CHAPTER 2

INDIAN DEBATE ON MULTICULTURALISM

"Of all the concepts that have caught and sparked off new motions of the politically permissible, multiculturalism as an umbrella concept occupies the pride of place. It is the latest spin industry to capture the imagination of sociologists, political theorists, policy planners and anthropologists."¹

This chapter mainly deals with the theoretical debates and issues on multiculturalism which have been going on since the past few decades in the realm of both western as well as Indian political theory and philosophy and the relevance of the debate in handling the question of diversity management. Since the 1960s the problem of cultural diversity has become a central one for social scientists in Western Europe, North America, Britain, the former Communist countries and the developing countries like India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nigeria etc. In part it arises from the disintegration of the former empires and nation-states, including those of the Communist and ex-colonial countries where regional units seek autonomy from the political units of which they were formally a part.

This Chapter is organized as follows: In the first part, I will be highlighting some of the arguments and counter-arguments made by different scholars regarding the sustainability of the Indian state as a successful democracy. As a corollary of the first part, I will then focus on the ongoing multicultural debate in our country since

¹ Neera Chandhoke, "The Logic of Recognition?", Seminar, No. 284, 2000, p. 35.
the 1990s. In the third part of my discussion I will try to locate the applicability of the debate in the empirical context and the role of the State in the management of the diverse conflicts that afflict the Indian society.

From the days of India's independence, political analysts have prophesied that India will not be able to survive as a single integrated state. Various forms of "crisis" arguments have been advanced in support of the thesis about the country's integration and collapse.¹ Selig Harrison in his *India: The Most Dangerous Decades* prophesied that ethnic movements would ultimately lead to the 'balkanization of the country'.² For Harrison, traditional India was characterized by an overwhelming array of parochial interests that made political unity an exception to the complex mosaic of political authority that prevailed on the subcontinent throughout most of its history. Actually, Harrison was overly pessimistic about the ability of the Indian state to accommodate conflicts. Myron Weiner's *The Politics of Scarcity* also highlighted that economic development, by promoting the organization of new interest groups, often disrupts rather than facilitates political development.³ Samuel Huntington also argued that "premature" or "excessive" political mobilization can lead to a "crisis of democracy." Similarly, Gunnar Myrdal in his *The Asian Drama* has characterized India as a 'soft' state because of its incapability to restructure social relations in the face of the powerful social groups.⁴ Atul Kohli in his paper 'Crisis of Governability' expressed concern over the incapability of the Indian state to govern itself properly. In his words "... the changing role of the political elite, weak political organizations, the mobilizations of new groups for electoral reasons, and growing social unrest,

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including class conflict—direct attention to the interactions between the state and social forces that help explain India’s growing problems of governability.”

However, all these writings underestimated the inner strength and vitality of the Indian Republic to maintain its unity amidst social and economic ‘discontent’. Defying all the predictions about its ‘balkanization’ in the scholarly discussions and the media in the years following independence, India has achieved an enviable record of national integration and political stability. However, the discussion will be biased if the observations of some eminent scholars regarding the successful functioning of India’s federation are not considered.

Atul Kohli in an article entitled “Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism? The Rise and Decline of Self-Determination Movements in India” has taken a more balanced view and acknowledged the capacity of the Indian state to manage diversities and analysed the entire process of diversity-management thus:

“a democratic polity in a developing country encourages group mobilization, heightening group identities and facilitating a sense of increased group efficacy; mobilized groups then confront state authority, followed by a more or less prolonged process of power negotiation; and such movements eventually decline as exhaustion sets in, some leaders are repressed, others are co-opted and a modicum of genuine power-sharing and mutual accommodation between the movement and the central State authorities is reached.”

In his earlier works, Kohli had expressed deep concern and held a pessimistic attitude of the Indian political system and had questioned the constancy and integrity of the Indian nation-state. However, Atul Kohli in a more recent writing “The Success of India’s Democracy” unswervingly acknowledges India as a successful functioning democratic state. According to Kohli, the success of India’s democracy can be attributed to the “moderate accommodation of group demands,

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especially demands based on ethnicity, and some decentralization of power.\textsuperscript{8} Further, another renowned scholar Jyotirindranath Dasgupta in his article, \textit{"India's Federal Design and Multicultural National Construction"} has argued that "India's bold experiment of combining democratic responsiveness to cultural differences with a federal conciliation of regional community, identity, and autonomy claims and a nationally concerted promotion of regional capability, has tended to ensure a novel mode of multicultural national development."\textsuperscript{9}

