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Paper: Media and Margins

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Component II: Description of the Module

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Engaging with Diversity- Pluralism in India

India is one among the diverse nations in the world, highly diversified around spheres of culture, caste, language, region, ethnicity, gender and religion. At the very outset, let us try to study various areas where we can witness diversity and variations in the Indian context. As the title of this module goes, it intends to focus on two very significant areas. Its foremost concern is to explore the flourishing diversity that exists among Indian societies, and how pluralism functions within the Indian societies.

1. Introduction:

India is a diversified nation in terms of socio-cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious dimensions. So in this context how do we define diversity? In simple terms the term diversity implies variety and multiplicity. For example, an individual holds a variety of identities in his/her entire lifespan. Every individual for that matter enjoys multiple identities right from the moment of his birth. A child when born is born carrying a specific biological identity; as a boy, girl or the third sex. The child will then eventually continue to add on multiple identities along with it; a definite caste identity featuring the specific caste it must have been born into, a religious location probably, will belong to a certain region and speak a particular mother tongue.

Diversity, be it based on culture, language or religion has always been a matter of opportunity and challenge in Indian society. In various places it is seen that multiple cultural groups stay together in harmony. Certainly, conflict and peace went alongside during different periods in history. Religious movements have taken place; people are stratified on the basis of their caste, ethnic, language and religious identities. Hinduism as a religion has majority believers in India and also there exist a number of religious groups which have a minority status. Their dignity has been a sincere concern for the state, securing their rights of religious minorities. Thus, we can derive out of this that Indian society has never been a rigid one and has accommodated diversity.

Probably, most of us have come across of the popular quote, 'Unity in Diversity'. This quote connotes that India has witnessed several alterations and has built itself through various stages encountered. For instance, it has been ruled by various foreign rulers. It is worth mentioning that people of India have always tried to maintain that diversity intact and in a considerably harmonious manner following the ideals like secularism, brotherhood and so on but owing to the conflicting situations which have arrived till date, how far can we justify the saying that India as a nation is vastly diverse and at the same time unified or should we probably put it this way - the important matter of concern today however is that how far are people unified in such a diversified social setting? How far are people sharing a cordial relationship with each other? We know that India is a multi-religious country but then what is questionable is that if mere tolerance among religious groups or any other groups are sufficiently enough for diversity and plurality to flourish?

2. Understanding the various forms of Diversity:

In the Indian context, Kaveeta Meena talks about various aspects of diversity that are rooted in socio-cultural factors, religion being a significant one. India is a multi-religious country where religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism have originated and religions like Islam and Christianity have served immense influence at different periods throughout history. Religion, however is a very sensitive issue and can be a root cause for creating differences among people of different religions. Religious practices touch several aspects of an individual's life. Our religion influences our conduct, our food habits too for instance. In a country like India where there exists multiple religions, it becomes difficult to avoid situations which carry embarrassment of some form or the other based on religious practices. Not all embarrassments lead to conflicts or bitter feelings towards one another but some do (Meena, 2015). Let us now have a look at various forms of multiplicity which make India a diverse country. To begin with, let us have a brief idea about the geographical diversity of India.

Region:

Every state in India has its own specific culture knit with its age old traditions. Each culture is having its unique features and identity but tries to live in harmony with other cultures as well. India has a long history of colonial subjugation. There were interesting instances of various religious and identity movements within the country that emerged at different points in time but these have not been able to impart such a huge impact which could have otherwise resulted in conflict among different groups in our society based on different religions, different languages, different castes, etc.

People here belong to different racial categories; Mongoloids, Caucasoid, etc. People also belong to different ethnic groups carrying several cultural and identity markers, different dress patterns, food habits, different belief systems and different forms of dance and music. For instance, people of Punjab and people of Assam celebrate rich and abundant harvest differently but the essence of celebration remains the same. For instance, people of Punjab celebrate the occasion through Bhangra (a dance form) and at the same time, people celebrate this joy through a different dance form which they call Bihu Dance. The lighting of Bonfire is also a common practice among the people of Punjab and Assam.

Language

Language is another important sphere which contributes to the diversified situation of the country. India is a multi-lingual state. Languages help people communicate with one another; people share their feelings and opinions with the help of language. Language connects people and people feel emotionally connected through their respective languages. Let us understand this particular phenomenon through a simple example. For instance, an Indian citizen might feel detached from her language identity in a foreign country but if she comes across a person who speaks the same language as her in that foreign country, both the persons will feel a sense of belongingness or attachment because of the same language.

