Multiculturalism: Meaning, Development and Characteristics

Most countries of the world today are, internally plural. They have people of different religions, races and cultures living within their boundaries. How can these diverse communities of people be treated as equal within the framework of democracy? This is the question that multiculturalism poses and seeks to answer.

Multiculturalism aims at minimising discrimination of minority cultural communities to promote the ideal of non-discrimination. As more and more countries became democratic, they set aside discrimination based upon religion, gender, caste race. Multiculturalism contributes to this ongoing project of democratization by pointing to a site discrimination that received little attention before, namely, cultural identity. The recognition that cultural identities may be a source a marginalization and state actions may put minorities at disadvantage, is the most important contribution of Multiculturalism.

Understanding Multiculturalism

In reference to political science, Multiculturalism can be defined as a state’s capacity to effectively and efficiently deal with cultural plurality within its sovereign borders. It tends to contemplate society as a ‘salad bowl’ and as a ‘cultural mosaic’, in contrast to a ‘melting pot’.

Multicultural theories have both drawn from liberalism and attempted to go beyond liberalism. Liberal multiculturalism is rooted in a commitment to freedom and toleration: the ability to choose one’s own moral beliefs, cultural practices and way of life, regardless of whether these are disapproved of by others.

To eliminate culture-related discrimination in liberal democratic polities, multiculturalism recommends policies that enhance cultural diversity in society. Protecting and promoting cultural diversity is a primary value within multiculturalism and it strongly favors them for the sake of i) minimizing minority discrimination; ii) creating conditions in minority cultures survive and flourish. Multicultural theorist argue that policies of liberal state put external pressure on minorities to assimilate into the minority culture.

According to Charles Taylor, if we cannot contribute to our inheritance we must at least ensure that diversity that exists survives and does not perish. Multiculturalism advocates that the presence of several cultures contributes to the "overall" richness of society.
The central theme within of multiculturalism is that individual identity is culturally embedded, in the sense that people largely derive their understanding of the world and their framework of moral beliefs from the culture in which they live and develop. Distinctive cultures therefore deserve to be protected or strengthened, particularly when they belong to minority or vulnerable groups, thus, practices politics of recognition.

Kymlicka (1995) identifies three kinds of minority rights: self-government rights, polyethnic rights and representation rights to manage diversity in a state. They are:

- **Self-government rights**: These rights belong to what Kymlicka calls national minorities. These peoples are territorially concentrated, possess a shared language and are characterized by a ‘meaningful way of life across the full range of human activities’. For examples—the Native Americans, and the Aborigines in Australia. In these cases, the right to self-government should involve the devolution of political power, usually through federalism, to political units that are substantially controlled by the members of the national minority.

- **Polyethnic rights**: These rights are to help ethnic groups and religious minorities, which developed through immigration, to express and maintain their cultural distinctiveness. These rights provide basis for legal exemptions, such as the exemption of Jews and Muslims from animal slaughtering laws, the exemption of Sikh men from wearing motor cycle helmets, and exemption of Muslim girls from school dress codes.

- **Special representation rights**: These rights attempt to redress the under-representation of minority or disadvantaged groups in education and in senior positions in political and public life. Such rights imply a form of reverse or ‘positive’ discrimination, which attempts to compensate for past discrimination or continuing cultural subordination. Their justification is not only that they ensure full and equal participation, but also that they are the only means of guaranteeing that public policy reflects the interests of all groups and peoples and not merely those of traditionally dominant groups.

**Development of Multiculturalism**

One of the most powerful factors underpinning the global significance of identity politics has been the growth of international migration, particularly since the 1950s. The USA, as an immigrant society, has long been a multicultural society, but multiculturalism, in present sense, came into being with rise of the black consciousness movement or ‘black politics’ in the 1960s. The origin of the black nationalism dates back to 20th century and emergence of ‘Back to
Africa’s movement inspired by figures like Marcus Garvey. However, this movement gained greater prominence in 1960s with an upsurge in both reformist and revolutionary wings of the movement. In its reformist form, the movement took form of a struggle for equal civil rights in the USA under the leadership of Martin Luther King. The strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience was nevertheless rejected by Black panther movement, which supported black separatism under the leadership of Black Panther Party, founded in 1966. Black Panther Party promoted use of armed confrontation. Late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed growing political assertiveness among minority groups, sometimes expressed through ethno cultural nationalism, in many parts Europe and elsewhere in the North America.

