

EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

SACHIN KUMAR

Research Scholar, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

While thinking of how the value of multiculturalism can be translated into a social reality or how should cultures be protected and preserved, Multiculturalists have mostly emphasized on giving institutional protection to cultural minorities in the form of groups differentiated rights and privileges. We argue in this paper that a fuller realization of the value of multiculturalism would require us to move beyond legal and institutional framework and begin to talk of more stable and reliable foundations for a truly multicultural society. multicultural education, with its emphasis on changing people's attitude, serves as a strong foundation of a democratic society—one in which cultural diversity is not just respected or tolerated but actually celebrated and seen as adding to overall flourishing of life. This paper then seeks to present an outline of what we refer as multicultural education.

Before analyzing why societies need to realize the value of multiculturalism to enrich learning experience and what kind of institutional framework can support help realizing that, it is important to make some preliminary remarks about the nature of multiculturalism itself. First of all, it is important to understand that multiculturalism should be conceived both in terms of a value as well as a fact. As a fact, multiculturalism is evident in the multiplicity of cultures in our society. There are multiple cultures in our country that are given recognition by our society and have received legal recognition as well in the form of constitutional protection to the minority cultures. Article 29 and 30 of Indian constitution, for instance, grants cultural and religious minorities rights to establish cultural and educational institutions to preserve their cultures. Multiplicity of cultures is a fact; and this can also be demonstrated by the larger philosophical argument about diversity of human condition. The view that diversity is an essential condition of human existence, and difference thus remains an unavoidable, is advocated by thinkers like Charles Taylor and henna Arendt. This view entails profound implications on the theories of defending multiculturalism.

If we agree with the proposition that multiculturalism is a fact of every society, we can then move a step ahead and make a case for multiculturalism as a democratic value.

KEYWORDS: Multiculturalism, Society, Education

MULTICULTURALISM AS A DEMOCRATIC VALUE: TWO RATIONALES

Why is culture so important in thinking about liberalism and democracy? The believe that rights and liberties are prior to all the other value, and remains at the foundations of democratic system, has been central to liberal political thought and in effect led to the theses that right is the primary good for citizens of a liberal society. This notion suggests that ensuring citizens' freedom to make free and informed choices is the most fundamental guarantee provided by a democratic society. Multiculturalists, however, rejected the primacy of the framework of individuated rights and advanced alternative theses: culture is the primary good. This notion grows out of the dissatisfaction and the limitation of

the framework of individuated rights in ensuring protection of cultural rights of people. This, for instance, does not imply that individual rights are less important than cultural or group rights. What is suggested in fact is that the protection of cultures is an essential prerequisite for a fuller realization of core liberal values such as equality and liberty. Multiculturalism holds a view that humans are culturally imbedded beings: cultural belongingness serves as a significant source of identity. Cultures provide us a context to make choices, define our goals and aspirations, strengthen our convictions and commitments, and define to a significant extent who we are and how we relate to the external world. People make choices not in abstraction; their cultural context serves as framework to their choices. Choices pertaining to day to day life such as what we wear and what we eat are greatly influenced by the cultural practices. Such influence is not merely limited to ritualistic events of daily practical life but goes deep into shaping even our metaphysical beliefs about the good life and god. Religion, for instance, can be taken as one such metaphysical believe about good life which we embrace as a part of our cultural belongingness. In all, the argument remains that cultural belongingness is a matter of great significance for an individual's social and political life; hence protection of culture is an essential liberal value.

So it is clear till this point that culture is an important part of our social and political life. This proposition now leads us to another pertinent question: why to accommodate cultural diversity. To put it differently, what damages are likely to be inflicted on democratic rights of people if societies fail to protect and preserve minority cultures? We have argued in this paper that fuller realization of democratic rights of people in any society significantly depends on how well the value of multiculturalism is practiced. Keeping this in mind, we will discuss following two rationales to defend the theses: why to accommodate cultural difference.

First, what we call as wellbeing argument, takes flourishing and enrichment and growth of cultural life as core values of multiculturalism. It is argued here that if cultures are protected and a healthy and democratic interaction is ensured between them, it is likely to contribute to the enrichment of all. Culture must not be seen as monolithic or isolated self-sufficient entity nurturing of which can happen independently without getting influence outside cultures. On the contrary, a healthy and democratic interaction among different cultures allows them to mutually enrich each other in terms of expanding the moral and political horizons of those cultures. If Chinese food has become an integral part of food habits of Indians, it only indicates enhancing of our food choices. If today women are being given rights to contest in the election of local urban governance bodies in conservative country like Saudi Arabia, where participation of women in political activities was seen culturally prohibited, it shows that communities do expand their moral horizons as part of mutual learning. It would not be incorrect to assume that every culture has something worthy to offer to others. Tribal cultures in India, for instance, represent remarkable level of gender equality and values of environmental conservation—something that can be learnt from them and made part of larger social and cultural values. But this cannot be done unless those tribal cultures are not protected against the constant external threats from “mainstream “society in the form of discriminatory laws and tendencies of cultural homogenization. Hence over all wellbeing of cultural life greatly depends on our capacity to protect and preserve cultures to make mutual enrichment possible.