Dipankar Gupta, however, feels that the perception of 'unity' cannot be so easily explained in 'either', 'or' dichotomy. According to Dipankar Gupta, there are two aspects to the study of Indian nation state. "Scholarship on language or religion based ascriptive movements in India has not been quite as successful in meshing the particular with the general for the greater glory of universal analytical knowledge. One group of scholars regard India as a continent waiting to break up into smaller sovereign entities. Because India has so many languages, religions, and is so culturally diverse, it cannot according to this brand of opinion, be an authentic nation state. As there are several 'cultural' nations within the Indian state, these nations will inevitably force their way out of the unitary structure by delving deep into their respective ascriptive consciousness. But there is another approach to the study of the Indian nation state and to the various communal and ethnic mobilizations that have occurred in it since its birth in 1947. This approach would respect India's career as a durable phenomenon for nigh on 50 years and would ask instead how such a long stint was possible at all."\textsuperscript{10}

Though the debate on multiculturalism is quite popular in the west since the 1970s, it has gained momentum in India only in the late 1990s. The present analysis


\textsuperscript{10} Dipankar Gupta, \textit{The Context of Ethnicity, Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective}, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, p.3.
is a humble attempt to critically present the views of different scholars regarding the theoretical aspects of multiculturalism.

To begin with, virtually every society in this world is multicultural. Multiculturalism is a term which has been used in two senses—-descriptive as well as normative. In the descriptive context India can be said to be a land of diversity. “But multiculturalism is also sometimes used to refer to a desired end state, as way of referring to a society in which different cultures are respected and the reproduction of culturally defined groups is protected and social diversity celebrated.” India falls in the second category.

The Indian debate as distinct from the western one has mainly focused on two distinct aspects: (1) Multiculturalism as an ideology emphasizing on identity, rights, culture, relationship between state and community, personal laws, secularism etc. and (2) as a public policy designed to maintain unity among the different identities.

2.1 MULTICULTURALISM AS AN IDEOLOGY

2.1.1 The Question of Identity

A lot of attention is given in recent times by the Indian scholars of multiculturalism to the question of identity. Identity denotes individuals’ sense of attachment and belongingness to a particular group, community or nation. Religion, race, ethnicity, language, tribe region etc. constitute important social identities. The identity of citizenship or an identity of belonging to the political community constitutes the national identity. Thus in multicultural societies individuals may have multiple identities—the identity of the group to which they belong which is their primordial identity and the national identity, that is the citizenship identity.

Rajeev Bhargava in his paper ‘The Multicultural Framework’ while emphasizing the importance of identities in multicultural societies elaborates on the "need to have a stable identity, the contribution of cultural communities to the fulfillment of this need, the link between identity and recognition, the importance of cultural belonging and the desire to maintain difference.”

Within the discourse of multiculturalism, it is often assumed that the identity of a person corresponds to a particular culture and that such cultures are wholes with easily discernible boundaries. Difference in identity, therefore, is supposed to correspond to differences in mutually distinct cultures. Bhargava, agrees to the contention that cultural identities are primordial and that cultural difference is recovered and invented half way up the path of cultural interaction between unequal groups.

He also analyzes the problems regarding multiculturalism---(a) It tends to essentialize and harden identities resulting in the radical exclusion of people. (b) by its encouragement of cultural particularity, it appears to deepen divisions and undermine the common foundation of society. (c) it supports aggregative community power over individual freedom and by according equal rights to oppressive cultures, it corrodes values of liberal democracy.

Bhargava feels that the way out of this impasse lies in supporting democratic multiculturalism, which recognizes the importance of cultural identity, the need to maintain difference and is committed to bring this difference into the political domain. But Bhargava is careful to point out that in situations of over-

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14 Ibid.


16 Ibid., p. 48.
politicization and deep and bitter conflicts; it often becomes necessary to support a politics of reciprocal detachment. Therefore, within democratic multiculturalism, space should also be found for a certain amount of liberal multiculturalism so that no one loses out completely.\textsuperscript{17}

2.1.2 The Relationship Between State and Identities

Valerien Rodrigues, in his Paper “Is There a Case for Multiculturalism?” emphasizes that “multiculturalism relocates the task of a state in a basic way. It is called upon not merely to acknowledge differences but to sustain them as well. Multiculturalism is opposed to state sponsored identities, as it would undermine the authentic constitution of the self, as it is to the erasure of identities. Again, multiculturalism is an invitation to dialogue, given our largely culture and community bound social existence, our knowledge and understanding remain necessarily limited. Such a limitation can be transcended only by getting into an active dialogue with other communities and identities. In the process of this dialogue other communities may arise, including those who bear multiple identities.”\textsuperscript{18}

He strongly believes that in a country like India, a multicultural approach will reorder issues like the uniform civil code, the demand for new states such as Uttarakhand and Jharkand (these states have been created in the year 2000), the insurgent movements in the North-East, the Kashmir question, the Hindutva movement, etc. which the nation-state has not been able to engage with any degree of satisfaction.\textsuperscript{19} It is only when the state recognizes and provides measures for the promotion of distinctiveness of identities within the definite geographical boundary that a multicultural state can truly be built up. In this context Subrata Mitra argues


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 127.
that in India the model of multiculturalism which he calls to be 'fuzzy' implies "acknowledgement of the existence of plural identities in the public sphere ... by putting its language, religion and status to a hegemonic position within the structure of law and administration".  

