Chapter 3
Challenges to Multiculturalism in India's context

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Abstract

India is known world over for its diverse society that includes various religious, cultural, and linguistic varieties. Indian Constitution and the administration have attempted to promote multicultural policies even before Multiculturalism became a popular ideology the world over. However, as with other pluralistic, multicultural societies, India faces the several challenges to multiculturalism. The government has to balance the diversity with integration in the face of electoral politics and social issues.

Introduction

India is a multicultural country with diverse religions, cultures, languages, and traditions. The diversity has resulted from waves of migrations along with the creation and assimilations of identities and cultures over centuries when a single nation-state as it stands today was not a norm. Independent India thus emerged with this diversity and one of the main unifying elements was the struggle for independence. "The new country was then driven by a belief in a political construct, the idea of India, an idea that for decades animated the citizens' efforts to unite their huge, diverse, and poor society and to transform it into a modern state fit to join the irreversible movement of world history" (Khilnani, 2012), Building of a nation uniting the diversity was not an easy task but was made much more easier by making the colonizers the common enemy. The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, envisions a secular and inclusive society. While the term "multicultural policies" might have become popular in the

1980s around the world, in the Indian context, various constitutional provisions and government initiatives, which were instituted from 1950s, already were multicultural in nature with an aim to foster a multicultural and inclusive society. "Scholars have hailed the Indian Constitution of 1950 as a prescient model of multicultural accommodation for its recognition of a range of group-differentiated rights within a broadly liberal democratic framework" (Bajpai, 2019).

Some of the key aspects of these constitutional provisions and initiatives are secularism, reservation policies, minority cultural and educational institutions, official recognition of linguistic diversity and special provisions for certain states, such as the existence of autonomous regions and special provisions for states with a significant tribal population. There is also a National Integration council, which is an extra-constitutional body that includes senior members of the government and civic society, instituted to combat threats to the Indian multicultural society through communalism, regionalism, casteism and linguism. Most of these topics are examined in detail in other essays of this book. In this chapter the challenges to multiculturalism in India are examined.

Examining Multiculturalism in the Indian context

Multiculturalism is a sociopolitical philosophy and policy approach that recognizes and celebrates cultural diversity within a society. It emphasizes the co-existence of different cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, fostering an environment where various communities and their traditions are valued and respected. The key principles of multiculturalism include:

1. Cultural Diversity: Multiculturalism acknowledges and appreciates the existence of multiple cultural identities within a society. It recognizes that people come from different cultural backgrounds, bringing with them unique perspectives, traditions, and practices.

2. Equality and Inclusivity: Multiculturalism promotes the idea that all individuals, regardless of their cultural or ethnic background, should have equal rights and opportunities. It aims to create an inclusive society where everyone feels valued and has the chance to participate fully in social, economic, and political life.

3. Tolerance and Respect: Multiculturalism encourages tolerance and respect for cultural differences. It discourages discrimination or prejudice based on cultural, ethnic, religious, or linguistic factors, fostering an atmosphere where people can coexist harmoniously despite their diverse backgrounds.

4. Integration and Interaction: Multiculturalism does not advocate for the isolation of different cultural groups. Instead, it encourages interactions and exchanges between communities to promote understanding and cooperation.

5. Policy and Legislation: In some cases, multiculturalism is also reflected in government policies and legislation that aim to protect the rights of minority

groups, prevent discrimination, and promote diversity in various aspects of society, including education, employment, and public services.

Multiculturalism is often associated with countries or regions that have a significant diversity of cultural and ethnic groups. It can manifest in various ways, such as the recognition of multiple official languages, the celebration of cultural festivals, and the implementation of inclusive educational curricula.

It's also important to note that the concept of multiculturalism has been a subject of debate in different societies. Critics of Multiculturalism such as Arthur Schlesinger and Brian Berry argue that it may lead to cultural relativism or the dilution of a national identity, while proponents assert that it enhances social cohesion and enriches the overall cultural landscape of a nation. Indian Scholar Dipankar Gupta while not opposed to the multicultural policies, feels that identifying and giving special treatment to minorities is not a one time process and that it is a continuing process. (Gupta, 1995) The interpretation and application of multiculturalism can vary across different countries and regions.

