



Responding to Identity Conflicts: Multiculturalism and the Pursuit of Peaceful Co-Existence

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Abstract

To build a strong and united community of citizens, nation-states often try to construct a shared cultural/national identity on the basis of a language policy, calendar of public holidays, school curriculum, cultural narratives of the nation and so on. As and when these constructions of national identity reflect the cultural orientation of the majority they tend to disadvantage minorities in material and symbolic terms sometimes turning into a source of simmering discontent and spilling over in the form of ethnic conflict. Theories of multiculturalism make us sensitive to these sites of disadvantage and discrimination that exist in nation-states even after the basic rights of citizenship have been granted. This paper suggests that it is essential to accept that accommodation must attend to the claims of minorities within the nation-state as well as to the claims of the marginalized groups within the communities or the region where the minority constitutes a majority.

Author Profile

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Most societies today are internally diverse. This is not a mere accident; nor is it simply the consequence of the process of globalization. It is the reflection of a far more basic dimension of our social and political life. Towards the end of the twentieth century it was estimated that there are “5,000 to 8,000 ethno-cultural groups in the world” and just about “200 states.... Arithmetic (thus) dictates that most states (at the moment over 90%) are inevitably going to be shared by more than one ethnic group, and often by dozens.”¹ So, even if the number of nation states was to increase the likelihood of most states remaining multi ethnic and multi-cultural would still remain. It is this condition of our political existence that compels different societies to learn to live with differences and to find ways by which culturally diverse populations can live together as members of the same political community.

Is such peaceful co-existence of diverse populations possible? How can people with different conceptions of good life live together as members of the same nation-state? What lessons are there to be learnt from our present experience in this regard? These questions need to be considered seriously, particularly since more and more societies today are confronted with challenges from within. In the past it was wars between nation-states that were the cause of destruction and displacement of populations. Today it is ethnic conflicts that have their roots within the nation-state that are yielding the same result. It is estimated that of the 101 armed conflicts that occurred between 1986 and 1996, only 6 were inter-state; the remaining 95 conflicts had their roots within existing states.² That is, these conflicts began as inter-ethnic conflicts within a nation-state though in some cases, as conflicts escalated, neighboring countries intervened or joined in these struggles thereby leading to wars between nations.

There were many different reasons for these ethnic conflicts. In some cases it was the desire to access socially and economically valued goods, and to share political power, while in other cases the very basis of the formation of the nation-state and the ordering of its boundaries was being questioned.³ Either way, communities that were in a minority were seeking recognition and some degree of self-determination. They were asserting their difference and on that basis seeking some sort of accommodation and autonomy. Most liberal democracies were unprepared to deal with these demands. They could recognize claims for political participation and equal civil and political liberties but other forms of accommodation seemed unacceptable. This was primarily because the nation-state had been conceived as a political community with a shared history and culture. Giving up this sense of common identity seemed therefore to be a challenge to the existence and the survival of the nation-state. Under the circumstances, almost all expressions of cultural difference were frowned upon and treated with suspicion. When the officials of the state acted on the basis of this understanding of the nature of the nation-state, it

¹ Will Kymlicka and Norman Wayne, ed. *Citizenship in Diverse Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² David Bloomfield and Ben Reilly, “Changing Nature of Conflict and Conflict Management”, in *Democracy and Deep Conflict: Options for Negotiators*, ed. Peter Harris and Ben Reilly (Stockholm: International Institute for Electoral Assistance, 1998).

³ Ted R. Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Studies, 1994).

almost always sharpened conflicts within the polity and yielded new forms of hardship for all communities.

