

Multiculturalism in India as reflected in Education with special Focus on West Bengal

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Abstract

Multi culturalism is a numerical term. Culture has a deep structural meaning. Culture means careful cultivation of some faculty. Rabindranath termed it as 'kristi'. Acharya Sunitikumar defined it as 'sanskriti'. It involves two things, change and refinement. Multiculturalism is somewhat theoretical concept. It may denote multiple cultures or diverse cultures, tolerance to all kinds of cultures or others' views and opinions. According to Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism is the question of recognition. In the loose sense it means cultural plurality that encourages cultural value to be respected and tolerated in moral and legal terms. The present paper focuses various aspects of Multiculturalism and how it has been practised in the educational sphere of our country. In this context it highlights the evolution of education in India right from the days of 'toles', and 'moktab's to the present day modernity via Anglicised education propounded by the British. It also depicts how the educational policies of the state of West Bengal reflect the spirit of Multiculturalism in the lives of younger generation.

Key words: Multi culturalism, Global cultural diversity, mosaics of culture, cultural inter mingling.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (A.S. Hornby) 'culture' means cultivation, refinement of civilization, evidence of intellectual development (of arts, science etc.) in human society, state of intellectual development among a people. Needless to say, the idea of culture is very much comprehensive. Culture is very important element in our life. A little part of it is visible. When two or more different cultures meet they collide and give birth to new cultural beliefs and values and it has a deep structural meaning. Multiculturalism is a numerical term. No single and simple formula is sufficient to explain the term. It has not been an enormously local topic and received a lot of attention from the perspective of modern or postmodern theories of identity, these theories are not self contained to explain how people conceptualise multiculturalism in Indian society. Charles Taylor in his book 'Multiculturalism – Politics of Recognition' (1997) argues 'Multiculturalism is the question of recognition'¹.

Descriptively Multiculturalism refers to 'Cultural diversity'. Demographic and theoretical factors are responsible for emergence of Multiculturalism. As a normative term it focuses on ideologies or policies that uphold the diversity allowing people to express their own identity in the manner they see it fit. Multiculturalism advocates equal respect to the various cultures in a society and promotes cultural diversities among the people of various ethnic and religious groups. Diverse Government policies in regard to

Multiculturalism have been developed – one seeks to focus on interaction and communication between different cultures, another upholds diversity amidst cultural uniqueness i.e. maintaining the uniqueness of local culture, simultaneously contributing to the global cultural diversity. The basic tenet of the later approach is that no specific ethnic, religious or cultural community value is deemed superior.

Multiculturalism deals with the matters of disadvantaged groups such as African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, even the immigrants who are ethnic and religious minorities and above all indigenous people.

“Multiculturalism has been official Policy in several nations since 1970's for reasons that varied from country to country, including the fact that many of the great cities of the western world are increasingly made of mosaic of cultures”.²

Various countries like Australia, Argentina, Canada, U.S.A, Britain adopted Multiculturalism mainly being urged by public emphasis on the importance of immigration. They encourage and nurture all kinds of art and cultural expression from ethnic groups. However, negative reaction towards Multiculturalism is also not uncommon. “David Cameron's declaration of the ‘death of Multiculturalism’ or the Malaysian Government's attempt to create a ‘Malaysian race’ by 2020”³ are such examples.

India is a vast land of diverse race, religion, culture, language etc. In fact, there is no equivalent term of multiculturalism in Indian context. It can denote many cultures, diverse cultures, tolerance to many cultures etc. No term can describe it in the fullest. Indian civilization has a rich cultural history. From time immemorial many castes, races have been living side by side as a multi-cultural nation named India. Indus-valley civilization existed around 3000 B.C. Thereafter the Aryans came around 2000 to 1500 B.C. The Vedas were composed (not written) during this period. Alexander invaded India in 327 B.C. and some of his followers remained in India as a race named Bactrian Greek. In the first century A.D. Greek, Sakas, Parthians, Kushans came to India and they were mingled in the mainstream of Indian civilization. From 13th century onwards India was fully under the Muslim dynasties such as Sultanate, Lodi, Khilji, Tughlaq etc. In the 15th century India saw the emergence of a lot of ‘sadhaks’ such as Kabir, Nanak, Ramdas, Chaitanya, Dadu etc. Who talked of love for mankind. The Mogal emperors ruled India for about one hundred and fifty years. They were considered part of Indianness. So it may be said the Indian people lived united as a nation for a long time although strife was there among the rulers. Eminent historian Vincent Smith aptly observed: “India offers unity in diversity.”⁴ The light of modern civilization and renaissance stirred India only after the settlement of the British whose elevation from merchants to rulers brought about a sea change in Indian life. They, unlike others, did not come to stay here but to colonize. They never thought of their own country but did something in the sphere of education for smooth running of administration and the development works were mainly in the interest of their business expansion.

