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Social And Cultural Factors Affecting Pluralism
From The Point Of View Of India

By

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SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING PLURALISM FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF INDIA

By P MURARI*

The dictionary definition of pluralism is as follows: “A philosophy that recognises more than one principle of being, a condition of society in which different ethnic and other groups practise their own customs or hold equal powers.”

A more simpler definition, which I accept, is that pluralism is a condition of coexistence of multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies in such a way that individual and common interests are harmoniously synchronised for the good of all.

Most nations today consist of dynamic, pluralistic societies. Even a casual glance shows how Asia’s south and south-east regions, the Americas and even the U.K are rapidly assuming pluralistic dimensions. The fact, however, is that pluralism in the context of a nation-state is a multi-faceted phenomenon. If a progressive nation has to survive and make its mark on the global scene, the concept of pluralism has to be inextricably entwined in a people’s moorings, way of life, nay its cultural ethos; and the genius of the people has to be exquisitely yoked to promote and preserve such pluralism.

In fact, pluralism is the heart and soul of a vibrant, healthy and blooming democracy. It is in pluralistic societies that the will of all sections of society prevails; where there is no single source or principle of good, but many, disparate and autonomous shapes of what is considered good. “Pluralism as a political theory holds that sovereignty does not, or should not, reside in one single group, order or organisation of people, but in a cooperation and consensus of many groups.”

However, in the context of public affairs and political thought, pluralism refers to “specific institutional arrangements for distributing and sharing governmental power to the doctrinal defence of these arrangements, and to an approach for gaining understand-

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ing of political behaviour.” In an ideal pluralistic society, therefore, optimum growth and development of an individual is generally assured. Moreover, frequent governmental interference in social logistics is minimal. Besides, variegated, independent, social, cultural, economic, religious, educational, professional and political ideologies find free play and full expression and propagation in such environments. Normally, in no one area does the state control or regulation hamper the free interaction among these ideologies, organizations and associations. However, these institutions, of their own, function within the broad national policies, programmes and parameters.

Thus, it can be concluded that a pluralistic society would perhaps provide an ideal environment for the full development of the human personality for the flowing of human growth through the aegis of voluntary associations. Through proper working of these associations, individual and collective talents flourish to make society a happy and congenial place to live in. Pluralistic traditions in a society provide greater freedom in all areas of human endeavour, and ultimately promote participation of diverse social, cultural, political and economic integration, well-being and all-round progress. Under pluralistic conditions, there is public order, harmonious co-existence, concern for the individual and collective welfare and coordinated functioning of the State in the overall interests of society.

Besides, it is well-known axiom that human nature “responds more strongly to various sub-national associations, regions, groupings and productive units than to states — and these groups necessarily represent human purposes and functions, realise individual values and thereby make freedom meaningful.”

History is a witness to this belief, and truth. In ancient Greece, sports were the prime cementing force. In the world of today, the basic objective of the Olympic movement is only this - harmonization, pluralism - howsoever faulty and imperfect it may be. The fact of the matter is that pluralism is the world’s greatest need today. It will be through continuous interaction, debate, dialogue, discussion properly channelled through mass media that pluralism can project the beacon light to the world.
Social and cultural factors are key elements in moulding human attitudes. If attempts are made to suppress dissent, pluralism receives a body blow, e.g., Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia.

Cultural and historical factors have a powerful influence on how much a society tolerates dissonant voices. A society in which obedience is accorded high priority and hierarchies are rigid tends to erode pluralism. However, this always led to strong reactions and people resisted. When the autocrats tried to suppress dissent, revolutions took place as in France, Russia and for a brief period in Britain.

Apart from suppression and blind obedience - one major social factor which affects pluralism is the status of women. In many a third world country women are not allowed to play a positive role which in turn negates the benefits which pluralism can confer. The situation is changing with women’s rights groups coming to the fore - but not fast enough to make every one happy.

Another major social and cultural factor affecting pluralism is the stratification of societies. Colonial rule for many centuries left its scar on the psyche of many societies. This affected social and cultural mores and systems, the elimination of which took long years in a process of recovery.

In India, the continuity of our ancient civilization and culture, despite their failings and degeneration over the centuries, and by absorption and assimilation of the new without discarding what is relevant today, have helped the nation to overcome many a crises. These crises from time to time were met by various religious, social and cultural movements such as Buddhism, Bhakti, Sufism and Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s Renaissance. These were all movements which led to pluralism and social cohesion. These truly were expressions of the cultural and social urgings of the people at large.

Unlike the West, securalism was not the off shoot of a conflict between religion and the State. Rooted in India’s past history and culture, it emerged out of India’s pluralistic society and the desire of India’s founding fathers to be just and fair to all communities. However, securalism in the Indian context is not the mere anti-thesis of communalism or Hindutva. Secularism only means India is a non-theocratic state. The 42nd amendment
confirmed what was enshrined in our Art.25(2) of the Constitution, according to Dr Subash Kashyap, one of our most eminent constitutional experts and distinguished Secretary General of the Lok Sabha.

Dr Amar Kumar Singh, in his excellent article, on social change outlining the Indian Identity - Dec. 1992 states that the genius of India has been its capacity for synthesis which underlies the unity of India. It accepts, adapts, assimilates, expands and enriches itself. Swami Vivekanand once said that for him a good meal was a Muslim dish prepared in a Hindu kitchen and served in Western style!

It has often been argued that the divisiveness of religions is superficial, extrinsic ritualistic whilst all religions preach the same intrinsic moral and ethical values. What is needed is to stress the essential commonness of religions as was done by India’s great sufis-saints like Kabir and subsequently by Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Azad and Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.

Nationalism has been the prime unifying force in most modern states including plural societies like India. USA is another example.