On the other hand, ethnic minority communities developed in many European countries as a result of the end of empire and of deliberate attempts by governments to recruit workers from abroad to help in the process of post-war reconstruction. Since 1980s, however, cross border migration has significantly intensified. Consequently, a growing number of countries have come to accept multi-ethnic, multi-religious or multicultural character of their population and attempted reconcile cultural diversity and identity-related difference with civic and political cohesion.

Australia has been officially committed to multiculturalism since the 1970s, in recognition of its increasing ‘Asianization’. In New Zealand it is linked to a recognition of the role of Maori culture in forging a distinctive national identity. In Canada it is associated with attempts to achieve reconciliation between French-speaking Quebec and the English speaking majority population, and an acknowledgement of the rights of the indigenous Inuit peoples. In the UK and in much of western Europe, multiculturalism recognizes the existence of significant black and Asian communities, and has tried to break down barriers to their full participation in society. Attempts to reconcile citizenship with cultural diversity have usually focused upon the issue of minority rights, special group-specific measures for accommodating national and ethnic differences.

**Characteristics of Multiculturalism**

- Multiculturalism reflects, most basically, a positive endorsement of communal diversity, usually arising from racial, ethnic and language differences. As such, multiculturalism is more a distinctive political stance than a coherent and programmatic political doctrine.
• Multiculturalism begins with the assumption that minority cultural groups are disadvantaged in relation to majority, as state policies embedded in majority culture do not take into account culture specific needs of minorities.

• Multicultural theorists advance two broad sets of arguments in favour of communal diversity, one based upon its benefits to the individual and the other based upon its benefits to society. For the individual, multiculturalism recognizes that human beings are culturally embedded and derive their understanding of the world and sense their of personal identity from the culture in which they live and develop. Distinctive cultures therefore deserve to be protected or strengthened, particularly when they belong to minority or vulnerable groups.

• This leads to the idea of minority or multicultural rights, including the right to representation, the right of respect for cultural, and usually religious, practices that may otherwise by prohibited by law or regulations, and the right to recognition through the preservation of symbols that help to promote collective esteem.

• For society, multiculturalism brings the benefits of diversity: a vibrancy and richness that stems from cultural interplay and encourages tolerance and respect for other cultures and religions, while at the same time strengthening insight into one’s own culture

• Multicultural theorist consider recognition of different cultural identities as first step towards recognition of specific needs of minorities.

• Multiculturalism argues different measures to ensure cultural diversity, for example. recognition and respect to cultures, different set of rights to minorities such as self government rights, polyethnic rights and representation rights.

**Critical Evaluation**

However, multiculturalism and the doctrine of minority rights have also attracted criticism.

1. At the core of these criticisms is the concern that multiculturalism emphasizes divisions among people rather than what unites them: particularism displaces universalism; minority rights take precedence over majority interests; and the stress upon ethnicity weakens national or civic unity.

2. Multiculturalism’s model of group identity pays insufficient attention to diversity within cultural or religious groups and risks defining people on the basis of group membership alone. Even though cultural diversity is now inevitable in modern
societies, multiculturalism may also promote political instability by emphasizing particularism rather than national cohesion.

3. Multiculturalism may be incoherent in so far as it both proclaims the advantages of cultural embeddedness and holds that society benefits from exchanges among cultures that will tend weaken their distinctiveness.

4. Conservatives view, multicultural societies are, by their nature, fractured and conflict-ridden. As society is a fragile and organic entity, successful and stable societies must be underpinned by shared values and a common culture.

5. A leftist version of the idea of tension between diversity and solidarity highlights the impact on social responsibility of greater ethical and cultural pluralism, suggesting that multicultural societies are destined to have weak welfare states and low political participation.

6. Since liberalism is based upon respect for individual autonomy, liberals find it difficult to extend toleration to cultural practices, such as female circumcision, which are in themselves illiberal or intolerant. In such circumstances, liberals place respect for human rights and civil liberties above a concern about group identity and traditional values. Polyethnic rights that may require legal or civic adjustment to be made to take account of cultural distinctiveness, as in the case of exemptions from laws or regulations. While such exemptions may help to preserve the identity of cultural groups, they do so at the expense of a unifying set of civic and political values which all members of society are expected to respect. In France, forms of religious dress and religious symbols have been banned from schools, both in order to preserve the distinction between the church and the state, the basis of liberal secularism, and to counter gender inequality, particularly associated with the wearing of the hajib or headscarf by Muslim girls.

Multiculturalism is often linked to the doctrine of minority rights to the promotion of social justice on the part of groups that have been disadvantaged or marginalized within conventional Western society. The attraction of multiculturalism is that it seeks to offer solutions to challenges of cultural diversity which cannot be addressed in any other way.