The second rationale behind accommodating cultures pertains to democratic equality argument. It is argued here that fuller realization of democratic equality requires that cultures are given their due space: they should be protected,

recognized, celebrated.¹ Equality of opportunity is one of the core principles of liberal political thought. This principle means that people make choices freely and fearlessly and everyone is provided equal opportunity to be able to exercise those choices regardless of their class, cast, creed, race, language or any other personal and social attributes. But in society, we confront situations where cultural distinctiveness of a particular group or community becomes a reason for its exclusion and discrimination. The distinctiveness, which should ideally be a source of enrichment, begins to put the community at disadvantageous position and restrict the sphere of options and choices people are allowed to make. Cultural difference becomes a hurdle in the free exercise of rights. So when Canadian traffic rules made compulsory the use of helmet for everyone including Sikh community, a sizeable population in the country, the law did not seem to respect the cultural right of Sikh community for which wearing of turban is a sacred practice. To take another example of aboriginals. When universal laws pertaining to property rights—taking individual as basic unit—are imposed on tribal groups, and their practice of communal ownership of land is disrupted, then it amounts to violation of their cultural rights. In both these examples, cultural distinctiveness puts the communities at a unequal footing in terms of not allowing them access to their culture without getting disadvantaged. Cultural difference, be it wearing of turban or customary rituals, would restrict the sphere of choices and opportunities for both these communities as long as their claims are not accorded recognition and institutional protection. The institutional protection can be granted in the form of special group differentiated rights, as advocated by Kymlicka. So, going back to our examples again, exempting Sikh people from helmet related traffic rules and legal recognition to aboriginal's customary practices pertaining to communal ownership of land would actually appear as preconditions to ensure liberal equality in true sense. Framework of groups differentiated rights does not violate liberal commitment for individual freedom and equality, but actually promote liberal ideals of freedom and equality. It is argued here that there is a need to see equality from the point of view of minority. Thus, Group-differentiated rights—such as collective property rights to tribal homelands or rights to control educational policies—ensure that national minorities have the same opportunity as the majority society to preserve their societal culture (Kymlicka: 1991, P. 142).

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

In thinking of how should cultures be accommodate, Multiculturalists have mostly emphasized on institutional protection in the form of special groups differentiated rights and privileges. We argue in this paper that a fuller realization of the value of multiculturalism would require us to move beyond legal and institutional framework and begin to talk of more stable and reliable foundations for a truly multicultural society. Multicultural education, with its emphasis on changing people's attitude, serves as a strong foundation of a society that not just respects but celebrates cultural diversity. This section seeks to present an outline of what we refer as multicultural education.

“Basically, multicultural education is a critique of the Eurocentric and in that sense monocultural content and ethos of much of the prevailing system of education” (Parekh: 2000, P. 223). Eurocentrism advances the following two claims. First, modern European civilization represents the highest form of life reached by humankind so far and provides the standards by which to judge all others. Second, the glory of modern civilization is derived primarily from European sources, owing very little to non-European civilizations. Its formative influences are taken to be all European: classical Athens and Rome is thought to be laying down intellectual and political foundations; Christianity as moral and religious

¹ Will Kymlicka (1991) makes this point.

foundations; and third major source was the rise of individualism, secularism, science, technology and so on, all assumed to be the unique achievements of modern Europe. The aims of Eurocentric education are then to cultivate those capacities, attitudes, values and sentiments which Europeans today nurture and cherish as foundations of human spirit: the capacities for critical and independent thought, individualism, the scientific and secular spirit, and pride in European history and culture.

