

“A New Politics of Identity”

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Book Review: *A New Politics of Identity: Political Principles for an Interdependent World* by Bhikhu Parekh, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. ix+317, price: 19.99 pounds

The most mind-boggling issue of the 21st century has been identity politics linked with caste, ethnicity, race, religious and gender identities. It has played havoc in innumerable life situations: in personal lives, in the community, in national politics and in the global scenario. Whether it is communal violence in India, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, apartheid in South Africa, Crisis in Afghanistan or war on Iraq, genocide in Rwanda or civil war in Sri Lanka, it is these grave socio-political and cultural contexts that makes this seminal contribution by Bhikhu Parekh worthy of debate and discussion.

The book is very lucidly written with interdisciplinary perspective that touches upon all contemporary concerns of the civilization related to instability in personal identity and crisis of legitimacy of the nation state. It examines political economy, history, ethnography and material basis for perpetuation and strengthening of a new politics of identity in the context of revolutionary changes in communication brought by globalization. It vividly captures struggles and sufferings caused due to ruptures created by identity politics as a result of globalization challenging conventional cultural and national identities. In Introduction (chapter 1), the author avers, “Identity politics so far has been defined and conducted in terms of particular collective identities, such as those based on gender, ethnicity and nationality. While this is important, it is just as crucial to affirm our universal human identity.” (p.2)

Human beings are bearers of universal and particular identities which are complimentary in nature. Struggles around identities based on gender, race, sexual preference, religion have grown exponentially in the 21st century due to uncertainty and resultant insecurity generated due to globalization. Need of global interdependence makes us act “in the spirit of human solidarity and activate our human identity.” (p. 3). Both, Particularists and Universalists are facing moral and political challenges.

Chapter 2, “The Concept of Identity” deals with dialectics of 3 dimensional identities-personal, social and human, determined by ‘desires, memories, fears, anxieties, phobias, complexes, emotions and passions acquired during the course of one’s life.’ (p. 13). Critical self reflection plays a vital part in formation of all the three identities. All of us have plural social identities that are unequal in their reach and depth.

The author examines collective identity, an important subset of social identity in Chapter 3. He highlights the way in which collective identity is constructed and contested. He deconstructs its politics by giving examples of marginalized identities of gay, women, blacks who are questioning their inferiorization and subjugation and who are also challenging mainstream views on race, rationality, history, progress. They are demanding recognition of their rights and redistribution of

space and power.

National identity, one of the most dominant forms of collective identity with dominant public agenda is discussed in chapter 4. Colonial past of Great Britain, Nazi rule in Germany, institutionalization of Brahminical norms of “purity & “pollution” and untouchability in India, slave trade in Europe and America generate agonizing collective memories and perplexing problems. In Canada, since 1970s, the question of national identity has dominated debate. But because of cumulative effect of urbanization social atomization, secularization and the immigration of people of different races and religions, new multicultural identities have emerged. Chapter 5 of the book delves on ‘Multicultural Society and Convergence of Identities’. The mainstream treats immigrants as archetypal strangers and their beliefs and practices meet with resistance. The receiving country’s authority demands either ‘assimilation’ or ‘integration’ in political, economic, social, moral and cultural spheres. Earlier immigrants came as refugees and were grateful to receiving country for accommodating them and were ready to assimilate. Contemporary immigrants have been recruited for their labour and skill so their relationship with receiving society is contractual. (p. 82). As political community becomes more at ease with multi ethnic composition, plurality of images society develops tolerance towards heterogeneous composition and becomes capacious.

In Chapter 6, ‘European Liberalism and the “Muslim Question”’, the author analyses an emergence of Muslim identity. “As the politically visible Muslims began to define their identity in religious terms from the late 1970s onwards, Europeans began to wonder how to integrate them and turn them into loyal citizens.” (p. 103). Today, there is an extensive moral panic due to widespread distrust of Muslims and belief that the Muslims are averse to integrate. Spate of terrorist attacks before and after 9/11/ 2001 attack that crashed two of the airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, has resulted into demonization, criminalization, persecution and brutalization of millions of Muslims world over.

The author makes a plea to evolve an understanding of economic, political and ideological factors responsible for cultural diversity in Chapter 7, ‘The Pathology of Religious Identity’. The author finds Huntington’s thesis of ‘Clash of Civilization’ extremely flawed as it takes away the scope for dialogue and does not show the way for containing and managing clashes. He also shows limitations of scriptural literalism that is not amenable to rational investigation and criticism. Fundamentalism has a connotation of a religious dogma that aggressively furthers/ promotes, rather imposes traditionalist beliefs and practices, including patriarchal gender roles. It is viewed primarily as rejection of secular modernity. Fundamentalists are totalitarian as they seek to remake all aspects of society and government on religious principles. It is oppressive because it asserts that women should be confined to care of home and children and must always submit to male rules and regulations. It insists that patriarchal control over women’s sexuality, fertility and labour are God given and should not be contested. It reinforces its ideology by using vehicles such as family and kinship networks, media, state apparatus, criminal justice system and cultural constructs. Fundamentalism is a response to modernization, socio-economic changes, demographic shifts and multiculturalism. Two centuries back, communalism had a connotation of identity based on community. In the post-colonial discourse, communalism is understood as an antagonistic collective mobilization on the basis of religion leading to the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan and recurrence of communal conflicts/riots and carnages.

