

Debating Pluralism in the 21st Century: Western and Indian Perspectives

Irfan Afzal Parrah

Phd Research Scholar Centre for Political Studies Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi

Abstract—The primary objective of this paper is to fathom the distinct methodologies and frameworks through which the profound question of pluralism or debates on Self and Other have been addressed by Western and Indian Knowledge Systems. The paper will seek a creative and critical analysis of themes and approaches that have shaped the debates on pluralism in the aforementioned knowledge systems. It must be noted that Western and Orientalist representations of pluralism have shaped the debates in academia for centuries now. The paper will eventually argue that contemporary experience reveals that Western frameworks and approaches to the idea of pluralism have proved insufficient and inadequate and therefore need an alternative. The failure of Western approaches to pluralism primarily lie in the ongoing violence in the world and the increasing conflicts in the incumbent century. The paper will further evaluate the creative potential of the Indian Knowledge System as represented by Gandhi and poetry in Kashmir to evacuate human beings from contemporary suffering and violence.

Index Terms—PLURALISM, INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM, WESTERN PHILOSOPHY, GHANDHI, POETRY, ETHICS.

I. WHAT NORMATIVE POTENTIAL DO DEBATES ON SELF AND OTHER HAVE FOR CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS?

Let me begin this paper with a critical approach to the representation of the contemporary human condition by an American Jurist and Philosopher, Ronald Dworkin. In his work, *Sovereign Virtues: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (2000) argued that the most potent issue for the 21st century would be equality. By equality, what he meant basically was the equal distribution of resources of wealth and income. This was a unique idea that emphasized the relevance of

economic approaches to the contemporary human condition, represented by deeper inequalities of income not only within nations but amongst nation-states as well. The available reports published by the United Nations and other agencies are a testimony to the ever-growing economic imbalances on a class basis between rich and dependent nations. This distribution of resources has immense ramifications for addressing contemporary problems, such as poverty and hunger.

However, what Dworkin and similar formulations of incumbent problems ignored or did not pay much attention to was the changing nature of conflicts that have taken a different character. It is in this context that this paper suggests that the contemporary human condition, represented by psychological hatred and communal violence in the world, cannot be reduced to mere Marxist approaches of equality. One may refer to modern alienation and vilification of otherness in the world that cannot be merely reduced to economic dimensions. This representation of the contemporary human condition, as represented by alienation and hatred, that this paper calls the problem of pluralism or inter-community relations as the biggest problem of the 21st century. To put it differently, pluralism or inter-community/religious relations is the biggest casualty or most threatened political normative of the incumbent century.

What normative philosophical value do debates on Self and Other or Pluralism carry for the human condition in the 21st century? It must be noted that the philosophical salience of these debates on pluralism is evident from the debates in the Western and Indian Knowledge Traditions that have, of late, shaped and defined these traditions. In the context of Western philosophical traditions, the debates on pluralism or Self and Other have occupied profound spaces in it in the 20th century. It must be argued that very few

queries and anxieties have shaped the Western philosophical canon more than the questions on Self and Other (Houseman, 1998). Michael Houseman was a German Philosopher who had shaped the debates in German philosophy for decades, specifically post Holocaust. The Holocaust of Jews in Germany not only revealed the inadequacies in the German and broader Western canon of negotiating in accommodative terms with the Other but it equally raised alarm bells for other Knowledge Systems to develop inclusive and accommodating frameworks and approaches to the problem of Other.

The holocaust broke the trust and consensus that apparently had defined academia for centuries post-Enlightenment. The German philosophers post holocaust occupied much of their energies in Germany and other European Countries. Immanuel Levinas, a Jewish German Philosopher, sought a reversal of the ontological projects of being as defined by his predecessor and one of the stalwarts of German philosophy, Martin Heidegar. As a response to the latter's formulation of Being, Levinas proposed his philosophical ventures through the much popular phrase "Ethics as First Philosophy". What Levinas was seeking is increasing salience to ethical questions that represent other communities in an inclusive and accommodating framework.