Anyway, our concern is to present the picture of Indian education system with special reference to West Bengal and to establish how multicultural it is. Before the arrival of the British, Indian people, as a whole, were not much worried about education. The centres

of indigenous education were mainly 'Moktabs', 'Pathshalas', 'Tols' and some private institutions run by the zaminders. The 'moktabs' and 'tols' mainly catered religious education. The first phase of the British rule patronized oriental education. "The first phase of British rule in India from the late eighteenth century onwards, was broadly orientalist in its educational policy, combining 'the initiation of the west to the vast literary treasures' of the East [and] the reintroduction of the natives to their own cultural heritage, represented..... as being buried under the debris of foreign conquests and depredations".⁵

But by the early nineteenth century, emerged a counter movement called Anglicism which got a concrete shape in 1835 when Thomas Babington Macaulay declared in his 'Minute on Indian Education' that an English education was imperative for the state of affairs in the colonies to be improved, and what was needed was " a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect"(P 249).⁶

The introducers of modern education in India were, no doubt, the missionaries, whatever might have been their motive. When time was up to renew the charter between the East India Company and the British Govt., the British Parliament added a section incorporating provision of spending Rs. One lakh per annum for education in India. Besides, the missionaries played a pivotal role in publishing text books and spreading female education. To quote Syed Nurulla and J.P. Naik: "The missionaries did extremely valuable pioneer work in the field of education of women – a 'dangerous' area in which the officials of this period refused to tread".⁷

But controversies brewed as to how the fund be used – whether for higher studies or for Primary education in one way and whether to impart western education or oriental education in the other. The educated and enlightened people of Bengal, Who laid a movement towards mass education and liberation from superstitions and taboos brought out ' Renaissance' in Bengal. " For the intelligentsia of Bengal, the 'Renaissance' inaugurated a search for cultural and, eventually national identity, a place from where they could articulate a sense of individual and collective selfhood."⁸

In the first quarter of the 19th century, i.e. during Renaissance in Bengal, a well versed man in Bengali, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and English, Raja Rammohan Roy laid emphasis on western education in India through English. He desired transformation of Indian culture realizing the ideal aspects of western education. A group of youths led by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31) campaigned in favour of everything that is English and attacked Hinduism vehemently. They demanded propagation of modern education among common people through mother tongue. The question whether eastern or western knowledge would be given to the natives was resolved after the publication of Macaulay's Minute (1835) that adopted English Language as medium of instruction and downward filtration theory for spread of education was taken as a device. As there was no central regulation system, the provincial administrators were working as per their will. Besides, the Govt. realized the need for teaching through mother tongue as well as the importance of mass education. So much so that a parliamentary committee was formed and as per its decision the President of the Board of Control published a document on the Directive of Education Policy of the Company in 1854. This was known as Wood's

Despatch that terminated the controversy regarding Orientalism and Westernism. It expresses:

"Education which we desire to see extended in India is that which has for its object the diffusion of the improved Art, Science, Philosophy, Literature of Europe, in short, European knowledge".⁹

Many important decisions were taken e.g. establishment of Education Dept., establishment of Universities, stress on mass education, female education, vocational education and for this Wood's Despatch is termed as "Magna Charta of English Education in India."¹⁰

After this Hunter Commission (1882) was formed to look into the condition of Primary Education in India. Our national leaders and thinkers, taking into consideration the inefficacy of the English education system, took up the responsibility for spreading education and its result was establishment of many organizations like Arya Society (1870), Santiniketan (1901), Dawn Society (1902), National School (1906), National College (1906). Anglo-vedic College, Central Hindu College by Anne Besant, Gurukul School at Haridwar etc. In 1902 Indian Education Commission was formed with a view to recommending in favour of development of Higher education. In the Resolution on Education (1904) some common principles were adopted such as, spread of vocational education, preservation of Indian art and culture, improvement of female education etc. when Sir Ashutosh became the V.C. of Calcutta University he adopted successfully policy of expansion of secondary and higher secondary education by liberal affiliation to schools, colleges, teaching through vernacular at higher stages, encouragement in the studies in Science and Technology etc. The important recommendations of Calcutta University Commission or Sadler Commission (1907-19) were as follows: Higher education should be started after intermediate, mother tongue be medium of instruction. The Wood Abbot Report (1937) recommended establishment of vocational institutions and polytechnics. The Sargeant Report (1944) focuses on two types of High Schools – Academic and Technical, use of mother tongue as medium of instruction, training of teachers, spread of female education etc.

In Post independence period Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49), though established to go into the various aspects of university education in India, reviewed the secondary education also. It stated the standard of admission to the university courses should correspond to that of the present intermediate examination. It offered a lot of suggestions in favour of teachers and improvement of teacher training.