India is a home for thousands of linguistic groups with over 1652 languages and dialects. Most Indian languages belong to four major language families, namely, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burmese and Austro-Asiatic. Census of a country

helps on statistical calculations of the various major components and gives it an institutional form. The Indian census report of 2001 recognizes a decent number of 122 major languages and around 234 mother tongues. However, pertinent to mention here that for any language to be counted in the census report, it must be having more than 10,000 speakers. Most of the unreported languages are spoken by the tribal communities. No language in India is given the recognition as a national language. However, Hindi is the official language in India. Language is an important identity maker for any individual or community. People are identified as well as differentiated on the basis of languages spoken. Language has been proved to be one very sensitive issue which is one significant reason behind ethnic conflicts today (Meena, 2015; 78-79).

If one looks at the complexities based on language in North-eastern region of India, the initial rift based on language started when British imposed Bengali language in Assam and people opposed the acceptance of a different language as a mode of communication in most of the official work. Thus, language can be considered to serve as a mobilizing force in nationality formation (Miri, 2003).

Caste:

Among the socio-cultural dimensions which reflect diversity, caste is a significant category in India. Caste system is considered to be unique as an institution in Indian society. Caste system is predominant among Hindus in the strictest sense of the term but the recent scenario shows that caste system has spread to other non-Hindu communities too such as Muslims, Christians and Sikhs.

Let us try to understand the functioning of caste system in brief. The Hindu society is broadly divided into four categories or classes termed Varna. The traditional caste system is generally conceptualised in terms of the four fold Varna system which divides the members of Hindu society into four major categories: Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras; Brahmans being the priestly castes or scholarly castes, Kshatriyas being the warrior caste, Vaishyas as merchants or traders and at the bottom are located Shudras who are either labourers or servants.

Thus out of this situation, we can clearly understand one fact and that is that the people of various caste groups have definite occupation which ultimately carries other important identity markers like social status, power and prestige. It should be mentioned here that apart from these four caste groups, there exists another category which is addressed as 'Panchamas'. People belonging to this particular category are often treated in an inhumane manner as they are considered to be ritually as well as socially inferior or impure. They are also referred to as 'outcastes' or 'untouchables'. Beliefs like the touch of an untouchable would pollute the other privileged caste groups rule the basis of the Hindu caste system (Meena, 2015; 78- 82).

Religion:

In the religious sphere, India possesses a great diversity. India is a multi-religious country. Religion is both a factor of unity and diversity in Indian society but, all are differentiated internally. Traditionally, different religious groups have lived in India in more or less peaceful coexistence. India is not religiously a homogenous state even

though nearly 80 percent of the population is Hindus. There are six major religions in India namely Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism. There are also other religions like Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Bahaism.

Then there are sects within each religion. Hinduism has sects like Shaivas and Vaishnavas. Similarly, in Islam there are Shias and Sunnis, Sikhs as Namdharis and Niirankaris, Jainism into Digambar and Shwetambar and Buddhism into Hinayana and Mahayana.

In addition, the primitive men like the tribes have their own peculiar cults which are quite distinct from these major religions. Thus India possesses complete diversity in terms of religion.

3. Sexual orientation- Sexuality taking a new turn.

To understand this phenomenon, one must first inform oneself regarding what sexuality is all about. Sexuality refers to a person's sexual preference. In the Indian context, however, heterosexuality has been the norm and it still continues to be. Heterosexuality implies sexual interaction or attraction between people of the opposite sex or gender. Generally, when we imagine a newly married couple, we think of a man and a woman; or in the common terminology, the bride and the groom. Have you ever thought about how must have the members of a particular society behaved when they got enlightened about the fact that sexual interaction or behaviour might occur within two people of the same sex? Certainly, this entire phenomenon has been a serious topic of concern for a conservative country like India where bisexuals, lesbians, gays and transgender are highly stigmatised and to a great extent made to feel deviant.

But situations today have changed with sincere attempts on the part of NGOs and media which focus on giving these people their basic human rights. The Supreme Court has incorporated a constitutional category which recognizes the transgender as "third gender". It allows admission in educational institutions and employment facilities for the third gender but can we be certain of a decent, human treatment towards these people in schools, colleges or workplace? We cannot, because the stigma associated with these categories of humans is way deeper to be removed by a Constitutional provision.