The greater relevance and salience of pluralism or inter-community/religious relations was an outcome of the failure of the Cartesian conceptualization of human being to a mere possessive ontology, which was concerned primarily about his own interests and immediate material concerns. The Cartesian ontology was represented and captured by a popular phrase, "I think therefore I am", implying the overwhelming significance of the Self over any negotiation with the Other. Furthermore, this Cartesian formulation was instrumental in laying and establishing the foundations of the Western philosophical canon rooted in the projects of modernity and the Enlightenment. It was assumed that modernity and enlightenment, as I will argue later, will resolve the problem of pluralism or inter-community relations primarily because of the salience of the individual over the community. The further assumption was that the community and other ascriptive values would be relegated to the periphery. The atomistic individual rooted in Newtonian ontology will resolve the conflicts and predicaments originating from overwhelming salience to community

or religious normatives. In short, the project was to sideline religion to allow space for mechanistic ontology.

However, the post-Cartesian ontology reveals the high significance for contemporary debates on knowledge. It was slowly recognized that self-knowledge is inadequate without a relationship to the other. Self is inextricably linked to the other, it was gradually recognized. The isolated individual was inadequate to fathom the embedded and rooted nature of human beings in their community or religious group.

The ever-growing salience of the relationship of Self with the Other is powerfully captured by the writings of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur places high salience to a negotiation with Other in any debates on Self and Other. In his work, *Oneself as Another*, he argues and I quote:

"The identity of the Self is inextricably bound up in the presence of the other. Selfhood and otherness are inseparable. One may see the Other as being like myself. The mystery of other is nothing but the mystery of myself" (Ricoeur, 1992).

The salience of the debates on the self and other constitutes a critical component in the intellectual ventures of the Frankfurt School or Critical Theory. The Frankfurt school was set up in 1923 in Germany to evaluate concepts for human emancipation and democracy. The proponents of this new school include Jürgen Habermas, Theodore Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, among others. Theodore Adorno places high salience to resolving contemporary problems, such as alienation, once humanity appreciates the recognition to Other in any evaluation of the Self. In other words, the project of Adorno and other critical theorists was to develop concepts and mechanisms through which strangeness or otherness will not be vilified.

II. PROMISES OF MODERNITY/ENLIGHTENMENT: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL.

The trajectory of the Western intellectual Tradition can be a significant vantage point to decode the debates on pluralism or inter-community relations. This is because the contemporary knowledge system and academic debates are profoundly impact and define the categories and concepts developed in the Western intellectual corpus. Western academia, since

modernity is a benchmark to negotiate with the problems confronting human beings post the Dark Ages, which Europe and its intellectuals sought to overcome. The philosophers of the Western tradition, from John Locke to John Rawls via Rousseau, sought the resolution of problems through categories like liberty, Overlapping Consensus (Rawls, 1971) and General Will, respectively.

The intellectual ventures of John Locke warrant a special appraisal since he is not only the father of liberalism, but he is representative of the Western knowledge Tradition in its negotiation with the debates on Self and Other. In addition, John Locke stands as a benchmark and reference point for later Western liberal scholarship to develop theories on state, religion and politics. In short, Locke sought to resolve the tensions that had plagued Western Civilization for centuries through the conceptual normative of *toleration*. In his essay titled *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, published in 1689, he argued for a vocabulary of toleration underlying the political arrangements that were needed as Christian Europe was battling internal clashes and wars between Catholics and Protestants.

Extending on the conceptual normative developed by John Locke and in a similar framework, the stalwart and founder of modern Western political philosophy, Jon Rawls, sought an intervention in the debates on pluralism through this much-debated and widely read theory, *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971. Rawls developed his theory in response to the alleged decay of the Western political philosophy, which was normative in character and was under strain from the behavioural revolution in political science led by David Easton and others. The other challenge facing the Western knowledge tradition owes its origins to the Vietnam War and the Civil War in the United States. The wars warranted greater and fresher academic approaches and new conceptual vocabulary that could fathom the required innovations to better resolve the debates on pluralism. Through the concept of *Overlapping Consensus*, Rawls sought attention to the political arrangements in which parties or groups would abandon their exclusive claims to what he termed “Comprehensive Doctrines” (Rawls, 1971, 2002).

These academic interventions, basically, were a manifestation of the projects of Western modernity and enlightenment and were carried forward by

liberals from Locke to Rawls through Mill and Bentham.

The Newtonian and modern ontology of the nature of human being had ramifications in the debates on Self and Other in Political science. The expressions of this framework was primarily represented by the Western theorization of secularism. It was argued by Western scholars like John Locke that religion and political, or sacred and temporal aspects of modern life, shall be separated. The state shall not invoke the language of religion to define or matters that are political in character.