2.1.3 The Problem of National Identity

The concern for 'national identity' has attracted the attention of the scholars of the subject. In consonance with Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism where he considers nations as imagined community and notes that, "If nation states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical', the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past..." and "that image of antiquity is "central to the subjective idea of the nation". M.S.S. Pandian has developed a fundamental critique of the so-called 'authentic' and 'legitimate' (all-) Indian nationhood with the help of E.V.Ramaswamy's alternative concept of 'nation'. In such a narrativization of the Indian nation Pandian vehemently criticizes by saying that in India "nation is marked by privileging a single subject position (in the case of India, the upper caste Hindu male) as the essence of the national. This character of the national identity implicitly inferiorizes other subject positions within the nation space, and when these subject positions are enunciated in opposition to what is


privileged, they are delegitimized, at varying degrees, as the Other of the nation”.

Thus what we find is that the concept of national identity seeks to create divisions in the Indian society by giving a superior status to the Brahmins and inferiorizing the women, shudras etc.

Again, T.K. Oommen in his edited work *Citizenship and National Identity: from Colonialism to Globalism* observes that in independent India, national identity has been claimed on the bases of religion, language and tribe. He remarks that while some groups did not claim a separate sovereign status in the name of national identity, there were some sections of people who claimed separate sovereign state in their urge for a specific national identity. He earnestly felt that there is "a general need in India for the separation of national identity and citizenship entitlements; the latter should be extended to all irrespective of the former".

It is to be discerned that recognition of difference and multiple identities are not inimical to national identity. In fact, in almost all societies individuals and groups may have different and mutually competing identities. There could be multiple layers of identities within a state. There may be complementarities between the national identity and generalized identity derived from individual’s attachment to his/her religion, language, ethnic groups etc. What the different theorists have failed to realize is that people identify themselves more with their cultural identity than with the national identity; it is only when their cultural identities are recognized that the national identity could be formed.

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25 Ibid.
2.1.4 Relationship between State and Community

The relationship between state and different communities is crucial to the understanding of multicultural policies. Sarah Joseph in her article, “Do Multicultural Individuals require a Multicultural State?” begins by the apprehension that “the debate on multiculturalism had not paid enough attention to the frequently associated social and economic disadvantages of minority groups. Caste, gender or class based influences would generally constitute a dimension of an individual’s cultural identity.”26 Regarding the question of which groups and identities should be granted recognition by the state, she feels that there is no clear guidance. She strongly feels that societies can be genuinely multicultural if only if the individuals are multicultural.27

In another article “Of Minorities and Majorities” published in the Seminar (2000) she argues that multiculturalism is used to describe the policies of a nation-state in relation to its cultural minorities. “Attempts to accommodate individual rights as well as recognition of minority communities characterize the multicultural state.”28 She further expresses the view that the debate about multiculturalism and minority rights is well reconciled by the Indian Constitution, which amply recognizes differences. She at the same time is skeptic about the fact that the problems of minority protection and multiculturalism can be solved only by following a politics of difference and granting more minority rights. If politics of difference is not backed up by a commitment to equal basic rights and citizenship, it will result in repression and not protection of minorities. She opines that states like India would need to pursue simultaneously a range of objectives which would include freedom and equality, as well as respect for the contributions of minorities to a shared national culture.

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While Sarah Joseph is in favour of granting more rights to the minorities, Gurpreet Mahajan (1999) and Dipankar Gupta (1999) hold contrary views. Mahajan states that "the concept of minority seeks to fix identity and hide the internal differentiation between communities. She feels that minority rights which emerged in India with the formation of the nation-state has on the one hand restricted homogenizing tendency of the nation-state but on the other has simultaneously empowered communities and hindered the process of democratization." Besides curtailing the ability of the state to legislate for equal rights, it has reified communities and legitimized the politics of majoritarianism and minoritarianism. Gupta also strongly argues against the listing of minorities for it rigidifies communities and is impervious to the actualities that secularization generates on the ground.

Bilgrami, too, questions the efficacy of the protection of "personal laws" of the Muslims in India because he firmly believes that conceding such rights may mean conceding to illiberalism because many practices following from such 'laws' curb individual rights. Ultimately instead of communitarian reforms, state led reforms become necessary.

Pufendorf called the Indian state to be of an "irregular shape, like that of a monster." On the question of state led reforms, critics argue that the present Indian State should be radically rationalized. That is to say, "Kashmir should lose its special status, minority religious, educational and other institutions should be subjected to the same requirements as their Hindu counterparts, minority personal laws should not be recognized, India should enact a single civil code, and the State should in general stop privileging and pampering its minorities."


30 Ibid., p. 43.

31 Bhiku Parkh, Rethinking Multiculturalism, Cultural Diversity and Political Theory, Palgrave, 2000, p.192.
2.1.5 Individual Rights Versus Community Rights

In the realm of political theory, there is an impasse between the liberals and the communitarians and also within liberalism itself on the issue of individual versus community rights. Contemporary liberal theorists like Will Kymlicka have argued that liberalism is not essentially opposed to the notion of individual who is embedded in socio-cultural communities. Therefore, State protection should include both individuals and groups.

