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Religious Pluralism and Identity problem in India

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Abstract:-

India is one of the most culturally, philosophically and religiously diverse countries in the world. The roots, not only of these diversities but also of morally appropriate responses to them, i.e. to pluralism, go very deep. It was an amalgam or synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan, including tribal elements. In other words, since its very inception Hinduism appears to be a "mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas. Religious pluralism can be defined as "respecting the otherness of others". Freedom of religion encompasses all religions acting within the law in a particular region. The main assumption that underpins this strategy is that presenting correct information can lead to the mobilisation of opinion and people for a cause within a democracy. In summary, the nature of challenge to pluralism comes only in part from direct threats of communalism and other forms of ethno-identity violence

Keywords:- The challenges to pluralism, Seeking Justice for victims, Religious pluralism, Pluralism and Human service, Tribalism and Constitutionalism, Taking Pluralism Seriously, Rethinking Citizenship and the State, Conclusion.

Introduction:-

Since the middle of the second millennium BC, Indian civilization has played host to several streams of migrant groups and communities from different parts of the world. The advent of the Aryans, the Tibeto-Burman speaking Mongoloid groups, the Kushans, the Sakas, the Greeks, the Huns, the Arabs, the Persians, the Turks and the Mongols at different points of time testifies to the pervasiveness of the migration process during the successive periods of Indian history. The migrant groups and communities brought their respective traditions and behaviour patterns from their native lands. In the course of time they lost contact with their places of origin and underwent an extensive process of indigenization. The process of adaptation and interaction among the various groups brought about, on the one hand, India's characteristic diversity and, on the other, a composite cultural tradition. This fact is borne out by historical sources and contemporary surveys as well as researches in folklore.

The foregoing discussion makes it fairly clear that from very early times Vedic society was internally differentiated and pluralistic, rather than monolithic and homogeneous. It was an amalgam or synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan, including tribal elements. In other words, since its very inception Hinduism appears to be a "mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas", as Romila Thapar puts it.25 The point which I have tried to establish is that since ancient times Indian civilization has had a pluralistic and composite character, the pluralistic and composite ethos of Indian civilization, which began germinating during the Vedic period, was supplemented by the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, and was further reinforced during the early medieval period which witnessed the early flowering of the Bhakti Movement. This composite tradition attained efflorescence during the late medieval period. (1) Pluralism has been one of the quintessential features of Hinduism both at the metaphysical as well as socio-cultural level. At the metaphysical level, truth was considered pluralistic. For example, it is believed that if two Sruti traditions are in conflict, both of them are to be held as law. The inherently pluralistic ethos of Hinduism is reflected, on the one hand, in the wide and divergent range of beliefs and ideas and, on the other, in stratification, customs, traditions and behaviour patterns.(2)

The challenges to pluralism in India:-

During the struggles against colonialism, many social reformers in India considered its plural heritage deeply entrenched in the country's history and held that the Indian experience of respect and coexistence with multiple religions would help the West to deal with their growing pluriformity in the 20th century (Tagore, 1916). The history of the national movement in India is a history of transforming diverse identities into a unifying 'nation'. But it was also the site on which the first major political partition of a geography into two independent nations-Pakistan and India-took place soon after the end of the colonial regime. The 'partition' left a deep scar on both sides of the border and, the memory of suffering and pain still continue to generate most compelling and moving narratives (Butalia, 2000; Pandey, 2001; Tan & Kudaisya, 2000). A deeply painful event of this nature could not escape from being useful for those who wanted political mileage out of it. Especially when competitive democratic politics took the turn of 'identity populism'- considering various group/community identities potential 'vote banks.

Thus the inter-religious conflicts, popularly referred 'communal violence', during the 1970s and 1980s was attributed to the process of the politicization of religion by political parties that tried to get the support of the majority Hindus. (4) The escalation of communal violence during 1980s and early 1990s continued to be seen as caused by competitive identity populism (Sabrang Research, 2004), and became the most visible cause and the driving force of the problem. However, it acquired a more complex character against the background of global changes and persisting national problems such as the Kashmir problem.