Agnostic and atheistic versions of secularism have yielded room to versions espousing pluralism. Even the Marxists are grudgingly admitting of the merits of Swami Vivekananda and engage in a debate on the true meaning of dharma with BJP thinkers. The Sahmat show in Ayodhya also aimed to celebrate secularism as pluralism, cultural as well as religious. (M.N. Panini - Hindustan Times, Dec. 1993).

Communication undoubtedly is a veritable instrument of promotion of social, political and cultural action by the people to establish links between different communities to usher in change. It is also through these social, political and cultural actions of the people that a nation’s foreign policy is shaped and international status determined and established. The modern means of communication such as radio, computers, satellite television and satellite editions of newspapers and magazines are instrumental in coalesing and cementing diverse ideologies.
Pluralism can prosper and accelerate best in a situation where the social milieu is supportive and cultural ethos is congenial. Though it is difficult to define the social milieu or cultural ethos, the Constitution of India lays down some of the social and cultural dimensions in the fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles of state policy. Some of these provisions which have constitutional sanction are detailed as under:

- to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women;
- to value and preserve the rich heritage of composite culture;
- right to conserve distinct language script and culture;
- right of the linguistic and religious minorities to establish and administer educational institutions;
- uniform civil code;
- free and compulsory education till 14 years;
- promotion of educational and economic interests of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and weaker sections.

These tenets of the Indian constitution are promises and ideals for basic humane values and constitute primary social and cultural development concerns. Both social and cultural concerns spelt out are applicable to all Indians irrespective of caste, creed, religion, sex; the prime aim being promotion of pluralism in Indian society.

With a view to materializing these aims and objects, it is clear that kaleidoscopic social and cultural factors will have to play a prominent role in prompting and furthering pluralism under all kinds of situations. The state and society together will have to, therefore, create these conditions for development of pluralism. We must also evolve a panoramic cultural prespective if we want to promote deep understanding of the changing socio-economic basis as culture. My predecessor in office, an erudite and cultured scholar, P.C Joshi, therefore, rightly opines that for this purpose, we must “uphold the idea of fundamental unity of social science and culture,” and that social science provides an “unfragmented view of human conditions.”
Another view is that “cultural life of a people cannot be viewed in isolation from economic life.” And again, “without being culture-oriented, social science tends to become value-free or value-neutral and thus becomes disoriented and dehumanized.” Communication can provide an excellent link between social science, economic life and cultural ethos in a society to make it pluralistic. Rich communication messages with ingeniously formulated media strategies can bring about in a pluralistic society integration and harmonization. This is so as much in print and electronic media, as also in literature, theatre and even in traditional and folk media.

This is the total social phenomenon actively involving cultural and economic aspects at the same time. Thus, communication, both in mass and class terms, has immense potential in bringing about harmonization and hence, pluralism in a society.

Thus, pluralism will increasingly be modulated and induced by communication. Unless such communication is adequately and firmly cushioned with mass participation, it will be rejected and cannot become a factor in pluralism that the world today is looking for, and is in urgent need of.

Moreover, with a view to making communication a powerful instrument of pluralism, technology has to be intelligently yoked and ingeniously employed. Communication technology is pregnant with all sorts of possibilities. The future role of communication will enormously depend on the mode through which the communication message is beamed. While technology can become tyrannical, it offers vast opportunities for pluralism through social and cultural messages, if properly devised and cleverly executed.

Cultural and social environments should, therefore, facilitate collective self-expression of the people’s urges and aspirations. By supporting and promoting mass participation, communication can help usher in an intimate and regular dialogue amongst the people in all stations of life. Such a situation was successfully and willingly brought about by Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru. Modern communication technology is equipped, indeed built to aid this sort of communication scenario, which will turn it into a propelling force for pluralism at national and international levels.
The challenge before modern communication is to so design technology to serve the purpose of bridging the hiatus between classes and masses. In fact, by its very nature and structure, modern communication technology is people-oriented, a pluralism promoter, encourages diffusive, participatory and diverse techniques - the need of the people today all over the globe.

There are several cardinal pillars on which pluralism in India stands firm and straight. These are secularism, tolerance, understanding and nationalism, among others. The very fact that India does not have a state religion and 18 national languages meet the linguistic aspirations of diverse communities and groups has worked as a tremendous force in binding the people together despite their vast differences in living styles, nature and habits. In addition, our value systems and rather strict moral codes have kept the Indian people closely knit, sharp and irreconcilable religious chasms not-withstanding. Genuine feelings of secularism, ideals of welfare state, freedom of speech and expression have undoubtedly served as strong cultural and social forces to further national cohesion and the spirit of fellow feeling.

In the light of the failure of materialistic philosophy, as pursued by the former Communist countries, and frittering away of various ethnic communities as in the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, cultural and social mores are undergoing, and rightly so, vast transformations. But it is the spirit of pluralism supported by social and cultural programmes which can come to the rescue of the people losing a grip on the national fabric.

Articles 25 and 26 of the Indian constitution further replenish the ideals of secularism and strengthen nationalism among the people. While Article 19(2) imposes reasonable restrictions which may be placed in the interest of “sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality ...” are important provisions which are immensely supportive of people’s urge to realize the significance of common ideals pressing nationalistic programmes ...

Thus, it can be safely asserted that social peace and coexistence among such diverse people as is India were born out of the universal spirit of pluralism. As eminent social scientist Rasheedudin Khan has stated: “In India, our glorious history is a witness to
innumerable tribal groups and ethnic communities, "living together in a common motherland, a land of pluralism and accommodation, marked by centuries of intermixing between various segments in so many aspects of routine social life, festivals, congregations around shrines, and places hallowed by the life and work of noble souls of all faiths and creeds." This is indeed the best example of social and cultural conventions or norms supporting pluralism.
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