Mahmood Mamdani (1999), for example, shows how prolonged colonial rule has set up an opposition between liberal individualism and some versions of republicanism on the one hand and an authoritarian, illiberal multiculturalism on the other, neither of which yields social justice.32

At the philosophical level there is the ongoing debate about individual rights and group rights and the merits and demerits of each approach. In illustrating the relationship between individuals, community and the state, social scientists argue that the state should be based on a single and uniform set of fundamental principles, that it should have a uniform legal system, that the principle of equal citizenship requires all citizens throughout the country to have exactly the same body of basic rights and obligations, that allowing minority personal laws and giving the communities concerned a veto over changes in them compromises the sovereignty of the State, that the State should take no cognizance of religions, ethnic and other identities and so on.

Bhiku Parekh, however, holds a contrary view. He opines that the dominant theory of the State cannot be applied to a deeply diversified society like India. According to him “when different communities have different needs and are not alike in relevant respects, it is unjust to insist on treating them alike. Since most Indians define themselves as both individuals and members of particular communities and demand both individual and collective rights, there is no reason either why the

Indian State should not have both liberal or non-liberal features and reflect its citizen's dual political identity. Gurpreet Mahajan (1998) has noted that the Indian constitution devised a two-fold policy. On the one hand, it tried to ensure that no community is excluded or systematically disadvantaged in the public arena, on the other it provided autonomy to each religious community to pursue its own way of life in the private sphere. She, further, is of the view that, "in locating the individual within the community, multiculturalism acknowledges the existence of collective communities and identities. Contra liberalism, it maintains that people inhabit two worlds: they are members of a political community as well as members of specific cultural communities. Hence, what matters to them in this dual capacity must receive consideration within the democratic state".

On the question of whether individuals have the right to exit their communities, western liberalism gives right to individuals to exit which is not allowed by communities in India. In this regard Javed Alam maintains that "these communities would not allow individuals within their fold to exercise their rights to choose his/her way of life or even to express an opinion which goes against decisions arbitrarily arrived at by the community". He cites the example of Sahammat (a cultural organization standing for radical democracy and secular society) invites the wrath of the militant Hindu right wing for exhibiting plural versions of the Ramayana- these are not punishments for transgressions of caste norms but concern 'equals' within certain communities. This is undemocratic to Alam. He emphatically maintains that right to exit is crucial if we want conditions appropriate to the making of choices by individuals in situations where pre modern communities continue to prevail as strong entities.

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36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.
2.1.6 The Issue of Reform of Personal Laws

The question of modifying the personal laws assumes significance in a multicultural country like India, where different religious communities have their own personal laws. "The issue of reform of personal laws is deeply enmeshed with the question of gender justice. But it becomes a sensitive issue because it is perceived as interference by the conservative sections of the minority community. This is because personal laws are unfortunately utilized for marking out group boundaries and any move for reforms are perceived as threat to a community's identity." In this context, Zoya Hassan rightly pointed out that the reform of personal laws does not mean the end of the community or community identity; because there is a vast array of things which constitute the identity of a community, including language, religious rituals, pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting and prayers. A similar argument was also put forward by Bilgrami.

Regarding the question of initiating reforms, Partha Chatterjee firmly contends that minority groups should be given self-governing rights provided they practice internal democracy. "He states that by resisting on the one hand the normalizing attempt of the nation-state to define, classify and fix the identities of minorities on their behalf, and demanding on the other, that regulative powers within the community be established on a more democratic and internally representative basis, minority groups engage in a strategic politics that is neither integrationist nor separatist." Similarly, Bhargava (1999) and Bilgrami (1999) are also for "internal reforms emerging from within the minority community but with active support from the state." The basic point of difference between Chatterjee and Bhargava and Bilgrami is that while Chatterjee does not encourage the role of the state in bringing the role of the state in bringing internal community reforms while Bhargava and Bilgrami feels the need of state support.

39 Ibid., p.53.
Kumkum Sangari (1995), on the other hand, feels that the question of reform of personal laws either within the community or of reforms through the state should be given a deeper thought. "On the relation between the community and state and seeming contradictions and tensions between them, she states that it is wrong to draw a sharp line between community and state on either the question of religions or of patriarchies since there are structural, ideological, political and administrative linkages between the two.

Sangari also feels that the demands made by Hindu communalists to frame a Uniform Civil Code and the demand by minority religious spokesmen to exempt their personal laws are similar in the sense that these demands ultimately lead to closure of group boundaries, refute possibilities of individual existence, and ensure the internal cohesion of their respective religious communities through appropriate laws.

She strongly feels that the conflict between community and the state on the question of reform of personal law is misleading. The concept of Uniform Civil Code has sought sanction from the concept of nation as a homogeneous unit; the personal laws have sought sanction from the concept of nation as a conglomerate of discrete major religions defined through similar reductions and homogenization.

