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Crises of Multiculturalism in Europe

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Abstract

Multiculturalism is the characteristic of every traditional and modern societies. It is not possible to find perfectly homogeneous societies. For ages, Different ethnic, racial and religious communities coexist and live peacefully, get mingled with each other, celebrate festivals together and normally assimilate and integrate. When people move/shift to other countries for better life and progress, they voluntarily accept the rules and laws of the country of their migration and tend to accept the culture of that country. Even when they are treated as “others” it is acceptable to them, and they try to mould themselves. Though this appears to be normal, there always exist a feeling of “we” and “others” in every community. It is more so with the people who are involuntary migrators – that is who migrate out of compulsions. This “othering” becomes especially important in case of such people whose religious- cultural rights are deliberately ignored-neglected.

This paper studies conditions in Europe in the context of multiculturalism. European nations in their process of economic reconstruction after World War II always had welcomed workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh as well as other colonies. After the end of cold war, people from underdeveloped Eastern Europe started moving to Developed Western Europe for better life. Western Europe welcomed them as they could fulfil the requirement of unskilled labour.

But once economic crises emerged in Europe, foreigners and immigrants became convenient scapegoats for problems like poverty, unemployment and scarcity. Majority of these migrants are Muslim and in the wake of spread of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, their existence in European societies is considered as a “threat”. They are marginalized and discriminated and held responsible for economic, social, and political “Crisis” in Europe. Blaming multiculturalism thus becomes a useful political agenda in Liberal Europe which is questioning the fundamental connect between Multiculturalism and liberalism.

Key words- multiculturalism, liberal politics, migration, assimilation, integration, right wing politics

Introduction

Every society is a multicultural society. Multiculturalism refers to the existence and acceptance of cultural diversity in any society. Behind the philosophy of multiculturalism is the fundamental fact that in any society we find the confluence of different cultures and generally these culturally diverse people coexist peacefully. In ancient Greece people with different dialects, identities, traditions used to live together. Roman empire spread over entire Western Europe was also characterised by cultural, social, religious, and economic diversity. Ottoman Empire with majority of Muslims had religious diversity. Even in the 21st century, societies remain culturally diverse with different races, languages, religions. From sociological perspective, multiculturalism that is cultural diversity enriches the society as harmonious existence of different cultural groups benefits the entire society.

Philosophical aspect of multiculturalism argues for the giving respect to the diverse cultures, recognise their contribution to social richness, respect their views and differences with the dominant culture and the special acknowledgement of their existence. It is not expected that minority groups or communities having their distinct cultural existence should assimilate with the dominant groups and cultures as assimilations would mean relinquishing one's identity and multiculturalism refers to the perseverance of separate identities and cultural differences.

Beyond social and philosophical dimensions of multiculturalism what must be understood is the political dimensions which includes both social and philosophical and goes beyond that.

Political aspect refers to the role of the State in multicultural societies. Beyond recognition acceptance and acknowledgement of socio-cultural diversity, the distinct cultural identities must have a rightful place in a society, their special rights and claims that arise from this distinctiveness must be upheld and they must get protection under law from exclusion, discrimination, and oppression. Multiculturalism then is expected to be integrated with the government policy of granting liberal rights to culturally diverse groups. In the political sphere, multiculturalism supports for not only granting equal rights but also granting special rights emanating from their distinct identities.

Will Kymlicka and multiculturalism

Will Kymlicka is a philosopher, his writings are philosophical and also applied to current events and issues. He talks about multiculturalism in the context of diversities in the society resulting from immigration. The people migrate to other countries especially comparatively developed countries in such of development opportunities including higher education, jobs and in the long run choose to settle in those countries. These people form minority communities. Kymlicka calls them polyethnic minorities.¹ The ethnic and racial diversity of any society is caused by these polyethnic minorities.

These minority ethnic groups immigrate voluntarily and hence they do not wish to be segregated from the majority culture. They wish to integrate with majority but at the same time, they prefer to retain aspects of their unique culture such as language, script or religion and expect that their uniqueness should be recognized by giving them special concessions or rights. In order to ensure protection of their uniqueness which is the basis of their separate identity, they demand certain rights such as language rights or religious rights. For these polyethnic minorities, granting these special rights ensures equal citizenship. Kymlicka calls them polyethnic rights. Though liberalism is criticized to be concerned with only individual rights, and therefore seems inadequate to address the questions of rights that emerge from the identity issues, according to Kymlicka, recognition of these special rights – poly-ethnic rights or Group rights is also a part of liberal philosophy and are necessary for freedom and equality.