The paper suggests that it is high time to critically evaluate the basic and foundational principles and assumptions of Western and liberal philosophical normatives in the debates on pluralism. Not only are there signs of decline of Western liberalism in an inclusive negotiation with the idea of pluralism, but the more problematic story is that conflicts, violence, religious wars and hatred have increased phenomenally. One may draw insights from the works of Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who argued brilliantly that the promise of the modern and enlightened West was to end myth, but the reality of the incumbent century is that modernity and Western Enlightenment have produced another myth (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947). The myth produced by the Western tradition is that modernity and reason alone can lead to human progress and a better resolution of the problem of pluralism or inter-community relations.

The contemporary world and the modern human condition stand at a critical junction. Humanity is going through immense changes at social and religious levels with profound ramifications for the idea of pluralism and diversity. Increasing deaths in wars in Ukraine and the Middle East necessitate an alternative approach to better resolve and negotiate the idea of pluralism in a democratic way.

The failure of the Western discourse of secularism reveals the inadequacies of the liberal apparatus in better capturing the creative potential of knowledge. It is here one can draw insights from the Indian Knowledge System in comprehending the debates on pluralism and arriving at better arrangements for a democratic and inclusive idea of pluralism and inter-community relations.

III. INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM AND THE IDEA OF PLURALISM: A CREATIVE PERSPECTIVE.

In the debates on Self and Other, one may ask a simple yet profound question: what is exceptional about the Indian Knowledge System in negotiating with the Other in a more democratic manner? This paper argues that there are numerous reasons to attribute the Indian Knowledge System a greater salience over the Western academic canon. The principal and most vital reason is that the Indian Knowledge System, since ancient times, is profoundly rich in negotiating with pluralism. One may cite the case of religious diversity/pluralism, which has been an integral part of the Indian Knowledge System since ancient times to date. It must be noted that Indian society has always been diverse and plural. More than half of World religions have their origins in India. Such religious diversity has been taken seriously by kings and scholars since ancient times. One may go a step further and plead that almost all World religions, including Islam and Christianity, have their origins in Asian societies.

Yet the paradox is that almost all theorization on religion and pluralism stems from Western/European canons of knowledge. It is in this context that one should be surprised that German Sociologist Max Weber would define academia in fathoming the real possibilities that the Indian Knowledge System offers. The point this paper seeks to argue is that the *experience* of Indians with pluralism and religious diversity is a case for a greater recognition of debates on pluralism from the Indian Knowledge System with regard to contemporary debates on pluralism or inter-community relations.

The other factor that speaks volumes about the failure of contemporary methodologies is the almost complete inadequacy of Western-defined notions of secularism. By now, it should be clear that Western and Orientalist descriptions and analyses of secularism have given birth to more problems than resolved. One may agree with Manindra Nath Thakur that the more we talk about secularism as a rescue mechanism, the more we end up in times marked by religious polarization (Thakur, 2022).

The contemporary experience of politics reveals that the career of religion is flourishing in the incumbent century. This contests assumptions of modernity and enlightenment that religious influence will eventually

decline and the world will recognize the real opportunities of secularism. The “Secularization thesis,” as argued by sociologists like Peter Berger, has met a disastrous end as religion continues to shape politics and is a normative for billions of people around the world.

It is in this context and backdrop that this paper seeks an analysis of concepts evolved and produced in Indian experiences that may have enormous potential for addressing the problem of pluralism or religious diversity. Indian Knowledge System offers valuable insights in fathoming better the ontology of human nature and developing a creative perspective on religion and pluralism that may rescue human beings from contemporary suffering and ethnic violence in the 21st century.