Multiculturalism in India is different from the multiculturalism that has overwhelmed the European society in contemporary times. While the European countries in comparison to India have largely been homogenous states, which are encountering challenges because of globalization and migration, India has been a heterogenous society that is now facing an effort at homogenization for better control over society and politics. There are scholars who have pointed that the concept of multiculturalism is inadequate for capturing the deep, multi-level diversity of the kind encountered in India and other countries of Asia and Africa. (Bajpai, 2019, p. 128). The preferred term to describe these non-western societies is pluralistic.

As a society that has been pluralistic since ancient period, India has adapted to a multicultural polity and society in the post-Independence period. There was a fear among certain scholars that democracy in India may introduce pressures towards equality and homogeneity in culture based on Tocqueville's idea of mass society. (Kaviraj, 2007, p. 247). However, the historical and economic circumstances in the post-Independence period produced distinctive political-cultural forms specific to different regions (Kaviraj, 2007). India, a diverse nation with various religions, languages, and ethnicities, successfully transitioned to democratic governance despite its complex social fabric. Economic and social disparities further contribute to regional cultural and identity differences. While India opted for a multi-ethnic and multicultural state structure over a unitary one, it continues to grapple with challenges related to inter-ethnic and minority group relations. (Nandy, 2003, p. 12)

While India has made progress in promoting multiculturalism and inclusivity, challenges and concerns related to religious and cultural tensions still exist. Efforts continue to be made to strengthen the fabric of unity in diversity and to address issues that may arise due to the diverse nature of the country. It's

important to note that the effectiveness and implementation of these policies can vary, and there may be ongoing discussions and debates about the best approaches to fostering a truly multicultural society.

Challenges to Multiculturalism in India

While Indian state has made significant progress in promoting multiculturalism, there are still many challenges that need to be addressed. Addressing these challenges will require a concerted effort from all sections of society to promote unity, tolerance, and understanding.

Some of the major challenges are:

Linguistic Differences: India is a country with a wide variety of languages, and linguistic differences have also been a challenge to multiculturalism. The language barrier has often led to misunderstandings and conflicts between different linguistic communities. Indian government tried to forestall such conflicting federal structure by dividing the country on the basis of language. Through major reorganization of territories in 1950s and 60s, the ethno-linguistic differences were given recognition through territorial divisions. This kind of accommodative, multicultural state building process has been heralded as the most effective method of managing conflicts that may have balkanized the new independent India (Bhattacharyya, 2003, p. 158). This linguistic diversity was also given protection under the constitution where conservation and cultivation of such rights are the fundamental rights of every citizen of India. Article 29 (1) says that any section of the citizens of India having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the fundamental right to conserve the same. (Basu, 1997, p. 380) However, because the provision of creating states is quite flexible, demands by certain ethnic or linguistic groups become more political in nature and the appeasement by the parties in the election year leads to divisions on the basis vote bank politics rather than actual or required recognition for linguistic minorities. For example the creation of new states such as Chhattisgarh, Uttaranchal and Telangana. Telangana state was created not on linguistic identity as Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are both Telugu speaking states. The demand for state division here was vote bank politics more than linguistic or group recognition.

One other challenge that crops up because of linguistic differences is also the backlash against non speakers of native languages. Globalization, IT revolution has increased the internal migration of population from all parts of the country in to major metropolitan areas. From time to time one notices the backlash against the migrants who do not speak the local language. There are several clashes over sign boards, voter lists and languages used in the border areas of the states. (Indian Express, 2023) (Times of India, 2021). Even the three

language formula in schools came under fire in southern India where the states felt that Hindi was being imposed on them (Deccan Herald, 2023).