In summary, the nature of challenge to pluralism comes only in part from direct threats of communalism and other forms of ethno-identity violence. This has to be analysed along with two other developments: first, the increasingly visible inadequacy and vulnerability of established strategies of political protest and civil society practice in dealing with these threats. Secondly, the theoretical advancements in recent times in overcoming the simplistic dichotomy of the universal and the particular in understanding the ideals of democracy, human rights and such other concepts.

" Seeking Justice for victims and doing campaigns for secularism:-

From the very beginning, 'Seeking Justice' stands as the single most urgent concern in civil society interventions. The bulk of activities carried out by CSOs in India in this regard follow strategies to help mobilise opinion and people in favour of a perspective of justice. At yet another level, they use constitutional methods of redressal such as courts or demanding new legal frameworks (legal reform). The actualisation of the idea of justice therefore has a retributive dimension (seeking punishment of the culprits who committed the acts of violence/violations) and a campaign dimension (seeking responsible state action to maintain peace and a just environment and seeking citizen participation in support of such demands).

The earlier response during 1970s and early 1980s came from the Civil liberties groups. The method of fact finding subsequently became part of the NGO activities and more recently emerged as 'investigative journalism' practices in the media. Since the beginning of 1990s, with the rise of NGO-isation of human rights activity, numerous human rights NGOs began to take up similar activities. By late 1990s, new NGOs or social action groups with a special focus on communalism began to emerge. Magazines like Communalism Combat appeared, besides the civil liberties magazines like PUCL Bulletin and many vernacular magazines of civil liberties groups, uncovering a variety of trends in communalisation of polity and society.

The main assumption that underpins this strategy is that presenting correct information can lead to the mobilisation of opinion and people for a cause within a democracy. Fact-finding helped CSOs to highlight hidden dimensions and aspects into the discussion and also generated momentum for interventions. Although fact-finding continues as an important strategy of human rights interventions, of late its effectiveness or ability to mobilise has begun to depend upon how

the dominant media space responds or accommodates the findings. (5) Similarly, there is perceptible change in the urban middle class orientation to social action, there is a growing presence of new media oriented engagement as channels of expression which contrast with previous strategies of direct mobilisation. With the rise of specialist NGOs, such as the advocacy NGOs in the field of human rights and justice, a practice of initiating court cases pursuing justice in a concentrated and focused manner also emerged. Fighting court cases was not new. Civil liberties organisations have always engaged with the court system and their predominant engagement was with the issue of liberty.6)

Religious pluralism:-

Religious pluralism, to paraphrase the title of a recent academic work, goes beyond mere toleration. Chris Beneke, in Beyond Toleration: the Religious Origins of American Pluralism explains the difference between religious tolerance and religious pluralism by pointing to the situation in the late 18th century United States. By the 1730s, in most colonies religious minorities had obtained what contemporaries called religious toleration. (7) "The policy of toleration relieved religious minorities of some physical punishments and some financial burdens, but it did not make them free from the indignities of prejudice and exclusion. Nor did it make them equal. Those 'tolerated' could still be barred from civil offices, military positions, and university posts." In short, religious toleration is only the absence of religious persecution, and does not necessarily preclude religious discrimination. However, in the following decades something extraordinary happened in the Thirteen Colonies, at least if one views the events from "a late eighteenth-century perspective".(8) Gradually the colonial governments expanded the policy of religious toleration, but then, between the 1760s and the 1780s, they replaced it with "something that is usually called religious liberty". Mark Silka, in "Defining Religious Pluralism in America: A Regional Analysis", states that Religious pluralism "enables a country made up of people of different faiths to exist without sectarian warfare or the persecution of religious minorities. (9)

Religious pluralism can be defined as "respecting the otherness of others". Freedom of religion encompasses all religions acting within the law in a particular region. Exclusivist religions teach that theirs is the only way to salvation and to religious truth, and some of them would even argue that it is necessary to suppress the falsehoods taught by other religions. Some Protestant sects argue fiercely against Roman Catholicism, and fundamentalist Christians of all kinds teach that religious practices like those of paganism and witchcraft are pernicious. This was a common historical attitude prior to the Enlightenment, and has appeared as governmental policy into the present day under systems like Afghanistan's Taliban regime, which destroyed the ancient Buddhas of Bamyan.