Regarding the multicultural debate, she strongly argues that "cultural diversity is an effect of multiple primordialities in dynamic relation with class and other non-primordial collectivities and rejects religion as the single most determining factor of cultural diversity."40

2.1.7 The State, Civil Society and Citizenship

Jan Brouwer in his Paper, "Multiculturalism as a Modern and an Indigenus Concept in India" feels that "as the state as an institution and multiculturalism as a

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40Ibid., p. 57.
policy are impositions on indigenous institutions and traditions, there are bound to be problems in their implementation. According to him the current debate in India centers round the issue of linkages, or their absence, between the state, citizenship and civil society. The strength of civil society determines to a large measure the acceptance of Multiculturalism as a policy tool in a society which is informed by the same codes as its state."

The foregoing discussion reflects the fact that the scholars on multiculturalism endeavour to analyze the debate from different perspectives. However, they are unanimous regarding the fact that the Indian brand of multiculturalism is quite different from the western notion. In the West, multiculturalism has developed as an extension of liberalism, the political principle, which accords primacy to the individual. In the western debate on the subject the starting point is the individual, and, multiculturalism, there is taken as a corrective on the excesses of this principle.

But the concept has an altogether different connotation in India where the diversity is not only overwhelming but also having several peculiarities. According to Gurpreet Mahajan, "multiculturalism cherishes cultural diversity and envisions a society in which different communities forge a common identity while retaining their cultural provenance. Multiculturalism acknowledges the existence of diverse communities, but what is more important is that it accords positive value to the collective identities of all ethnic communities. Multiculturalism endeavors to initiate policies that allow citizens to maintain their cultural distinctiveness. It sustains cultural diversity and helps in the forward movement of societies by engendering a broad-based acquiescence which is not thwarted or prejudiced by religious or cultural intolerance."42 She also clearly emphasizes the fact that multiculturalism is not just the acceptance of diversity and multiple solitudes without a common public agenda. It is neither a gift of liberal democracy nor an

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optimal policy within a democracy. Again, it is not only about inter-group relations
but also informs relations within a community.

Bhikhu Parekh in his outstanding work *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural
Diversity And Political Theory* has explained the concept of multiculturalism in a
coherent manner. According to him multiculturalism refers to a body of beliefs and
practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world
and organize their individual and collective lives. Multiculturalism is about
cultural diversity or culturally embedded differences. Multiculturalism in modern
society takes different forms---Sub-cultural diversity (share broad common
culture), Perspectives diversity (represent a vision of life the dominant culture
either rejects altogether or accepts in theory but ignores in practice), and
Communal Diversity (it represents plurality of long established communities, each
with its long history and way of life which it wishes to preserve and transmit).

According to Parekh, the central insights of multicultural are three---
(1) Human beings are culturally embedded in the sense that they grow up and
live within a culturally structured world.
(2) Different cultures represent different systems of meaning and visions of the
good life.
(3) Every culture is internally plural and reflects a continuing conversation
between its different traditions and strands of thought.

He further says that a culture cannot appreciate the values of others unless it
appreciates the plurality within it ---The converse is just as true. From a
multicultural perspective, a good society cherishes the diversity and encourages a
creative dialogue between the different cultures. According to him, a multicultural
society might respond to diversity in two different ways ---It might welcome and
cherish it, that is to say, respect the cultural demands of its constituent
communities or it might assimilate these communities.

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43 Bhiku Parkh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*,
Palgrave, 2000, pp. 2-3.

44 Ibid., pp. 336-337.
The Indian model of multiculturalism has close affinity to the notion of multiculturalism elaborated by D. Miller in his book ‘On Nationality’. He maintains that a radically multicultural society:

“[...] must allow each of its members to define her identity for herself, by finding the group or groups to which she has the closest affinity, and must also allow each group to formulate its own authentic set of claims and demands, reflecting its particular circumstances. The state must respect and acknowledge these demands on an equal basis. It cannot hold up one model of the good life at the expense of others, nor may it be its policies on principles of justice that some groups but not others regard as legitimate.”

It appears, therefore, that unless the state takes cognizance of the diverse needs of the citizens, the citizens will feel alienated.

2.2 MULTICULTURALISM AS A STATE POLICY

There is another dimension of the debate where multiculturalism is recognized as a state policy or to use Charles Taylor’s phrase, it is the ‘politics of recognition’. In this context Subrata Mitra argues that:

“There are, in this respect, strong parallels in the nature of the debate on multiculturalism in India and western liberal democracies. In India, as in stable democracies, the preferred solutions the advocates of multiculturalism suggest are federalism, consociationalism and legislation that cater to the needs of minorities. The stance, taken by the advocates of these solutions varies greatly as well. The advocates of radical multiculturalism argue in favour of the contentious public assertion of difference where as those on the liberal side of the spectrum opt for a less conflictual approach. However, all those in favour of a multicultural nation ask for a solution which brings different groups together within a large structure of synergy rather than merely assimilating all those that are considered marginal, relative to a politically constructed core.”