Theories of multiculturalism were, in one way, a response to the ethnic conflicts that were being witnessed the world over. They challenged the dominant understanding of the nation-state at many different levels. At the most basic level these theories suggested that we recognize that many states are not one-nation-state; rather they are multi-nation states. This means that there are inhabited by people belonging to different communities, with their distinct culture and, in some cases, societal institutions. One could not therefore assume that the citizen population is homogeneous and interchangeable. One had instead to recognize that citizens had two kinds of memberships: they were members of the political community and at the same time also members of a particular cultural community. While one could assume same-ness at the level of political community, cultural membership set citizens apart from each other in some respects. One could not therefore assume citizens to be identical in every respect. Much more importantly, the political arrangements needed to be mindful of the diversities that exist at the level of cultural membership.

This view was significantly different from the notion of the state-state that prevailed in many liberal democracies. Liberal democracies were aware of cultural differences, as also differences of ideas, beliefs and thought. These differences were present at the level of the individual; hence, it was assumed that the best way to allow these differences to flower and grow was to have a 'hands-off' approach. One could treat them as matters involving the private realm of our life - a sphere that should be left outside the purview of state intervention. While liberalism accommodated differences in this way it did not consider the necessity and desirability of accommodating differences in the public arena. The latter remained the realm of, to borrow a phrase from Sandel, the 'unencumbered' universal citizen.⁴ Theorists of multiculturalism were asking them to reconsider the idea of a universal public sphere and, even more assertively to accommodate differences in the public sphere. The latter involved, at the very least, the creation of a facilitating framework that could allow individuals to bring in their cultural identity into the public arena, and more substantively, to create space for the public recognition and accommodation of different cultures.

Recognizing and Valuing Diversity

Liberal democracies had consciously bracketed out cultural markers. In the past race, religion, caste and gender had been the basis of excluding some individuals from the political and the public arena. Consequently the process of democratization gradually made these social and cultural markers of identity irrelevant for membership of the political and public arena. Multiculturalism marked a departure from this way of thinking. As the basic rights of political participation and civil liberties came to be granted to all citizens irrespective of their social identity, multiculturalism argued that differences could now be made between citizens and some differences/cultural markers of identity needed to be formally recognized if we are to treat all citizens as equal.

⁴ Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory*, 12/1 (1984) : 81-96.

Cultural identity was being brought in on the ground that the state can never be completely neutral. Even though the liberal state claims to be neutral between different conceptions of good life it has certain laws/policies relating to such issues as language, marriage, suicide, euthanasia – issues on which it invariably reflects the views of the dominant majority. Other communities are expected to conform to the prevailing norms even when their cultural self-understanding differs from this. This seems unfair, to say the least. But what is also important is that it places these minority communities (minorities as their rationality does not find an expression in the laws and the policies of the state) at a disadvantage. If, for instance, the official language is different from the mother tongue of the community, its members are at a disadvantage and they have to put in extra work in order to compete with the majority.⁵ The dominant culture that prevails in the public arena also at times acts as an inhibiting force, keeping the minorities out of the public domain.⁶ When minorities are able to overcome this sense of discomfort, for instance, when the younger generation successfully assimilates into the dominant culture it yields inter-generation conflicts. Either way the minority community members get disadvantaged.

When disadvantages of this nature aggregate they almost always alienate the minority communities and yield some form of ethnic discontent and conflict. The sharp difference in the ability of the different communities to access available resources and opportunities creates a sense of resentment and distance from the state and the rest of society – conditions under which a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to the state becomes exceedingly difficult. Multiculturalism makes us sensitive to this kind of simmering discontent within the nation-state. It compels us rethink the idea that members of a nation-state must hold everything in common: they must at least share a language and culture. In place of this it suggests that individuals and groups are likely to develop a sense of loyalty to the state when they receive due recognition. If recognition involves according recognition to their language by giving them the opportunity to receive education in their language or devising policies whereby members of the community have the opportunity to address the state authorities in their language or use their language in the market, then such measures must be welcomed rather than resisted. Any imposition of homogeneity is likely to be counterproductive and it is likely to create fissures rather than solidarity among the citizens.