This neglect which people bear in their hearts for the third gender will hinder the path towards the emancipation of these groups. Hereby, it becomes seemingly of greater importance to mention that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code makes mention of 'homosexuality' as a crime and anybody found guilty of this 'crime' will be sentenced life imprisonment or imprisonment with fine. It is worth mentioning that even if in the near future, LGBT rights flourish, they will continue being victimised unless and until people of our society understand that they are different as individuals but this difference which is natural can in no manner be morally wrong (Meena, 2015: 81; Parasar, 2007: 9).

Understanding Pluralism

Let us now try to extend our discussion to the next important aspect which this module intends to deal with, that is pluralism. What does Pluralism mean? India is a diverse country religiously, culturally, regionally and on the basis of sexual orientation as well. We can address Indian society as a plural one within which exists plurality of socio-cultural elements. Caste system is an integral institution of the Indian society and it is certain to have segmental divisions between members of different caste groups. But then, what does pluralism have to do about these diverse segmental divisions? What is the ultimate goal of pluralist ideology in serving smooth functioning of democracy? The pluralistic principles preach that despite varying differences, based on caste, creed, race, sex or religion, a society must remain tolerant and accepting to various changes heading towards it. It serves as a carrier of democratic ideals by creating an environment in which people belonging to different groups can voice their opinions, interests and problems.

Pluralism in a particular society recognises the presence of more than one single cultural identity. Even if Indian society is plural in nature and tries to safeguard the interests of all the groups present within the fold of Indian society, we get to see how at times, the democratic principles seem to fail in eroding various forms of disparities. The Indian Constitution appreciates cultural collectivity and follows a definite institutionalized structure and principles which allow diverse groups of people to live together as respected citizens of the country. Indian Constitution is framed with secular principles in mind and in order to execute the principles of secularism the constitution provides its citizens freedom of religion; the right to profess and practice any religion.

Today, we live in a religiously and morally pluralistic world. India is a multi-religious country where people practicing different religions exist. Religious pluralism, as has been mentioned earlier, believes that contradictions can and may exist and a pluralist ideology preaches that all kinds of contrary or contradictory religious belief systems or behaviour can and should have the favourable environment to coexist in a dignified manner. But what makes pluralism or for that matter religious pluralism so important an idea? The answer being that we live among diversities, holding different religious faith where it becomes important to recognise that along with our religious belief systems, there exists communities who have their own faith. Religious pluralism will be taken to have failed when one particular religious tradition dominates the rest of the traditions, overlooking their importance and as a result harming their dignity while bestowing upon them marginalized religions.

Religious pluralism denies one single ‘truth’. It denies absolutism. Each religion, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism will have their own religious interpretations of ‘truth’. Every religion has a different religious history, different religious experience and different views about the ultimate motive of our lives. It would be a serious rather disruptive challenge to harmony if religions deny the truth of other religious faiths or completely negate the truth of others upholding theirs as absolute. But this particular phenomenon of denial of the other is not just inter-religious. Inclusion and exclusion both denote contradiction.

Let us understand this phenomenon through a simple example. For an example, if heterosexuality is the right way of behaviour then homosexuality will have to be a

contradiction or for that matter it has be excluded. If a person believes that his/her religious faith is the truth then he has to question the authenticity of any other religious faith as against his/her. It means that if heterosexuality is accepted then homosexuality has to be excluded, if my religious beliefs are the ultimate truth than other faiths are excluded. Pluralism provides a much more integrationist explanation to these diverging ideas. It looks beyond the strict divide of exclusion and inclusion and gives a new path which suggests that truth is plural. (Koyama, K, p-1-3)

Conclusion:

A multicultural society needs to be peaceful in order to avoid atrocities or chaotic situations. Each group of people must be accommodated and accommodating towards plurality of existing groups. Each one of us must have heard of something called 'Religious tolerance'. There are many who opine that religious tolerance is the path to be chosen in order to sustain a plural society. But can tolerance be enough to run a plural society harmoniously and in a dignified manner? No, mere religious tolerance can never be sufficiently a good solution to help every diverse groups safeguard their dignity. Tolerance is simply an acceptance. To tolerate means to endure something against which we hold negative perceptions. A person who is tolerant towards other religions might be just enduring and not appreciative about the rest except his/her religious faith. In this case, there are chances for that person to consider his religious faith as superior to the others at the back of his/her mind. This assumed superiority might lead to discriminatory and violent behaviour in the long run. Therefore, in order to sustain a plural society, one has to be more than being just tolerant. We need to inculcate within ourselves the values of hospitality. A person needs to be more than being tolerant, one must be liberal enough to recognise that many truths might exist; one must most importantly learn to respect the diversity. It is only then when a pluralist society would dignifiedly co-exist (Schimek, p. 1-3) .