That is to say, multiculturalism stipulates a pattern of structuring state-society relationship encompassing the principles of recognition, representation and distribution. It is here that federalism intervenes and is conjoined with multiculturalism. In fact, acceptance of the federal principle binds multiple identities and diversities in a manner that is neither reducible to an identity of fragments nor to a homogenized identity.

2.3 THE DEBATE AND THE QUESTION OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

It is indubitable that the Indian debate on multiculturalism has focused on some important perspectives of multicultural societies. It has highlighted some important aspects like the relationship between state and community, the position of minorities in the nation state, the place of religion, secularism the question of national identity and so on and so forth. Nevertheless, what we find is that the debate has mainly remained a discursive and theoretical and has been ineffectual to apply the concept of multiculturalism to the ground realities of the Indian Republic. Further, the debate has also failed to address the key question regarding the secret of India's unity and integrity especially at a time when the major multicultural federations are disintegrating. Though the debate has recognized that the country has faced and is still today witnessing different sub-national, ethnic and other political conflicts, it nevertheless, remained quite indifferent to the mechanisms that has resolved and helped manage the diverse conflicts. Moreover, the debate has ignored some very pertinent questions. If the diversities are to be cherished and nourished, how should they be protected and accommodated within the polity? What should be the limits of recognition and representation of difference? The question of the legitimacy and sustainability of the state has not been catered to. However, scholars are not unanimous regarding policy of accommodation. It seems that the experts on the subject have merely highlighted the problems associated with multiculturalism without delving deep in to the structural complexities and the plausible solutions of this 'fuzzy' multiculturalism. Moreover, the debate has also failed to highlight the various movements of self-
determination going on in the different parts of the country and the attitude of the State in tackling such movements, often by granting reasonable degrees of self-government. Building a multi layered national identity in a country of teeming millions and multiple diversities have remained the central problematic of Indian democracy that the debate has failed to take cognizance.

It cannot, however, be said that multiculturalism is always about promotion and protection of diversities. Theoretically speaking, both the twin concepts of multiculturalism and national unity are apparently contradictory. Apparently, multiculturalism appears to be separatist, secessionist. It is causing harm to the political system. The national leaders as early as 1950 were aware of this problem and that might be the reason why the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in his Letters to the Chief Ministers had advised to the Chief Ministers "not to treat them by some single formula because they differ greatly among themselves. It seems obviously undesirable to deny them some kind of self-government or autonomy." He simultaneously cautioned against any attempt at homogenization of different culturally specific people. Again, Granville Austin in The Indian Constitution---Cornerstone of a Nation, argues that Nehru and the other Assembly members "recognized the need for a strong Central Government and, at the same time, for as much decentralization as possible."

Given the nature of Indian diversities and accommodation of them, Harihar Bhattacharyya, opines, "One major form that multiculturalism has taken in India and that has informed public policies of accommodation of diversity is ideological and political." From the ideological point of view it can be said that the Indians are accustomed to live amidst diversity for ages. At the same time it should be noted that ideology alone couldn't bind a nation together. In the Indian context, the

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diversities were also politically recognized through different processes of federalism and decentralization and this political recognition is not a one-time process but rather a continuous one which has enabled the state to maintain the balance between the twin forces of unity and diversity. However, it should be mentioned here that this decentralization is of a special type designed to protect and recognize the identities and in the process give them some degree of autonomy, which is needed for their development. It is democratic as well as multicultural.

Rajni Kothari, India's leading political scientist, observes that "the battle for federalism in India is fundamentally a battle for greater democracy in which the people come into their own through social identities, organizational forms and institutional frameworks with which they feel comfortable and through which the can find their potency and self-respect."50

But in the Indian scenario, Kothari has failed to recognize that federalism can accommodate identities only up to the second tier (state level). It is not operative below the provincial level. It is here that the process of accommodating regional identities through the method of multicultural decentralization assumes significance. Though some scholars argue that federalism is possible through the third tier of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, but it is noteworthy that PRI s are based on population and there is no scope of recognition and promotion of the interests of the regionally diverse identities.

The Indian brand of multiculturalism can be identified as 'organic diversity'. It is organic because there is 'interspersion and interfusion of different identities'. But this interfusion is not assimilative. Different identities retain their individualities but at the same time tied together in such a way as to give them a collective identity. Diversity and differences is not considered to be inimical to national identity.