Language is however only an instance of the kind of concerns that require accommodation. In situations where we are dealing with communities, like the indigenous people, who have lived

⁵ Joseph Carens pointed to the disadvantages faced by the Francophones when English is declared the official language of Canada. Examples of a similar kind can however be drawn from other parts of the world. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the decision to make Sinhalese the official language of the state was perceived by the Tamilian population as a source of disadvantage. In India the recognition of Hindi, written in the Devanagari script, as the official language of the centre similarly disadvantaged the speakers of other language – a disadvantage that the State attempted to minimize by recognizing other languages in the Eight Schedule of the Constitution. Yet, shortly after independence, demands for the reorganization of state boundaries on the basis of linguistic identities surfaced and gained momentum. Eventually this re-organization gave a much stronger form of recognition to several languages, as they became the official language of different states. The point that needs to be emphasized here is that advantages and disadvantages accrue from state policies on language.

⁶ Joseph Carens, *Culture, Citizenship and Community: A Contextual Exploration of Justice as Evenhandedness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Bhikhu Parekh, "Britain and the Social Logic of Pluralism," in *Striking A Balance*, ed. Sandra Coliver (London: Human Rights Centre, University Of Essex, 1992).

on a particular territory with their own social, political and economic institutions, accommodation may involve some form of power sharing. These communities, for the multiculturalists, need the right to self-governance – i.e., some degree of political autonomy to live by their own rules and norms and be governed by their own institutions. Arrangements of this kind, that are intended to give communities to govern themselves, could be made within the framework of federalism. We could, as has happened in India, create different federal units on the basis of a shared identity; these units could be given the same set of powers and functions, or as has been done in the case of some states in the Northeast region, give special powers to some states protecting their customary laws and practices.⁷ In brief, the willingness to attend to a community's needs and concerns is necessary to resolve the emerging conflicts between communities within the nation-state. Implicit here is also the belief that the nation-state, with its instruments of coercion and conception of sovereignty, is a hindrance to the process of democratization and equal treatment to all. Accommodation is necessary, and at times it may require due recognition of multiple identities.

Rationale for Accommodation

Perhaps the single most important message that comes from multiculturalism is the need to accommodate differences. If we look at the kinds of conflicts that have emerged in many states around us it is evident that accommodation is the need of the hour. Accommodation is not however easy; many view it as a sign of weakness that is likely to lead to the escalation of demands from the given minority community as well as other communities in the nation-state. It is assumed, perhaps somewhat prematurely, that the willingness of the state to accommodate cultural claims and differences through a set of institutional arrangements is likely to weaken the state by creating dual or multiple allegiances. This is a serious consideration and when we look at the Indian experience it is apparent that new demands for recognition are continuously being articulated by cultural groups that may have existed for a long time or those that may have emerged as old solidarities dissolved and gave way to new group formations. These groups begin to construct their separate identity and history in a way that differentiates them from their immediate neighbors. But the same experience also assures that, the emergence of new demands notwithstanding, the existence of, and recognition to, multiple identities need not always weaken the state.

Accommodation of linguistic identities in India is perhaps the strongest evidence of this. When the Telegu-speaking population in India demanded a linguistic re-organizing of state boundaries many political leaders opposed it, fearing that this would fragment the polity further. It is only when the protests could not be contained that the central government agreed reluctantly to set up the State Reorganization Commission. However, what was then the last resort eventually became a point of strength for the polity. Retrospectively it is evident that non-recognition of linguistic claims of these communities threatened the nascent nation-state more acutely than the recognition of these claims. In fact, as many scholars have since pointed

⁷ Article 371 A and G give a special status to Nagaland and Mizoram by recognizing customary laws and procedures of each of these communities, and giving them the authority to administer themselves in accordance with these customary laws. Such asymmetrical arrangements of power sharing (where some federal units enjoy more powers than others) is able to take note of the different histories of groups and their relationship to the state.

out, linguistic identities that were recognized at the regional level may have formed another tier of loyalties and solidarity but these did not threaten the nation-state. Today, it is easy to conceive the co-existence of these regional identities with the national identity: one can be a Bengali, a Maharashtrian or a Malayali and simultaneously see oneself as an Indian. The existence of multiple identities does not weaken or dilute one's national identity.