Traditional perspectives of liberalism and multiculturalism

Liberal democracy believes in granting equal rights to all the people. It stands for non-discrimination based on caste-class-religious discrimination. Liberalism is an individual as well as social ideal. Claiming formal -legal equality for all citizens, it seeks to grant blanket political identity. Such equal treatment results in political homogenization of society governed by common political culture. The metaphor used to describe liberal democracy is of a “melting pot” that stands for the assimilation of diverse cultures whereby distinct identities melt and become a part of common identity. Liberal state is required to follow not only the policy of assimilations but also the policy of integration which is made clear by the metaphor of “tossed Salad” used to describe multiculturalism. The metaphor “tossed Salad” implies a policy whereby the poly ethnic groups being an integral and recognizable part of the collective, are able to maintain their distinct identities.²

The metaphor of “melting pot” and “tossed Salad” makes clear the distinction between assimilation and integration. Assimilation is a compromise with one’s identity and totally merging with the common identity willingly or by force. Integration on the other hand is a two-way process. It is a compromise for both the sides, the people claiming distinct identities as well as government wherein the government policy would grant special rights – religious or linguistic rights but also demands allegiance to common rules of governance. Integration is thus open to multiculturalism as it supports the idea of liberal state that recognizes the special rights in a community. Thus, multiculturalism as a policy has two distinct characteristics. The first important characteristic is that it seeks to address the different demands of groups in a culturally diverse society. Secondly, multiculturalism does not aim at standardization or homogenization or uniformity but rather acknowledge that people have different ways of life and have a right to pursue their differences.

Emergence of Multiculturalism in Europe

After WWII, though European powers gave independence to their colonies, the connection with the colonies continued. Unskilled workers migrating to Europe was a general phenomenon began with industrial revolution in Europe which was continued even after World War II. Once Western European economies started expanding with American financial aid, there was a shortage of labour force which could be filled with, the labourers from the former colonies. European societies increasingly became multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious in its everyday life as the migrated labourers in due course brought their families and settled there.

Europe claimed to have adopted liberal approach towards those minorities and maintained that they have accepted multiculturalism. The migrated labours got facilities for reasonable accommodation, schools, places of religious worships, job trainings etc. They were encouraged to protect their traditions and culture as it was thought that by maintaining such connectivity the workers will not forget their roots, they will remain attached to the countries of their origin and will be waiting to go back. It will then be easy to send them back when they were no more needed. Thus, when European government adopted such policies, their approach was not of inclusiveness, it was a need-based multiculturalism. Migrants were treated as “different”/inferior in many aspects, and they were expected to render indisputable obligation to the governmental policies. European version of multiculturalism was acceptance of multiethnic nature but not the positive recognition of plural nature of the society. It was expected that migrants themselves should voluntarily assimilate, integrate, and accommodate with the Western cultures and values. The migrant communities did not object to this approach as for them getting mingled with European culture, values and lifestyles was a sign of progression. Multiculturalism and the silent discrimination did not cause social unrest in Europe.

Decade of 1970s

By 1970s the European governments and societies seemed to have accepted that European people will have to now live with the sizable non-white, non-Christian and non-European immigrant communities and that migration and migrators have become a fact of European life. To manage these social diversities Governments of these countries adopted different programmes and policies to facilitate the cultural and religious expression of these groups. Along with the places of worship, even multilingualism was accepted. Besides German, Dutch, and Italian even Hindi, Marathi, Arabic and Turkish languages could be heard in Europe. Also, different cuisines and food festivals, organization and celebration of cultural programmes became a routine in European societies. Though all European nations did not follow similar policies and did not have normative objectives to deal with the issue of multicultural societies, they adopted nation specific ways of recognizing and managing diversities in societies once considered homogeneous.

1970s however also saw the emergence of economic crises at the global level, Europe was no exception to it. One of the reasons of the economic crises was shortage of raw material causing hike in the prices of raw material. It hampered productivity; high rate of productivity growth of post-war period came to an end. This caused gradual underemployment and then unemployment leading to surplus labour. In this situation, the immigrants found themselves in a more disadvantageous position.

As economic crises became serious, the governments adopted different strategies to deal with these problems. While dealing with the problem of unemployment, the Governments made distinction between original Europeans and migrants. As employment opportunities were limited, preference was given to Europeans over non-Europeans. Their cultural difference became the main reason for the difference in the treatment. They were treated as separate, fragmented identities that were demanding share in the opportunities, that in fact were not due to them or meant for them. But at the same, political systems wanted to prevent any outbreak of conflict or violence or dissatisfaction that would take a form of the movement and therefore tried to depoliticise such situations.

Developments in 1980s

The decade of 80s was a period of change. Soviet Union began to withdraw from Afghanistan. Also, the process of Soviet disintegration started. The East European nations became independent, but it was not a peaceful event. These nations were ethnically diverse nations and with independence ethnical diversity had already started causing conflicts between majority and minority groups. The cold war between US and USSR came to end formally with the fall of Berlin Wall and opened the discussions on meaning of democracy, free markets and liberal policies. Workers began to Migrate from Eastern and Central Europe to Western Europe, increasing the pressure on economy. However, these labourers were European and not “outsiders”. Though the immigrant cheap labour was a problem, it was not as serious as the problem emerging from Muslim immigrants. Europe was in the phase of transformation.

For many countries in Western Europe, 1989 seemed to be a turning point due to renewed interest in the problem of immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants. In 1989 in France in early October, three Muslim girls who refused to remove their head scarves were expelled from their middle school.³ In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s extreme-right National Front party was attracting a significant portion of the electorate with its demagogic demand to expel Muslim immigrants from France. Politicians across the political spectrum responded by arguing in favor of “immigration zero”.⁴ The party won the elections.