However, that all the scholars on the subject are unanimous regarding the question of multiculturalism and national unity. Some scholars opine that multicultural decentralization will ultimately lead to balkanization and ultimate collapse of the nation. Their main contention is that continuous decentralization would make the society a series of 'ghettos.' That is to say multicultural decentralization i.e., deconstruction on the basis of language, religion, tribal identity, ultimately result in ghettowisation and due to lack of internal communication, some sections might be marginalized. Ultimately, the entire state system might break down. They opine that the modern state is weakening whereas the little communities are getting strengthened through their political articulation. However, this view is too one sided. Nevertheless, the Indian experience has proved this contention wrong. India still boasts as nation of 'unity in diversity'

2.4 MULTICULTURAL DECENTRALIZATION

Though the Indian debate has recognized that disputes and conflicts are an inevitable part of multicultural societies, and that the balance between state and identities should be maintained, it has not paid sufficient attention to the establishment of conflict-resolution mechanisms. The debate has greatly undermined, if not ignored, the desirability of suitable mechanisms to enable the diversities to flourish and foster.

In our opinion, democratic multicultural decentralization as a distinctive institutional-political-social formulation, grown out of India’s specific contexts, has served and is continually serving as a method of effective governance in the multicultural context of India. In the existing literature on the subject, this specific dimension has remained, unjustifiably, neglected. What needs to be clarified is that this mode of decentralization unlike the political one is not a static one but is continually adapted to the different levels of the Indian polity.

Given the complex diversity of our country, coupled with regional imbalances, social and economic inequalities and mass poverty, democracy, federalism and
decentralization are the best means for the satisfaction of urges of identities. In our view this ongoing process of multicultural decentralization for the last few decades is acting as an effective tool of conflict-management in India. Since independence India has been subjected to a process of multicultural decentralization in the form of states, sub-states, associate states, regional, tribal and district councils (for instance formation of Andhra Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Gorkha Hill Council, Bodo Council etc.). It is multicultural in the sense that exclusive attention was paid to protect the ethnic, linguistic and regional identities of the population and decentralization because the identities were politically recognized. In fact this political accommodation of ethnic identities has remained the most effective method of conflict-management in multicultural India. The most interesting point is that these political institutions are based on the principle of democracy. Moreover, it is pertinent to mention over here that these institutions derive their legitimacy from the consent of the ethnic electorate and it is not something “naturally” given.

Thus, it can be said that decentralization by providing autonomy, scope for popular political participation brings about adjustment of governmental methods to local needs and opinions. In fact this recognition and satisfaction of diverse urges lead to emotional integration of the nation.\textsuperscript{51} That is to say, multiple identities check excesses and exclusiveness of one another and hence promote national unity.

It is so because in India multicultural decentralization and national unity and integrity has been possible simultaneously. To be more specific, decentralization in a multicultural way has tried to maintain the individuality of the cultures that has been instrumental in binding the nation in a single thread of unity. The basic philosophy underlying the concept is that whenever an identity is being recognized, it in turn feels itself to be a part of the national identity. That is to say, if in a political system, the ‘thick’ identity (i.e., language, religion etc.) is recognized, these regional identities, in turn, will recognize the ‘thin’ identity (national or political identity). As a result, multicultural decentralization will

\textsuperscript{51} Balraj Puri, “Multiple diversities in Indian’s Unity”, in One People One India, December 2003, p. 10.
facilitate the thicker identities to become thinner and thinner identities will become thicker and a harmonious balanced is maintained. This is practically what has ensured India’s unity and stability as a democratic nation. In India both the ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ identities are recognized through the different doses of multicultural decentralization——Statehood, sub-statehood, different accommodative provisions of the Sixth Schedule, Autonomous Councils, Peace Accords etc. It is a constant process enabling different communities to integrate into a state without giving up their identity. Needless to say, such an attempt reinforces identification with the national life and secures cultural specificity of minorities in India. The distinctive feature of this model can be seen in its capacity to reconcile the value of citizenship with the richness of cultural difference. Bhiku Parekh has rightly said “no multicultural society can be stable and vibrant unless it ensures that its constituent communities receive both just recognition and a just share of economic and political power. It requires a robust form of social, economic and political democracy to underpin its commitment to multiculturalism.”

Multicultural decentralization facilitates democratic responsiveness to cultural differences with a federal conciliation of regional, community identity and autonomy. In fact, this is the basic formula that has enabled the Indian state to maintain its infinite variety and innate unity.

Apparently the concept of multicultural decentralization appears to be a complex one. In the Indian context, “it is an approach of creating space for diversity and difference along with a regime of democratic citizenship and the successful working of the Indian democracy for the last 58 years is testimony of the fact that it has well balanced the twin concerns of autonomy and integration in a unique mould of negotiation and harmony. Further, in a complex multicultural society like India, only the institutional form of federalism is insufficient to tackle the disintegrative forces operating within the sub-continent. That is why many a times different tensions in our polity have forced the state to restructure the federal space and sometimes even go beyond the state and sub-state level. It has served as a political model that takes appropriate cognizance of the values of the society.

52 Bhiku Parekh, Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory, Palgrave, New York, 2000, p, 343.
In the Indian context, decentralization and state building have been intertwined. This means that space should be provided for the regional and sub-regional identities so as to maintain the unity amidst all adversities. This is aptly explained by Rashiduddin Khan thus:

"The process of the infrastructuring of the Indian federation is not yet over. Therefore, political demands of viable regions for new administrative arrangements are not necessarily antithetical to the territorial integrity of the country. For, every urge for autonomy is not divisive, but most probably a complementary force; it would not lead to balkanization but to the restructuring of national identity."  