Challenges Before Accommodation

Accommodation allows us to win back the support of a group that might otherwise get alienated from the state. However, opening oneself to the task of accommodation is fairly tough and it raises many anxieties. There are at least three important concerns that surface and inhibit the process of accommodation. One, since nation-states have been so closely associated with a single, homogeneous and shared identity, articulation of difference almost always meets with resistance from the state. The situation gets further complicated and conflicts become steadily intractable when the minority community responds by constructing its own distinct cultural identity to mark its separateness from the rest. Such attempts at constructing a distinct cultural identity with its own history and experiences often ends up fixing boundaries, making a sharp distinction between 'us' and 'them', and propping-up traditional leadership and community practices. This not only creates a hiatus between the minority community and the rest of society, it invariably closes the community to internal debate and dialogue. This invariably disadvantages the most vulnerable sections of the community, such as women, who invariably become the symbol and mark of difference. It also reinforces the control of the traditional, and often conservative male, leadership of the community that in turn attempts to homogenize the community. Dissenters frequently bear the cost of such constructions of identity. In other words, both the state and the minority community act in an analogous manner. If the state refuses to acknowledge community differences, the minority community too suppresses internal differences. The space for the articulation of differences, as a consequence, diminishes, making it more difficult to pursue the path of accommodation. What makes a difficult situation even worse is that the citizens are expected to position themselves either in favor of a liberal and progressive external intervention as against a narrow traditional way of life, or alternatively to choose between a homogenizing and coercive state and popular upsurge. Both focus on an aspect of the totality and seek either/or solution rather than reflecting on the reasons that are responsible for the distance between the minority and the state (as a symbol of the majority).

The second imponderable is the use of violence in the articulation of demands by communities and the state response to them. Reliance on violence closes the space for dialogue; it generates mutual mistrust and makes each party more rigid and less open to negotiating its sets of demands. Most often the prolonged use of violence results in the escalation of demands – groups begin to seek special measures for self determination – and this makes it further difficult for the state to be receptive to the demands of minority communities.

Accommodation is particularly difficult, and this is the third kind of challenge, when we are dealing with competing claims of different minorities co-existing in a region. When a minority is asserting its claims against the majority or the state that seeks to impose its agenda of cultural assimilation, it is relatively easier to build a consensus around what would be considered fair

and equal treatment. The problem becomes more complicated when minority communities conflict with each other and seek territorial division and separate domains of self-governance for themselves. Accommodation under these circumstances meets with greater resistance and suspicion. While each minority, at one level, stands in some degree of opposition/distance from the state, challenge from other communities in the region appears to be a way of marginalizing it further. Triangular conflicts involving the state and different minority communities requires therefore a greater effort to build lines of communication and trust between communities – elements without which accommodation is not possible.

Thus, even though accommodation is necessary and desirable it is not always easy to move in that direction. In countries, like India and its neighbouring states, where the conflict is not between a historically oppressed or dispossessed minority and the state, there is a lingering fear that accommodation will lead to the spiraling of demands.⁸ Negotiations begin only when all other options appear to be exhausted, or, in the case of democracies, when there is enormous pressure from the civil society.

Accommodation is rarely the first step but it is an inevitable step towards which we have to move if we want different communities to have a sense of belonging to the state of which they are a part; and this sense of belonging can only be nurtured and sustained when they feel that they are not being disadvantaged or discriminated against. Theories of multiculturalism make us sensitive to some of the culture-related sites of disadvantage and discrimination in society. This itself is significant because issues of culture and identity appear in normal times to be superfluous and irrelevant in modern times where the emphasis is on choice rather than tradition and identity. By drawing our attention to the ways in which state reflects a cultural orientation and can disadvantage minorities, multiculturalism compels us to be open to the expression and accommodation of diversity as a way of minimizing, and possibly eliminating conflicts in society.