The major recommendations of Mudaliar Commission (1952-53) were installation of Higher Secondary system, diversified courses, three language formula, emphasis on educational and vocational guidance, improvement of methods, textbooks etc. The main recommendations of Kothari Commission (1964-66) stress on increasing productivity in education, achieving national integration, cultivating social, moral and spiritual values, vocationalization of education and adopting regional languages as medium of instruction.

To sum up, if we analyse the recommendations of the education commissions we find certain things in common in the mind of the educationists – vernacular as medium of

instruction, importance of vocational education, Science and Technological Education, spread of female education, cherishing the values of art and culture etc. were more or less concern of them.

In the British period a huge number of talented persons were born, brought up, cultured and politically united to organize freedom movement. In several occasions students' agitations suspended teaching in schools and colleges. Certain decisions of the British Govt. such as division of Bengal made the students rebellious against the imperialist power. Notwithstanding it cannot be denied the British education system helped cultural osmosis among the people from various parts of the country.

Role of English in propagating Multiculturalism in India

Language is a great medium of culture, it unites people and its emotion is so great that people can even court death for its sake. In post-independence India states were mainly formed on the basis of language. It is bewildering to think that more than 1500 languages including 60 or more foreign languages are spoken in India. To determine language policy happened to be a complex issue to our constitution framers simply because of the plurality of languages. Some persons who were out and out anti-English were of the opinion that English should no longer be taught as a subject but taking into consideration its importance in the field of Science, Technology, Trade and Commerce, International Relationship English could not be banished. Some recommendations of the Official Language Commission, which were adopted in the President's order are continuation of English as medium of examination for the recruitment through PSC, Parliamentary legislation, proceedings of the Supreme Court and High Courts, for wider academic, cultural and scientific interest etc. An excerpt from the report of Radhakrishnan Commission is worth quoting:

“English has today become one of the major languages of the world and Indians can neglect its study only at the risk of loss of themselves. I am convinced that in future as well, the standard of teaching English should be maintained at as high a level as possible.”¹¹

English serves as a means to maintain liason among the people of various parts of a multilingual country like India. It is interesting to note still a person well-versed in English is considered more educated and intelligent than others. Of late Bollywood actors, sports personalities, politicians are scarcely found to face media in any language other than English.

Multiculturalism in W.B. in the light of Educational Policies

Immediately after the independence there was a remarkable change in the demographic picture of West Bengal, a newly formed state within the union of India. Many refugees from the then East Pakistan thronged there. West Bengal is a state having border lines of three neighbouring countries – Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The Himalayas stand on one side and the Bay of Bengal flows on the other. It contains a wide variety of cultures. In 1956 a part of the then Bihar state, named Manbhum (presently Purulia) was included. People speak here in a variety of languages – Bengali, Nepalese, Hindi, Santali, Oriya,

Urdu etc. In Kolkata the erstwhile capital of India, so many groups of people including, the Anglo-Indians have been living for generations and they speak their ancestral languages like Gujarathi, Marathi etc. apart from local language. The people of hill areas speak in a number of languages and there is diversity in their dress, culture, food habit etc. So it is easy to understand that West Bengal is accustomed to accommodate variety of cultures with peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups.

Now let us survey how multiculturalism is reflected in the educational scenario of our state. In most of the schools the first language is Bengali, the second one is English, the third is Hindi or Sanskrit. In the hill areas the first language is Nepali and in some industrial areas it is Hindi or Urdu. In the Jungle mahal area for the last few years learners have got Santali or Alchiki as their medium of instruction. In big cities schools run with multiple languages and these provide the students to interact with fellow pupils belonging to various cultural background – thus schools might be termed as replica of ‘mini India’. To enjoy the mid-day meal in the same row in schools equips our young learners with the knowledge of equality. Schools and colleges offer holidays in various religious festivals and on the birthdays of eminent people from diverse religious and cultural groups. In this way they are acquainted with the message ingrained in various religions in one hand and the culture of the people associated with diverse faiths. As years pass by various types of institutions are being established here and pupils from various parts of the country and abroad as well enroll here. This results in cultural intermingling e.g. performance of Assamese Bihu, Punjabi Bhangra, Manipuri dance, Bharat Natyam, Garba etc. simultaneously on the same stage is very common even in a college or a university. Obviously mutual love and respect multiply among various groups of people. Nowadays many universities of our state have introduced the courses on folk culture like ‘chhou’, ‘jhumur’, ‘baul’ etc. to promote the talented of the marginal people. Recently in order to focus the relationship between the philosophy of Rabindranath and various trends of ‘chhou dance’ in the international platform, Sidho Kanho Birsa University, Purulia has taken up a project ‘mask up for Maestro’ with the guidance of a professor of Bath University, England [The Ananda Bazar Patrika 25 May, 2021].

Thus through inclusion of lessons of cultural values in our curriculum we are galloping towards multiculturalism day by day and the perception of nationalism in us is developing gradually overcoming the evil influence of media and other agencies with vested interest, that are ever engaged in polluting amicable relationship among cultural and linguistic groups.

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