Regionalism: India is divided into different regions, each with its unique cultural identity. The seeds of regional identity in India were sown during the independence movement. As regional princely states united with the Indian National Congress to become a part of independent India, a heightened awareness of regional differences and commonalities emerged, laying the groundwork for the development of distinct regional identities. Indian nationalism did not unite and subordinate established regional identities. A sense of nation and region emerged together, through parallel self-definitions. (Khilnani, 2012, p. 153) Post Independent India united these princely states into the union with several accommodations for retaining the identity and diversity for a united India. "A flexible federal framework has allowed for the recognition of demands for autonomy by linguistic and tribal groups through a redrawing of state boundaries over time" and thus providing inclusivity and recognition for all identities. (Bajpai, 2017, p. 11). The story of statehood within the Indian federation since 1950 is the story of acceding to ethnic identity demands for political recognition, for autonomous powers within the federation, and for a more secure environment for the protection and maintenance of identity. (Bhattacharyya, 2003, p. 161). However, regionalism has also posed a challenge to multiculturalism, as it has often led to a sense of exclusion and discrimination against people from other regions. Multiculturalism promotes positive endorsement of cultural difference allowing marginalized groups to assert themselves by reclaiming an authentic sense of cultural identity. In case of India, the economic development, globalization which impacted the cities did not reach the hinterlands thus leading to unequal distribution of opportunities and resources. Apart from the linguistic diversity, the religious and ethnic diversities started becoming the divisive forces as nationalistic sentiments gave way to regional differences. Regional leaders vying for central positions took advantage of the situation to widen the differences. Some of these went on to become secessionist movements like in Punjab, Tamil Nadu and northeastern states. Others created divisions within the states based on ethnic differences. Efforts at national integration, like the setting up of National Integration Council in 1961 by Nehru to find ways and means to combat the evils of communalism, casteism, regionalism, linguism and narrow-mindedness, and to formulate definite conclusions in order to give a lead to the country, (Background note on National Integration Council , 2022) and several government led programs for national integration did not last long as regional disparities in terms of economic opportunities and political representation led to increased regionalism and cultural and ethnic consciousness. India recognizes and celebrates its cultural diversity. Various cultural institutions, festivals, and events are organized to showcase and preserve the diverse traditions, languages, and art forms across the country. Any

move to homogenise this diversity leads to conflicts: "multicultural societies… need to find ways of reconciling the legitimate demands of unity and diversity, of achieving political unity without cultural uniformity, and cultivating among its citizens both a common sense of belonging and a willingness to respect and cherish deep cultural differences" (Parekh, 1997).

Religious Tensions: India is home to several major religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, among others. It is known for this rich cultural and religious diversity, making it a vibrant example of a pluralistic society. The coexistence of these diverse religious and cultural traditions has played a significant role in shaping the social fabric of India.

The Indian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion and promotes the idea of secularism. The state does not have an official religion, and individuals are free to practice and propagate any religion of their choice.

While India celebrates its multiculturalism, it is not without challenges. Instances of religious tensions and conflicts do occur, but the overall narrative is one of coexistence and mutual respect. The country continues to evolve as a pluralistic society that draws strength from its diversity. Religious tensions have been a major challenge to multiculturalism in India. The country has witnessed communal riots and violence due to differences in religious beliefs. The conflict between Hindus and Muslims is one of the most notable examples of this.

Post independent Nehruvian idea of secular India lasted for 35 years without much opposition. The 42 constitutional amendment added the word secular to the preamble of the constitution albeit during the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi and domination of one political party. Articles 25, 26, and 27 had already granted religious freedom to all religions including freedoms to preach, practice and propagate any religion. Challenges to this secular fabric came in the garb of the demand for Khalistan (Sikh State) and the rise of political parties promoting Hindutva. In the 1990s the secular nature of the congress party was being questioned and they were accused of appeasement of the minorities especially Muslims. In the post 1990s the rise of BJP on the Hindutva ideology led to changes to the secular state. "India has become, to some extent, an ethno-democracy given the impact of Hindu majoritarianism, which has reduced certain religious minorities to the status of second class citizens". (Jaffrelot, 2010, p. 20) This also led to several communal riots across the country as the majoritarian government did not take effective legal action against the perpetrators nor did they condemn such actions. This was seen as appeasement of the organizations that supported the party through their social activism. The continuing, and even growing, marginalization of Muslims in the administration, in elected bodies and in the economy jeopardize the very multiculturalist aspirations of 'the largest democracy in the world'. (Jaffrelot, 2010, p. 183).

