

Preserving multiple identities in India through education

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ABSTRACT

Religious and cultural pluralism is a belief that one can overcome religious and cultural differences between different religions and cultures and conflicts within the same religion as well as culture. For most religious traditions religious pluralism is based on non literal view of one's religious traditions allowing for respect to be followed between different traditions on core principals rather than on marginal issues. It is an attitude which rejects focus on immaterial differences and instead gives respect to those beliefs held in common. The existence of pluralism depends on the existence of freedom of religion which is when different religions of a particular region possess the same rights of worship and public expression. Freedom of religion is weakened when one religion is given rights or privileges and denied to others. Pluralism is a characteristic of Indian society and it should be definitely preserved. Preserving pluralism through education is the best and humanitarian way of co-existence in a multicultural, multilingual and multi religious society like India. This paper deals with the ways of preserving pluralism through various interventions of education like curriculum, teacher preparation, classroom environment, school administration etc.

Keywords: religious pluralism, multiple identities, ethnic minority, cultural pluralism

I INTRODUCTION

The unity of India is often assumed and taken for granted; it is seldom subjected to a critical examination in a diachronic framework. This is so because the sense of unity which pervades the fabric of Indian society is rather elusive, nebulous and enigmatic. Nevertheless, at the pan-Indian level, five interrelated sources of integration and unity may be delineated:

- (i) Sanskritic Hinduism at the ideational and institutional levels and through a network of centres of pilgrimage,
- (ii) a composite cultural tradition born out of the protracted interaction and exchange between Hindus and Muslims through the length and breadth of the country, which is best exemplified in the Sufi and Bhakti Movements,
- (iii) patriotism and nascent nationalism, which emerged during the War of 1857 and culminated in the freedom struggle,
- (iv) the secular-democratic ethos of modern India which is enshrined in the Constitution of the country, and
- (v) the country-wide process of modernization which was set into motion during the British period and which got accelerated in the post-Independence period.

The above-mentioned themes or currents have a wide geographical and cultural distribution and are manifested both at the macro as well as micro levels.

Pluralism is of various kinds but here we are concerned with only religious, cultural and lingual pluralism which exists in India.

II RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Religious pluralism is an attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society. It can indicate one or more of the following:

(a) As the name of the worldview according to which one's religion is not the sole and exclusive source of truth, and thus the acknowledgement that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions.

(b) As acceptance of the concept that two or more religions with mutually exclusive truth claims are equally valid. This may be considered a form of either toleration the understanding that the exclusive claims of different religions turn out, upon closer examination, to be variations of universal truths that have been taught since time immemorial. Sometimes as a synonym for ecumenism, the promotion of some level of unity, co-operation, and improved understanding between different religions or different denominations within a single religion.

(c) As term for the condition of harmonious co-existence between adherents of different religions and religious denominations.

(d) As a social norm and not merely a synonym for religious diversity.

(e) Pluralism states that there can be no discrimination in sexual morals, gender, religion, race, wages, etc. It results in mob rule. Whatever the mob wants the mob gets. Just like a nation that has no borders, it becomes overrun with aliens. This can destroy any semblance of law and order. Witness our current southern border. There must be distinctive in life that must be observed, otherwise there is chaos. There is a fixed, unified, transcendent truth. It was established by our creator. He is called God.

(f) Multiculturalism is also a result of syncretism. It states that all cultures are equal, and you must not discriminate or you could be branded as racist, homophobic, misanthropic, or misogynist.

(g) These two philosophies have captivated the so called intelligentsia, that compromise is a good thing. Life requires that you must recognize there are distinctive truths that are required for the preservation of sanity. There are boundaries that cannot be crossed without dire consequences. We may be too late to reverse this trend. If so, the future is rather bleak.

U.R. Ananthamurthy has said it is necessary to retain pluralism in Indian society. According to him the biggest challenge that Indian society is facing today is from communal forces that are trying to impose monoculture so as to put an end to the pluralistic character of Indian society.

Religious and ethnic minority groups try to preserve their religious values and their group identity through different channels, such as marrying within the group, wearing traditional clothing and congregating in segregated communities. The democratic ideal represents the most humane way of addressing the fundamental moral challenge of every social group: preserving a balance between the well being and integrity of the individual and the well being and integrity of the social group. Thereby, an ideal society does not sacrifice the welfare of the individual for the sake of the group, nor does it sacrifice the welfare of the group for the sake of the individual. While this may represent a succinct statement of the democratic ideal, it may also be read as the fundamental challenge of every society.

This challenge of balancing individual and social welfare is an ongoing struggle in which any excessive movement in one direction is met with opposition forces from inevitably competing concerns. The problems, mistakes and periodic excesses which are an inevitable part of the social

life of humans are not necessarily avoided; they are managed by the citizens themselves. The alternative would be to allow a designated authority, either an individual ruler or an oligarchy, to adjudicate the problem.