Modes of Accommodation

Once we accept that accommodation is necessary, even if difficult, the question that comes up is - What form should accommodation take? Linked to it is the second question – would we be better-off attending to the ‘real’ concerns of redistribution rather than accommodating cultural concerns?

Most often it is assumed that accommodation has to take the form of special rights for minorities. However, this is not necessarily the case. On the question of language, for instance, minorities might well be accommodated by according recognition to their language, perhaps in the form of a second language, so that government notifications and the medium of education in minority concentrated areas, could be the mother tongue of the minorities. Indeed the two languages (the language of the numerical majority and the minority) might be taught in all schools so that the minority can learn the language of the majority and vice-versa the majority could also learn the language of the minority. Such forms of accommodation do not bestow special rights upon minorities; they simply give to the minorities the same rights that the

⁸ By comparison, in North America where the indigenous populations have historically been the victims of past injustices it is relatively easier to make a special case for these communities and differentiate their claims and demands for special rights from the claims of other minority communities in the state.

majority invariably enjoys in a geographical area. Likewise, such accommodations as exemptions from prescribed headgear for Sikhs, when they ride motorcycles or serve in the army, only extends to the members of this community the same opportunities as are available to others, albeit it removes hurdles that would otherwise keep them away from taking up these jobs in the defense forces.

On occasions accommodation may entail stronger measures that do indeed give the minority a special status or privilege. A minority, for instance, the Francophone population in Quebec, may receive the right to govern itself. It could then declare French as the official language of the region, ask all francophones and immigrants to send their children to French-medium schools; it could in addition (as is currently the case) be given a permanent voice in deciding who would be permitted to settle in the region.⁹ Special provisions of this kind may be made to ensure that the language and culture of the minority is protected and allowed to flourish. In India, in the attempt to accommodate minorities in the Northeast, in particular the Nagas and the Mizos, special provisions were made to protect their customary laws and practices.¹⁰

Although it is difficult to specify in advance just when special provisions are needed and when the extension of same rights is enough, it can be said that in situations where we are dealing with historically oppressed or previously colonized communities, with communities that were against their wishes incorporated into the nation-state, and in situations where there has been a prolonged violent conflict between the state and the minority community, accommodation often requires strong measures involving some degree of autonomy to the latter. The extent and degree of autonomy may vary and it may come in stages rather than in one swell swoop. But a way of keeping the community within the nation-state and taking the edge off demands for secession is some degree of self-governance within the overall structure of a democratic constitution.

Besides self-governance through a federal system of power sharing the state could address the concerns of the minority by ensuring the community representation in key political bodies and through other related forms of affirmative action. Further, the chosen policies of affirmative action may not involve formal power sharing; they may take the form of preferential hiring or opportunities for education or simply providing more funds for a given minority-dominated region. All these elements are context-specific. Eventually it is the nature of the group and its relationship with the state and other groups in the polity that determine just what form accommodation can or should take. All one can say is that special treatment is not always required or justified. It may at times be necessary but only in a few extraordinary situations and is not supposed to be the norm. Hence, it needs to be backed by good reasons, such as, the past history of the group, previous agreements, the experience of discrimination or oppression, etc. In other words, it cannot simply be a response to violent articulation of demands.

⁹ Joseph Carens, *Culture, Citizenship and Community: A Contextual Exploration of Justice as Evenhandedness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Gurpreet Mahajan, "Indian Exceptionalism or Indian Model: Negotiating Cultural Diversity and Minority Rights in a Democratic Nation-State," in *Multiculturalism in Asia*, ed. Will Kymlicka and Baogang He (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 302-306.