Chapter 8, ‘Challenges of the Multicultural World’ Focuses on homogenizing impact of globalization on local cultures. The author argues on 5 propositions of Samuel Huntington:

1. The quest for identity is a central human concern.
2. No society can be based on a political creed or economic and political institutions alone.

3. Countless cultures and cultural groups can be grouped into 6 or 7 Civilizations on the basis of their shared values and worldviews.
4. Western civilization is deeply shaped by Greco-Roman and Judeo Christian heritage, and has a distinct identity reflected in its commitment to individualism, individual rights, liberty, equality, tolerance and the spirit of critical inquiry.
5. Since every civilization has a distinct identity, none can claim universal validity.

The author feels that Huntington's distinction between culture and civilization is unclear. Every civilization is eclectic and not homogeneous. Huntington's placing of religion at the heart of civilization marginalizes various socio-economic, political and international factors. Hence his generalizations about Muslim societies and countries with Christian tradition are historical. The author believes, "As different cultural communities come together in our globalizing world, possibilities of both cooperation and conflict increases. History is witness to the fact that well organized popular movements at both national and international levels play an important role to achieve just and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Prof. Bhikhu Parekh rightly states that globalization is not a new phenomenon, in chapter 9, 'Globalization and Culture'. In the 21st century, the relationships between countries have changed due to decolonization. "As a result there has been a considerable exchange of technology, modes of production, knowledge, beliefs and social practices." (p. 181). Fear of homogenization, Americanization makes many cultures more inward looking. US cultural industries have hegemonic presence due to control over electronic media and Hollywood Film industry. Still cultural boundaries have become porous in the areas of cuisines, music, dress-code, forms of spirituality, literature, paintings, images, sensibilities. Fusion has become a buzz word in the areas of Fine Arts. It is possible to strive for reconstitution of cultural communities based on global solidarity with twin purposes, as a survival strategy and as an inherent appeal.

The most mind-blowing chapter in the book is 10: 'Principals of Global Ethics'. Here he highlights the historical specificity of global ethics to reduce human sufferings. While exploring nature, basis and content of global ethics, the author emphasizes that it should be substantive enough to guide our choices, but not so much as to institutionalize a narrow vision of the good life; global ethics should be based on global consensus and human solidarity. It should be grounded in our historical context, including our current self-understanding, needs, aspirations and circumstances. It should be concerned with principles, not institutions, practices and policies. Rational deliberation is the only way to arrive at it. Global ethics should be based on equal worth of all human beings as equality leads to richer and more relaxed society than does inequality.

Chapter 11, 'Moralities of Partiality and Impartiality' studies "special ties arising out of mutual commitments, promises, participation in common practices and membership of organizations" (p. 228); even after accepting the proposition that all human beings are morally equal and make equal claims on each other. How to resolve a tension between moralities of partiality and impartiality in this context becomes a challenge. In the ultimate analysis either religion or values based on ideologies of human rights or distributive justice guide our actions.

While discussing 'Citizenship in the global Age' in Chapter 12, the author challenges exclusivist paradigm by statist view. According to him, "Sovereignty of state, as traditionally defined, is a deeply problematic notion." (p. 240). In the name of sovereignty the dictators, autocrats and tyrants in almost all countries have thrived and tortured minorities, ethnic tribes, women and people pursuing alternate sexuality. Globally oriented citizenship has provided democratic space and voice to persecuted and marginalized sections of all countries. Moreover, human beings are citizens of

particular nation, but also members of the global human community. This fact guides global humanitarian interventions at the time of manmade or natural disaster in particular nation may it be Sunami or volcanic eruption or ethnic tension, civil-war or war between two or more than two nations. Global human rights movement can ensure such intervention is freed from the corrupting moral and psychological climate associated with Afghan war or American invasion of Iraq, and becomes instead a way of expressing and nurturing global solidarity.

The last chapter “Promoting Democracy” brings to the fore hotly debated question in the post Afghanistan war and post Iraq American invasion, whether democratic societies should promote democracy in non-democratic societies. This type of ‘white man’s burden’, so called civilizing mission is perceived by the developing countries as specious, elf serving and dangerous. This brings us to the fundamentals of democracy and its historical growth. “The communitarian democracy of classical Athens is quite different from modern liberal democracy, and both again differ from the bottom up radical democracy advocated by Marxists and others.” (p. 261). Democracy has universal validity as it institutionalizes and nurtures human rights and ensures human dignity and a sense of self-worth. Democracy gives voice to the marginalized people. The message is clear and sharp. We have a duty to promote democracy it encourages a plurality of views, holds the government to account, does not allow suppression of dissent and gives scope for learning from the past mistakes. Democracy can be legitimized when economic development and distributive justice are ensured.

This book is a MUST READ for political thinkers, philosophers, ethicists, religious leaders, practitioners in development, human rights activists and participants in social movements. Simple style of narrative and optimum mix of theory and examples make the book an effective tool for study circles for the youth who are treated as canon-fodder for violent identity politics.

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