Giving one religion or denomination special rights that are denied to others can weaken religious pluralism. This situation was observed in Europe through the Lateran Treaty and Church of England. In modern era, many Islamic countries have laws that criminalize the act of leaving Islam to someone born in Muslim family, forbid entry to non-Muslims into Mosques, and forbid construction of Church, Synagogue or Temples inside their countries. (10)

Religious Pluralism and Human service Profession: -

The concept of religious pluralism is also relevant to human service professions, such as psychology and social work, as well as medicine and nursing, in which trained professionals may interact with clients from diverse faith traditions. (11) For example, has described four possible stances toward client religious and spiritual beliefs, which he called rejectionist, exclusivist, constructivist, and pluralist. Unlike the constructivist stance, the pluralist stance: recognizes the existence of a religious or spiritual absolute reality but allows for multiple interpretations and paths toward it. In contrast to the exclusivist who maintains that there is a single path "up the mountain of God," the pluralist recognizes many paths as valid. Importantly, "the pluralistic therapist

can hold personal religious beliefs while appreciating those of a client with different religious beliefs. The pluralist recognizes that religious value differences can and will exist between counselors and clients without adversely affecting therapy"

Tribalism and Constitutionalism:-

The effort of modern political theory to understand multiculturalism has engendered a variety of responses, depending upon the theoretical tradition (e.g., liberalism, communitarianism) and the nature of the group (e.g., immigrant groups, descendants of slaves, indigenous peoples). Contemporary political philosophers struggle with two primary issues: the rights and status of "ethno cultural minorities in multi-ethnic societies," and the virtues and responsibilities of democratic citizenship. (12) There are, of course, many tensions between these two areas of civic life in multicultural societies, and philosophers differ as to whether these are ultimately irreconcilable aspects of multiculturalism.

Indigenous peoples pose one of the most problematic cases within multiculturalism. Universally recognized as being the "first" inhabitants of subsequently colonized lands, indigenous peoples across the globe have an ambiguous status-alternatively considered by their encompassing nation-states to be "quasi-sovereign nations," "tribes," or "ethnic minorities." This ambiguous status is largely the result of historical circumstance. With each successive transfer of lands between colonizing governments and indigenous peoples, the Native people lost rights, gained other rights, and reached a new political accommodation with the "national sovereign."

Indian nations enjoy both political and cultural sovereignty as an aspect of their inherent status as separate governments. This sovereignty is "preconstitutional" and also extra constitutional" in character, (13). The sovereignty of Indian nations existed prior to the formation of the United States, and the Indian nations are not signatories to the United States Constitution. Thus, although the Constitution explicitly regulates the relationship of Indian nations with the federal and state governments, the Indian nations are not "parties" to the Constitution and thus, their powers are not limited by provisions such as the Bill of Rights.

Taking Pluralism Seriously: Looking Beyond the Rationalist and Communitarian Frames:-

The quotation marks in both pluralism and modern democracy are significant as they mark that both these terms are contested ones without any stable definition. One of the central insights that are critical to this paper is what Chantal Mouffe has referred to as the 'paradox of modern democracy'. According to her 'It is therefore crucial to realize that, with modern democracy, we are dealing with a new political form of society whose specificity comes from the articulation between two different traditions.(14) On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defense of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty.

In fact, the shift from the Keynesian Welfare State to the neoliberal regime in western democracies (at least from the 1970s onwards) has specifically attempted to privilege the liberal tradition at the expense of the democratic tradition. The axes on which the recent articulations of democracy revolve are free-markets on the one hand and human rights on the other, while at the same time any notion of popular sovereignty is elided. What the prevailing discourse signified by concepts like 'good governance' or 'nonpartisan democracy' intends to achieve is a consensual and a depoliticized form of democracy or, in other words, politics free of any dimension of conflict.