What is wrong with cultural monism? Cultural monism blocks the possibilities to realize the principle of democratic equality. We've already argued that fuller realization of equality in liberal democratic society requires accommodation of different cultures. But the consequences of cultural monism in education can turn out to be far more dangerous—keeping in view what it is likely to do to pupil's minds and hearts. A monocultural education system stifles imaginations, stunts development of faculty of critique, and instills sentiments of arrogance and false pride. "Imagination, the capacity to conceive alternatives, does not develop in a vacuum. It is only when one is exposed to different societies and cultures that one's imagination is stimulated and consciousness of alternatives becomes an inseparable part of one's manner of thinking. Since monocultural education cannot avoid encouraging the illusions that the limits of one's world are the limits of the world itself, that the conventional ways of thought are the only valid ones, it blots out the awareness of alternatives and stifles imagination" (Parekh: 2000, P. 225). Hence the horizons of imaginations remain highly limited and restricted and we only cultivate really narrow minds. Consequently, Cultural monism stunts the growth of critical faculty in pupils. It also instills a sentiment of arrogance by fostering a false sense of pride about the culture. Eurocentric education, for instance, has been propagating for a long time a false notion about the racial and cultural superiority of Europeans which had in fact worked for them as a justification to colonialism non-western world.

"If the aim of education, as all the great educationists have rightly argued, is to develop such worthwhile human capacities as intellectual curiosity, self-criticism, the ability to weigh-up arguments and evidence and form an independent judgment, to cultivate such attitudes as intellectual and moral humility, respect for others and sensitivity to different ways of thought and life, and to open students' minds to the great achievements of humankind, the educational system should be as free of Eurocentrism and all other varieties of ethnocentrism as is humanly possible" (Parekh: 2000, P. 224). But the question remains: what kind of education system can qualify to be a multicultural education.

The report on the teaching of history by the federal education panel in the United States published in 1992 provides some clue of how the history curriculum should be framed and designed. While major focus was given on teaching western history in the schools, but at the same time it was also realized that students must be given a sense of how larger world has developed and influenced western civilization. Accordingly, it divides human history into eight eras and focuses on developments that affected large numbers of people and had broad significance for later generations. It includes the Greek city-states, the Roman Empire and modern European history, but also China's Sung dynasty, the Mauryan Empire in India and the Olmea civilization which influenced the Zapotec and Mayan civilizations in Mesoamerica. The immediate purpose behind such a broad based study of history, the report explains, is to give the student a firm understanding of their community's past, an intelligent and sensitive understanding of the major periods in the history of most of the rest of the world, and the capacity to explore the similarities, differences and interconnections between them. "And the deeper purpose behind it is to stimulate students' curiosity and imagination, broaden their sympathies, and help them appreciate both the unity and the diversity of the human species."

The second condition that a well-conceived curriculum should satisfy has to do with the way it is taught. It is not enough to broaden the curriculum and

Give more space to different religions, cultures, believe systems, but need is to bring them to a fruitful dialogue. Beginning to talk about difference in classroom setting could be the first step towards initiating such dialogue. Many a times, prejudices persist about culture or community other than one's own merely because we refrain from talking about it. we discourage, for instance, talking in classrooms of issues such as cast discrimination, concerns of women, stigmatization of persons with disability, insecurities and fears of minority groups, mostly because these are "sensitive" matters pertaining to people's identities and it is assumed that people might be touchy about these matters. This has to do with our inability to develop an appropriate language to talk of difference. We need to evolve Pedagogical practices that deal with difference in a comprehensive and sensitive manner: that is, we initiate conversations on such issues without necessarily hurting the sentiments of concerned group. It should also be considered that initiating dialogue to understand difference comes with a huge responsibility and requires immense courage to be able to take it upon ourselves, for understanding the difference might be unsettling in ways beyond our anticipations. Understanding the other might certainly be a great opportunity, a sense of delight, and a moment of love and compassion. But it is also a moment of rupture, for it might demand changing of one's believes and convictions, prejudices, and very attitude and outlook. What is needed, therefore, is that we cultivate in students the capacities to be able to take up this responsibility of understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

We initiated this essay with a proposition: fuller realization of multiculturalism requires education system to be more sensitive and accommodative towards cultural diversity. A brief investigation of this theses presented in this paper clearly demonstrates that multiculturalism as a democratic value remains at the core of making a progressive education system. And multicultural education in turn is an essential tool to lay down the foundations of a truly multicultural society.

REFERENCES

1. Kymlicka, Will. *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
2. Kymlicka, Will. *Liberalism, community and culture*. Oxford University Press, 1991:132-209
3. Kymlicka, Will. *Contemporary political philosophy: an introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
4. Parekh, Bhikhu. *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*. MACMILLAN Press, 2000.
5. Mahajan, Gurpreet. *Identities and Rights: Aspects of Liberal Democracy in India*. Oxford) University Press, 1998.
6. D'Souza, D. (1992) *Liberal Education* (New York: Vintage Books).
7. Fullinwider R. K. (ed.) (1996) *Public Education in a Multicultural Society: Policy, Theory, Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