Several instances of communal violence between different religious communities, often fuelled by political or socio-economic factors have been recorded

in the recent years. Riots and clashes between Hindus and Muslims, for example, have occurred periodically, leading to loss of lives and property damage. Recent riots in Manipur have also had tribal, religious undertones to it. Religious discrimination can manifest in social practices such as caste-based discrimination, where individuals from lower castes, often associated with particular social castes such as Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables), face discrimination and marginalization in various aspects of life. Not only does religion and caste discriminate against minorities and lower castes it also increases gender discrimination. Multiculturalism has been criticized for ignoring these social issues while highlighting accommodation for different cultures. Multicultural policies, often formulated as solutions to social problems, can paradoxically worsen existing inequalities. By singling out specific groups for special treatment, these policies can reinforce divisions and create new forms of discrimination, particularly in societies like India, where historical and systemic injustices persist.

Certain religious minorities, particularly Muslims, have reported experiences of discrimination in the form of profiling by law enforcement agencies, leading to unfair treatment and harassment. Members of certain religious communities may face barriers in accessing education, employment, housing, and other opportunities due to systemic discrimination or prejudices. Some laws and policies in India have been criticized for favouring certain religious groups over others or for being used to target specific religious communities. Examples include anti-conversion laws in some states, which are often criticized for disproportionately affecting religious minorities. Hate speech and propaganda can also create religious intolerance and incitement of violence against particular religious communities, either through traditional media or social media platforms. This is a common occurrence when a majoritarian rule picks a common enemy and assigns a particular religion to it in the name of national security. While multicultural policies are still held sacrosanct, the push for homogenization of society leads to othering of the groups in spite of the state policies.

Caste System: The caste system in India has posed a challenge to multiculturalism. The caste system is deeply ingrained in Indian society and has resulted in discrimination and prejudice against certain communities. Despite the constitutional ban on discrimination based on caste, the practice continues to exist in many parts of the country. Caste not only creates a hierarchical structure, but also influences the minority rights debate in India. The Constitution doesn't explicitly define "minority". This has led to debates about whether it should be based on religion, language, or other criteria. Affirmative action measures, such as reservations in education and government jobs, are in place to address historical socio-economic inequalities, particularly for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Democratic politics is supposed to empower the marginalized groups by creating competitive coalitions. However, if it is done only for vote bank politics without institutions

that provide for compensatory legislation and redistributive politics, caste conflicts and communal conflicts can overwhelm the society and polity thus politicizing Caste. (Kothari, 2007, p. 106) These special provisions to select groups incite some groups of people to unite together and claim marginalization and want to be included in these special groups such as OBCs. For example, the Patels of Gujarat and Jats in Haryana. Even though these two communities are the largest in respective states and have always been privileged, they claim that their representation in the government jobs is minimal and thus want reservations for these communities in government jobs. Caste thus creates a sense of inequality even though constitutional provisions of equality and rule of law are provided to all. Caste distribution across the states in India is not equal which in turn leads to inequalities in the developmental sector among different states.

Economic Disparities: Economic disparities in India have also been a major challenge to multiculturalism. The divide between the rich and poor has resulted in unequal access to resources and opportunities, leading to social tension and conflict between different economic classes. Religious discrimination and caste discrimination have always led to societal and economic inequalities. "Horizontal inequalities are embedded in social and political structures and affect citizens' access to basic services. Inequality in India is about education, health, nutrition, sanitation, and opportunities as much as it is about rising income inequality". (Himanshu, 2019). Multiculturalism, ideally, should promote equal access to opportunities regardless of cultural background. However, economic inequalities can hinder this goal. Discrimination, bias, and systemic barriers may prevent individuals from minority or marginalized cultural groups from accessing education, employment, housing, and other resources that are essential for socio-economic advancement. Concentrations of poverty and lack of economic opportunities in certain neighbourhoods or communities can lead to social and economic isolation, hindering integration and exacerbating cultural tensions. Economic inequalities in India are widening according to the study done by the UN University WIDER world project. (Himanshu, 2019).

Conclusion

The list of challenges discussed here is not exhaustive. Along with these challenges, there are many that are cropping up in border states like migration, trafficking and ethnic violence. India's multicultural challenges may be different from European challenges as we are now seeing an effort at homogenization of Indian cultural identity. However this may not be as easily achieved. India's pluralism that causes the problems may also rescue it from becoming a homogenous culture. European challenges are that their homogenous culture is facing challenges of heterogeneity which is not acceptable as easily. India and Europe have to learn from each other to manage their multiculturalism effectively.

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