individual and group rights (universal and particular rights) nor to undermine the significance of identity/community politics. The argument is simple and straight, that the basis on which identity seeks recognition, equality and freedom from the state and the wider society, on the same basis women demand recognition and equality within the community. Moreover, it is recognised that democratic transition is not a one-day affair; it takes the time to grow, mature and ultimately bear the fruits. However, its goals, direction and the realisation of specified goals are clearly marked from the very outset in any transitory movement. Both the Muslim community as a whole and women as its vital part must come to terms with an accord that realisation of justice and equality for the community would simultaneously lead to the realisation of gender equality. Empirically, as well as normatively, this is the core component of the multiculturalism that cherishes diversities by countering all kinds of exclusion and inequality.

6. CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SPONTANEITY: DISTINCTIVENESS ALONG WITH INTEGRATION

Social spontaneity is the recognition of cultural rights together with the process of spontaneous social integration. The imperatives of society should be privileged over the state's efforts. To put it differently, it is a non-coercive social integration between different communities. The Muslim minority in India is an inseparable part of the social whole like any other community. The traditional perception of Muslim minority emerging out of the unfortunate partition of India must be countered. It is possible only when the multiple entitlements of the Muslim community is articulated, recognised and fulfilled. The recommendations of the Sachar Committee must be discussed, debated and accepted in its entirety, so that Muslim community's cultural diversity finds adequate representations in different walks of social, cultural, political and economic life. Such ameliorative measures are possible when social pressures of both the community and wider society are exerted on the political system and the state. The idea of social spontaneity has a close link with the social whole. The interactive social practices like education, employment, political mobilisation, dwelling and other material needs of the communities must reflect all the constitutive social components of the social whole. In other words, democratic social practices are the imperative need of a truly multicultural society. The idea and sense of social justice are also based on the concept of equal opportunity which would ensure strong social bond among various communities. Both the concept of social spontaneity and social whole are all encompassing and non-discriminatory. This feature of the concept would also take care of the intra-community challenges. In this context, it is important to mention that if the logic of demands of Muslim minority is justified, it cannot deny the same justification to Muslim women in relation to the Muslim community. In other words, both are the demands of equal treatment. It is my considered view that there is convergence rather than divergence in both the issues of Muslim minority and the issue of Muslim women within the community. Any split in both these issues would be a conscious ploy to weaken the democratic demands of the community and women within the community.

The dichotomy between 'self' and 'other' which was constructed during the colonial period continued even after the independence. The 'others' remained as unequal and subordinated within the public sphere. The privileging of majority-minority framework appears to build an unbridgeable gap between the inclusive self and the hostile other. The Indian multiculturalism is seen as a whole not a dichotomous segregation of its religious communities. Despite the bitter experience of partition on the lines of religious separatism, the Indian polity is able to sustain its social fabric based on toleration and accommodation of multiple identities hinged on the dynamic cultural realm. This blending of the moral ethos of diversified religious identities presents a unique aspect of Indian multicultural society

that is committed for equal civil, political and economic rights for the majority as well as minority communities. The Muslim community should be an integral part of the social-cultural structure of the Indian society. The process of 'othering' and its resultant alienation in the community can only be overcome by creating a strong cultural space of fusion of the Muslim community with the rest of society. It is believed that economic and material equality of the community would gradually create an integrative religio-cultural space among different religious groups. Such space would not only ensure economic equality but also guarantee social justice to the minority communities. However, so far, all the ameliorative measures have remained lackadaisical or at best have been used as merely an instrument to woo the consent of the Muslim minority. The spontaneous cultural intermixing of the Muslim community has not been adequately facilitated, aroused and encouraged by the overall polity. The more articulate, dominant and visible sections of society and the state in India have consciously refrained from such kind of inter-community fusion. In fact, the process of 'othering' has always at work whenever the issue of the Muslim minority is raised. The way they are wooed and promised welfare for the community at the time of hustings remarkably shows that they are something that is not the part of country's cultural heritage. This kind of cultural indifference towards the Muslims has strengthened the process of their identity as a distinct 'other'. But this was not the intent of the Indian Constitution. Contrary to the process of 'othering', the Constitution emphasised the need of encouraging composite dialogue. Accordingly it developed elaborate programmes, policies and operational institutional networks of promoting the interests of minorities and also of integrating them. Precisely this was the arrangement that the constitution has made for India's minorities. However, the imperatives of practical politics have not fully incorporated these significant normative constitutional values in the case of the Muslim minority. The dominant political voices more often treat the community as an instrument to be used and not to be integrated. Apparently, the so-called ghettoization of the Muslim community politically suits the dominant socio-political sections of the Indian society.

The seeming indifference of the political class and the system towards the community is probably the result of the lack of active political response of the Muslims. They have to struggle along with other minorities and deprived sections of the society to realise their democratic rights. The community must politically assert its democratic rights. Such assertions are required to realise the constitutional goals of minority rights in reality. Again, they have to demand the timely and speedy implementation of the Sachar Committee Report. The success of this demand critically depends on their political participation at multiple levels along with forging an alliance with other marginalised sections of the society.

Instead of creating a kind of binary between the Muslim community and other, we should have used a new language of socio-cultural amelioration of the community highlighting a spontaneous fusion of the communities. Possibly, this would simultaneously serve two purposes – identifying the cultural distinctiveness of the community as well as visualising a social whole where all communities voluntarily merge from their respective vantage points. It will assure minorities that they need not fear aggressive cultural assimilation. It will also lead to greater cultural sensitivity that will improve the language of public discourse. We should learn to have respect for minorities and cultures settled in our midst and become sensitive to other customs and traditions. In this globalising multicultural world, our cultural interactions not only have affected our traditions, arts and literature but also have elevated moral attitudes. Such multiculturalism involves balancing diversity and commonality, such diversity facilitates integration and comes to be cherished as our collective moral and cultural capital.

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