In Muslim world also this period was also of a great unrest. This unrest was caused by the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel "the Satanic Verses." This book claimed to cast doubts on the divine nature of Quran⁵. Salman Rushdie was accused of Blasphemy or unbelief and in 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa ordering Muslims to kill Rushdie. It was in 1998, government of Iran declared that Iran no longer sought his death. But after publication of this novel a strong reaction emerged in the Muslim community leading to numerous killings, attempted killings, and bombings.

The controversy on this novel raised strong anti-Muslim reaction in the European world. Islam was held as intolerant religion and threat to liberal values in Europe. Western European nations who considered themselves as champions of liberalism started openly worrying about Muslim immigrants, considering them as threat to original liberal culture of Europe. It was believed that Muslims would never be able to integrate with liberal culture of Europe. Europe's resistance to integrate Muslims was not considered as failure of European liberalism or multiculturalism. Rather this resistance was justified on the ground of incompatibility of Muslim culture. Muslim culture was not in harmony with the national tradition of European countries. Europeans increasingly believed that "their" culture was antagonistic to "our" culture.

Cultural nationalism in Europe

The events that took place in the decade of 90s led to the emergence of cultural nationalism in Europe. European countries began to express fear about being swamped by "other" cultures, thereby destroying the original European culture. This fear was long expressed in 1970s itself by Margaret Thatcher. In a 1978 television interview for current affairs programme World in Action, Conservative MP Margaret Thatcher claimed that British people feared being 'swamped' by immigrants from the new Commonwealth and Pakistan. Racial tensions had been brewing in the UK.⁶ According to her Europe that always supported openness, liberal values and democracy if is swamped by different culture- the people will obviously react and will be hostile.

The fear expressed by Margaret Thatcher seemed to come true by the end of 1980s and early 90s which saw the rise of fundamentalism in Afghanistan on the one hand and the emergence of ethnic conflicts and violence in the newly independent Eastern and Central European nations. Samuel Huntington in his "Clash of Civilizations" argued that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations.⁷

Afraid of this cultural influx, the reaction of European nations was to enact laws and regulations. They were in the form of serious cultural restrictions and these restrictions were mainly applicable to the Muslim religious community. The laws were passed that banned display of religious symbols on walls, limits were put on the height of minarets on mosques. A ban was imposed on veils worn by Muslim women. It was held to be the symbol of backwardness and the sign of gender discrimination and intolerance which was considered alien to European culture.

European Union passed strict rules regarding eligibility requirements for entry and naturalization of migrants. Migrants were expected to compulsorily learn the respective European languages and adopt European culture as well as the knowledge of the country in which they were going to reside. It was argued that such rules were to facilitate integration of "other" cultures with European culture.

Demise of multiculturalism

The new millennium saw the increasing intensity of the problems faced by especially Muslim immigrants in the multicultural societies in Europe. Multicultural societies were facing a crisis after 2008. Entire Europe sunk into critical economic conditions with economic depression of 2008. Economic fallout of Greece, Civil war in Syria caused the further increase in the number of migrants putting a lot of strain on the already troubled economies of Europe. Problems like unemployment, poverty, social insecurity were on rise. Majority of these migrants were Muslims. Since then, the fear is expressed that increasing Muslim population in Europe would outnumber the original European Nationals. Another and more dangerous possibility is the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. The European countries are afraid that any development in the Muslim world would cause action and reaction in Europe due to these Muslim migrants and thus destabilise the European societies. European countries have begun to worry about the spread of Islam and Muslims in general causing the rise of European nationalism.

Migrants and especially Muslim migrants have not remained only a political issue but also has become a socially sensitive issue as their existence causes fear and anxiety and suspicion among the common European people. European societies are tensed due to conflicts and race riots between immigrant ethnic groups and their white neighbours. Added to this is the growth of Islamic terrorism in the form of ISIS.

Immigrants have become a kind of “label” everywhere and they are blamed for all sorts of problems- crime, unemployment, disease, the deterioration of public services, scarcity of public funds, threat to liberal culture etc. They are treated as hostile identities. Crisis of immigration has become a popular agenda of European politics because of its populist appeal.

To conclude

Europe is facing an economic crisis due to the lack of people who fall in the age group of “working population”. The number of senior citizens is more with increased life expectancy. But at the same time ambitions of better career, costly lifestyles and no child policy of many young couples has caused the decline in the proportion of young generation. Hence Europe has to rely on immigrants to sustain economic growth. Yet migrants are increasingly seen as importing risks. It shows that despite the economic need for migrant labour and a tradition of embracing multiculturalism, European people and their representatives in the Government have moved away from liberal and inclusive policies of past. Emergence of strong right wingers in Europe suggests the gradual end of multiculturalism in Europe.

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⁷ Huntington, S. P. (1993, Summer). The Clash of Civilizations? Retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations>: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>