The philosophy and ideology of pluralism is not new but one whose time has come for actualization. Education is providing experience for students, teachers, counsellors and the community to nurture and practice pluralistic thought. The philosophy of pluralism is not restricted to the "purist" educational environment but is being extended to encompass teacher in-service training and community-based involvement and input. Teachers and the community at large are acquiring an awareness of pluralism through subtle methods of dialog and participation. Schools are expediting the implementation of pluralism through activities, workshops, courses, and small groups. These processes often fit under the name of multicultural issues and concerns; frequently the use of the term "pluralism" is avoided. Accurate definition may assist in the transition toward truly pluralistic thought.

Pluralism can be defined in a number of ways. The definition which seems most encompassing is the following: a society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious and social groups maintain participation in and development of their traditions and special interests while cooperatively working toward the interdependence needed for a nation's unity. The focus of most definitions revolves around the elements of interdependence, development and cooperation among diverse peoples of the world.

III ACTUALIZING PLURALISM

Although counsellors, schools, social service components and communities may not label their activities pluralistic in nature, there appears to be a pluralistic thread which runs through the weave of fabric of their teachings and philosophies. Examples of the variety of ways in which pluralism is being practiced, taught and expanded include the following methods.

(a) At Preschool- As early as preschool, youngsters are learning about pluralism in an experiential sense. Barbara Thomson (1989), who teaches 4- and 5- year olds in St. Louis, MO, encourages this age group to "see beyond appearances" by offering them a choice between the contents of a large elegantly wrapped box and a small dirty carton. The children all want what is in the big, beautiful carton but, upon pondering, believe that something "yucky" or delightful could be in either box. Upon opening the boxes the

children find garbage in the big box and a group snack in the little box. The discussion which follows this activity promotes the child's ability to transfer this tangible idea of "wrappings" to the real world of other children and how they are "wrapped" or dressed or appear. Other transference of learning takes place when discussion revolves around other times when appearance is not the most reliable indicator of worth.

Thomson's firm conviction that children must "do" and experience to truly learn is additionally noted in her many role-playing ideas for children. She continually emphasizes the individual in a group experience as opposed to a strictly individualistic orientation. This philosophy and her suggested activities provide needed practice for children in a pluralistic society.

(b) At Elementary School- Later in the elementary school years, teachers can help "celebrate diversity" and develop group respect with their students. To develop the idea of pluralism, children can create a classroom quilt to which each student contributes a square that is designed to represent his or her ethnic background; plant a small farm or garden project to allow children to experience the planning and cooperation required with each other, the earth and nature in planting their crops, harvesting and reaping the benefits or sharing the failures together. Children could create a mural in a similar way or have students independently research and report on various cultures. (Mack, 1988).

(c) At High School- Group counselling has a particular impact in the high school setting. "Any town: A Human Relations Experience" (McWhirter, Paluch, & Ohm, 1988) outlines a group experience for high school students to promote direct, intergroup contact and increased racial tolerance among students. The process of any town involves the promotion of group experience based on working together, sharing and listening. Each day of the week has a theme and the small groups are guided through experiential activities to help process the theme and become more fully attuned to themselves and others in their small group. The intimacy of daily contact and interaction helps to make the groups realize that race, religion, sex, age and other physical or social features are not sufficient bases for prejudice and discrimination. The Any town program claims that the we-consciousness that is promoted tends to develop into friendships that transcend racial, ethnic, sex, religious, age and other differences.

(d) At College Campus- One of the most active environments in reacting to pluralism has been the college campus. College campuses have developed training programs to diminish prejudicial attitudes and to promote unlearning racism. These efforts by universities help to bridge the gap for minority students. Most of these programs develop their ideas through a workshop or brief training program. Examples of these programs include a word association exercise which consists of six minority group descriptors typed on a page leaving space for written associations. Because the goal was to focus on racism, sexism, homophobia and anti-Semitism, the six descriptors were as follows: gay man, Black person, woman, Hispanic person, Jewish person and lesbian. Participants were instructed to respond anonymously by writing down the first words that came to mind for that descriptor. Sheets were collected and responses written on the blackboard. Questions which followed included: "Which group received the most positive associations?" "The most negative?" "Why?" It seems few questions needed to be asked to precipitate discussion. Students subsequently expressed their hurt, fears and anger about prejudice from this activity and in their lives. Both students and faculty participating in this group rated the overall experience as highly positive. (Lasenza & Trout, 1990).

James Stewart (1991), states that the design and implementation of diversity planning are most effectively undertaken as an integral part of overall institutional planning rather than as independent processes.

Thus from the above examples we can draw that education is a strong weapon to celebrate pluralism and multiple identity in India. Education is the strongest weapon to preserve pluralism in our country through curriculum, teachers training program, model teacher, classroom environment, co-curricular activities etc.

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