Rethinking Citizenship and the State:-

The liberal articulations of citizenship privilege rights over obligations and emphasize on a notion of passive citizenship rather than an active one. This has led to a weakening of the sense of community and collective spirit, as well as to a feeling of anomie and to the weakening of

social bonds. Hence, the liberal conception that there is no 'common good' and that each individual is free to pursue his or her own conception of the good runs the risk of sacrificing the citizen to the individual. While being sensitive to the problems posed by the liberal notion of citizenship, Laclau and Mouffe are not very comfortable with the communitarian critiques that foreground a civic republican conception of citizenship either. According to Mouffe the communitarian attempts 'to recreate a type of gemeinschaft community cemented by a substantive idea of the common good is clearly premodern and incompatible with the pluralism that is constitutive of modern democracy'. In this view there is a different danger: that of sacrificing the individual to the citizen. So what is needed is perhaps 'a new conception of the citizen that is different from both the republican/communitarian and the liberal ones...' The primary challenge for them then is how to conceptualize a 'political community' (citizenship) that articulates the demands of pluralism along with some notion of 'common good' that is not a determinate or a substantive one.

Conclusion:-

The conclusion sets its hope in the possible emergence of a wide acceptance of human dignity as a feature pertaining to all human beings alike and only in virtue of their humanity, i.e. independently of ethical merit, social status, caste, class or gender. The emergence of a hegemonic discourse of equality would serve as the empirical and meta-ethical precondition for the applicability of deontological theories of justice. Once its emergence is global, moral universalism becomes conceivable. Habermas' approach aims at the inclusion of 'all subjects capable of speech and action'. It is therefore universal relative to the globalised human perspective.In modern times Dalits, notably Ambedkar and the Mahar movement, have appealed to these Indic traditions. They have however tended to help only their particular community, as anthropologist Martin Fuchs has pointed out (Fuchs 1999: 168-336). They have therefore not been able to displace the notion of a fundamental inequality of human beings in Indian society as a whole.

References:-

1. Romila Thapar. Interpreting Early India, p. 68; Romila Thapar. "The Study of Society in Ancient India", In Ancient Indian Social History, pp. 211-39.

2. Interestingly, the Ramayana of Tulsidas contains scores of Arabic and Persian words. There are over thirty translations of the epic in Urdu and over a dozen in Persian. In some villages, the Ramayana is ritually recited before Hindu audiences by a Muslim sage. Not too long ago in imperial Delhi, a Hindu pandit taught the Quran to Muslim children.

3. S.P. Jain. The Social Structure of Hindu-Muslim Community, Delhi, 1975; Christian W. Troll (ed.). Muslims Shrines in India, Delhi, 1989; Currie, Muinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, Delhi, 1991.

4. The Bharatiya Janata party or BJP is a product of such politics. But political parties with a Hindu bent of mind were not new and existed from 1950. The BJP is a new formation and drew ideological as well as cadre support from the previous political party, Bharatiya Jan Sangh, founded by Shayama Prasad Mukerjee and supported by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) a voluntary organization established to revive Hindu pride.

5. The strategy of 'fact finding' appears to have arrived through the Indian civil liberties organisations drawing inspiration from the experience of civil liberties movements elsewhere, especially from the American Civil Liberties Union in the US and the National Council for Civil Liberties in the UK..

6.Although there is no systematic reflection on the changing nature of support for human rights activities of CSOs in India, one hears frequently the diminishing support for human rights advocacy. Besides, there is also a general scenario of gradual withdrawal of bilateral aid support for civil society activities.

7. Jump up to:a b Silk, Mark (July 2007), Defining Religious Pluralism in America: A Regional Analysis, 612, pp. 64-81

8. Jump up to:a b c Beneke 2006: 6

9. Jump up^ Beneke 2006: 5.

10. Jump up to :a b Chad Meister (2010), The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity, Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0195340136, pp 32-57