IV. ECHOING GANDHI: REFLECTIONS ON RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY FROM POETRY IN KASHMIR.

Kashmir, within the Indian Knowledge System, offers immense intellectual resources to shed light on the critical question of pluralism or religious diversity. Kashmir and its ancient philosophical wisdom have defined the ontologies of numerous knowledge traditions that emerged in the subcontinent. The intellectual resources that Kashmir offers can be mapped from the fact that the region has produced some of the finest minds in the domain of poetry, ranging from Kalhan to Iqbal via Lal Ded. In fact, the Rishi tradition of Kashmir is a powerful tradition that can potentially shape and enrich the contemporary debates on pluralism or religious diversity. The title Rishi is a local Hindu title. The ontologies of the Rishi poetic tradition are deeply and embedded in local genres and vocabulary. To put it differently, Kashmir Shaivism is a continuous radiating force shaping and defining the ontologies of the Rishi tradition in Kashmir to date.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to note that prose tradition in Kashmir is not as powerful as poetry. The possible rationale behind it may be that Kashmir and its mountainous landscape make it naturally inclined towards poetry. The significance of poetry lies in the fact that it is easy to remember and can be easily communicated to other generations. In the context of the Greeks, Eric Havelock argued that poetry played a vital role in the memory transition from one generation

to another (Havelock, 1982). In fact, before literacy rates went up in Kashmir, poetry was the main medium of discussion amongst people on debates ranging from the Unity of the Being, the nature of consciousness and the vital debates on Self and Other.

The catalogue of poets in Kashmir since ancient times is very vast and huge. Their contribution to enriching the poetic tradition in Kashmir is highly profound. A deeper analysis of the poetic tradition in Kashmir since ancient times up to contemporary times reveals the continued emphasis on themes like Divine Unity, Oneness of Consciousness and other metaphysical questions that are common to both Muslim and pre-Islamic cultures. The continuity of themes in the poetic tradition of Kashmir post-conversion to Islam can be gauged from the fact that Abhinavagupta's themes of love, compassion and heart continue to shape the ontologies of contemporary debates in poetry in Kashmir. These themes find representation and expression in some of the finest poets of Kashmir, like Abdul Ahad Azad, Mehjoor, or Shamas Faqir. A deeper analysis of their poetry reveals the continuous emphasis on love, compassion and good human conduct among human beings. These themes are fundamentally expressions of the nature of God, which is One. The Oneness of God is a profound and vital feature of the Indian Knowledge system that can work as an alternative to the Western descriptions of the nature of reality and consciousness. It must be recalled that Western descriptions of nature of consciousness is rooted in the Cartesian duality of mind and body that reduces the complex character of consciousness to a simple Newtonian individual who is interested only in himself.

Through the themes of love, compassion and good human conduct, this paper argues that these themes capture better the debates on pluralism or religious diversity. The approach to the contemporary debates on pluralism or religious diversity can better fathom the intricacies on the nature of consciousness, which in turn could work as an alternative to the Western approaches to pluralism or religious diversity.

These themes of love, compassion and Oneness of Consciousness, as constitutive of poetic tradition in Kashmir, are integral to the Indian Knowledge System. Gandhi in such debates is a vital reference point to comprehend these debates. This is because the entire philosophical grammar and intellectual wisdom is represented by these categories of love, Oneself as

Another, Oneness of Consciousness and good human conduct. These tropes to approach pluralism can enrich the incumbent debates on religious diversity in the 21st century.

If John Locke is the representative of the Western Knowledge Tradition, one may argue that Gandhi and his thoughts represent the Indian Knowledge System vis-à-vis pluralism or religious diversity. What is so exceptional about Gandhi is that he sought to reconcile numerous religious traditions through a deep conceptual alliance at the theological and metaphysical levels. Gandhian approach to pluralism or religious diversity is at a deeper metaphysical level than at a surface level, which is the case of the Western approaches to pluralism. The experience of the incumbent century reveals the deficiencies of these shallow and narrow approaches to pluralism or religious diversity.

V. CONCLUSION

The basic intent of the paper was to dovetail the approaches to pluralism or religious diversity from a Western and an Indian Perspective. The paper highlighted the immediate attention of scholars to approach the question of pluralism from a fresh perspective. The urgency of this fresh revisiting of the debates on pluralism stems from the almost complete failure of the Western approaches to it. The Western and Orientalist frameworks have defined the ontologies of pluralism or religious diversity for centuries, yet the experience reveals its failure. It is in these debates on pluralism that this paper sought to draw immediate attention to the Indian Knowledge System in better enriching the debates on pluralism or religious diversity in the 21st century. One component of the Indian Knowledge System is the poetic tradition in Kashmir that continues to represent/reflect ancient philosophical wisdom through the tropes of love, compassion, Oneness of Existence and Unity of Being. These metaphysical tropes, this paper argued, can better enrich the debates on Pluralism than the Cartesian focus on materialistic being.

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