There is no doubt that in several cases minority claims are asserted because the existing policies disadvantage them and make it difficult for them to compete with other groups in society for prestigious social, economic and political positions. But this should not be taken to imply that minorities are always worse off or that cultural claims made by them are just a front to seek redistribution of material goods. Even economically better-off groups present cultural claims. In fact economic prosperity can give communities the confidence to seek equal respect and visibility in the public arena. Thus demands for accommodation of cultural identity and its markers may come from all minority communities and they may take many different forms. In America the Jews, even though they were not economically vulnerable or weak, asked for the revocation of the Sabbath laws and in India, most communities, be it the majority or the minorities, have asked for banning books, films and other artistic expressions on the grounds that they offend community sentiments or misrepresent the community. Similar controversies have surrounded the writing of history textbooks also. These demands for the accommodation of cultural identity and its markers may, like other forms of special consideration, be sought on a continuing and permanent basis. In India, for instance, the representation of a community's history, particularly its contribution to the making of the nation-state, in school text books offers an example of such cultural claims and contestations in society.

Questions of recognition and accommodation arise in most democratic societies. What needs to be reiterated here is that cultural claims have their own rationale and importance; they need to be taken seriously and attended to. It is equally important to recognize that cultural claims do not always stand in for the seemingly more 'real' claims for material redistribution. Consequently, it is not always sufficient to focus on the latter. Availability of resources and prospects of the 'development' of a particular region are always welcomed, and they can help to de-escalate the problem, but when redistribution claims are backed by the rhetoric of cultural distinctiveness and difference, the latter too have to be accommodated. It is not sufficient to simply improve the living conditions. Infact the concerns of redistribution and cultural recognition have to go hand-in-hand and it is this that necessitates some form of relative autonomy for regionally concentrated minority populations.

Pursuing Peaceful Co-existence through Equal Treatment

The necessity and desirability of accommodation has in recent times been underlined by theories of multiculturalism. Although many more today are convinced about the wisdom of pursuing policies of accommodation, the association of this policy with multiculturalism has also always helped its cause. To put it in another way, apprehensions about certain aspects of multiculturalism has created certain skepticism about the path of accommodation. Theories of multiculturalism have a tendency of reify communities; to speak of the claims of a cultural community it invariably draws boundaries between insiders and outsiders and identifies certain practices as markers of a given identity and community membership. The fixing of boundaries and membership in this way almost always privileges the traditional elite and has the possibility of freezing cultures and limiting the possibility of internal dissent. The anxiety therefore is that accommodating minority communities might eventually help to create separate islands where the basic rights of the vulnerable members of a community are not protected in the name of difference. This is indeed a visible danger – one that accommodation policies have to be mindful of.

In every society, marginalized minorities, more than others, have a tendency to close ranks and emphasize the collective over the individual. Hence, their claims for protection often take the form of nurturing their collective community life at the expense of the rights of the individual. The emphasis on the collective (and its markers of identity) is a consequence of their vulnerability and insecurity in the larger society. Policies of accommodation have to take this on board and while creating a framework for protecting minorities and treating them as equal in society, they need to build safeguards for internal minorities in these communities.

Policies of accommodation have therefore a twin task to perform: ensuring equal treatment for a community and equal treatment for minorities within the community/region where the minority is concentrated. Each of these tasks is in itself quite difficult and together they pose an even greater challenge. Just as the nation-state is often suspicious of the minorities seeking special or separate treatment, minorities which receive recognition and accommodation are suspicious of any effort to create prior safeguards for internal minorities. They view such efforts as a continuing sign of mistrust of the community and external intervention. Hence, bringing the state on board along with the minorities to accommodate a given minority while simultaneously protecting vulnerable members of the group/region poses a big challenge. Indeed, efforts at accommodation are usually so focused on accommodating a protesting minority that the fate of internal minorities and dissenters is often forgotten. It is this neglect of the fate of marginalized groups within the community that eventually builds resistance to policies of accommodation. Hence, both in the interest of building a consensus in the larger society as well as for according due recognition to members of a minority, accommodation must attend to the twin concerns of equality between groups as well as equality within the community. It is the ability to successfully fulfill these two tasks that determines the survival and the fate of a democratic state.