He, therefore, proposes a shift in the pattern of governance from a centralised state structure to a decentralized pattern and strongly believes that accommodation of internal diversities can take diverse forms. Similarly, Nirmal Mukharji, former Cabinet Secretary, Government of India and former Governor of Punjab, emphasized the need for linking decentralization with sub-nationalism. He said:

"The starting point for fresh thinking in regard to devolution has to be the recognition of sub-nationalism as a growing reality. The federal centre would, as a first inference, have to be viewed as the focal point at which various sub-national identities converge rather than as a source from which power is imposed upon them. Devolutionary measures would, as a consequence, need to be worked out in a spirit of partnership between the federal and sub-national levels rather than unilaterally by a dominant centre."  

That is why another eminent scholar Paul Brass believes that the logic behind India's unity can be attributed to the three ideals of pluralism, regionalism and decentralization. It may be mentioned in this context that what Thuerer, a western multicultural theorist, has said in the context of Swiss diversity is equally applicable in the perspective of India. He has stressed that this transfer of

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“decision-making power to autonomous units ... facilitate[s] the possibility for people belonging to minorities to identify with state institutions, to adequately express their will and to shape their way of life” and thus “to influence those matters which concern them most directly.” In fact, decentralization by conferring religious, linguistic, and political autonomy to the minorities enable them to safeguard and maintain their ethnic identities. And this strengthens the bond of community feeling and furthers true democracy.

Sudipta Kaviraj rightly pointed out that: “Being a Bengali, Tamil, Punjabi, or Hindu, or Muslim, or agnostic, was not contradictory to being an Indian. Indianness was a complex and multi-layered identity which encompassed other such identities without cancelling them.” This is well accepted among the Indians and living with the diversities has become a way of life of the Indians. To reiterate in the words of Subrata Mitra, “Many Indians see the ideals of inclusive nationhood and multiculturalism that underpin the constitution and political practice in everyday life as a continuity, and a reflection of unity in diversity, an overarching values that provides coherence to the metaphysical universe of Hinduism.”

CONCLUSION

In fine, it may be said that the Indian state has shown great resilience and vigour in successfully resisting the disruptive forces and this can be attributed to non-assimilationist policies adopted by the state. The politics of negotiation and contestation that Indian democracy has institutionalized has provided the requisite space in which different communities have come together and made a concerted


effort to add their voices to the definition of the core values of the nation".59 He emphatically maintains “the sense of empowerment that India’s traditional plurality and modern democracy have provided to groups and individuals is the key to India’s project of multiculturalism”.60 India’s enormous diversity does not appear to be an obstacle in her way of nation building. It is noteworthy over here that the ongoing debate on Indian multiculturalism has only highlighted the multifarious problems of the diversities. No doubt, in a complex multicultural country like India where diversities are overwhelming, complexities are bound to remain but the debate has failed to pay heed to the various notions of self-government and the different constitutional provisions facilitating the entire process of accommodation. In this connection, Harihar Bhattacharyya has emphatically mentioned, “the existing accounts of Indian democracy neglect the federal political institutional framework of India that has accompanied India’s democracy, and within which democracy and decentralization have operated in a multicultural context.”61 He also stated that the Indian State that took shape after 1947 also learnt to accommodate such identities by granting limited recognition and hence legitimacy to ethnic affiliation.62 This is in the language of Thomas Fleiner, the principle of ‘diminished state sovereignty’ sovereignty.63

That is the reason why some western scholars have even considered India as an ideal political model that should be followed by the western multicultural democracies. In this context Harihar Bhattacharyya remarked:

“In India, unlike in western Europe, the state-building during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras, has not resulted in transforming all loyalties into one singular loyalty. Multiple loyalties of the people, not only socially and culturally, but also politically at different levels of the polity, have co-existed (and

60 Ibid.
61 Harihar Bhattacharyya, India as a Multicultural Federation, Asian Values, Democracy and Decentralization (in comparison with Swiss Federalism), Institute of Federalism, Fribourg, 2001, p. 62.
62 Ibid., p. 76.
63 Ibid., p. 42.
still do) along with the loyalty to the state. Nation-building process in India has also been multi-layered corresponding to the cultural identities of the people.”

Multicultural decentralization has facilitated the fusion of unity with diversity and is acting as shock absorber in containing and managing conflicts. In the light of the foregoing analysis, it can be inferred that the Indian debate has largely remained one-sided and has not paid enough attention to the frequently raised question of the integrationist role played by the state in accommodating the diverse entities and that the Indian state is not hostile to such movements for identity recognition. Nevertheless, it may be said that the debate has highlighted the significance of cultural differences and community identities in democratic politics.

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64 Ibid., p. 420.