

AN APPLICATION OF BERLIN'S CONCEPT OF VALUE PLURALISM TO THE INDIAN TRADITION

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Abstract

India has a long rich history tolerant coexistence and cultural interaction among its many diverse cultural and religious groups. But today, there is a promotion of a kind of nationalism which identifies with certain religions or cultural groups at the exclusion of others. The temptation is to try to strengthen India as a nation-state at the expense of its pluralistic past. The philosophy of Isaiah Berlin is valuable in this context, for it shows that value pluralism is not incommensurable with liberal democracy and that the two can support one another. He recognizes that an individual can pursue freedom, but that they also possess an innate ability to respect the freedom of others. In this regard, he develops the notion of *fantasia* or imagination as a faculty which is instrumental in creating understanding and tolerance of other cultural beliefs and practices. This essay will show how through these processes described by Berlin, a large democratic country like India can both create and national identity and preserve the rich heritage of its pluralistic past.

Keywords: Isaiah Berlin, Value Pluralism and India.

INTRODUCTION

Indian society is today facing many challenges concerning its identity. There are today many nationalists who would like to restrict this identity to certain religious and cultural groups. But India throughout its history has always been a very diverse society. This pluralist nature can be traced back to the ancient period of Indian civilization. Momin states that “since ancient times Indian

civilization has had a pluralistic and composite character, the pluralistic and composite ethos of Indian civilization, which began germinating during the Vedic period, was supplemented by the rise of Buddhism and Jainism...” (1996, p. 101). This pluralistic character has historically contributed to its flourishing. This can be seen in its rich intellectual, religious and cultural traditions and its powerful influence on other cultures.

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India's pluralistic culture is the result of several streams of migrations from the different parts of the world which can be dated back to the middle of the second millennium BCE. These migrant groups brought with them their customs and also underwent a process of indigenization (Momin, 1996, p.99). One group was known as the Indo-Aryans and the Vedas provide a detailed description of their culture and literature. The Vedas have been become considered the sacred texts of Hinduism. The word *Veda* means 'to know' or 'to seek' supreme knowledge. The Vedas are a collection of eternal truths, sacred knowledge, which have formulated by great sages and transmitted orally over a period of thousands of years, and finally recorded as scripture.

But the Vedas were not the only rich cultural development. Christianity made its way to Kerala, India in the fourth century CE. In the sixth century BCE, the development of Buddhism and Jainism challenged the credibility of the Vedas. Parsee Zoroastrianism found a home in India by the late seventh century CE. Judaism arrived in India around the eighth century CE after the fall of Jerusalem to the Muslims. In the eighth century, Islam reached India through trade and invasions (Sen, 2005, p. 17). The interaction of these religions contributed to the rich cultural of India, and its pluralistic ethos. The interaction and exchange between Hindus and Muslims also brought new religious practices such as the Sufi and Bhakti movements. The Sufi movement is known for its extremely tolerant viewpoint which has attracted many Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to its association. The Bhakti movement in India, similar to Sufism, provided another pluralistic way of seeking ultimate truth during the medieval period.

So we can say that the identity of India deeply involves the diversity of its cultures. This has created a history which is primarily tolerant and has created an open association which many traditions and religions. The pluralistic nature of India continues to both survive and struggle because it is deeply rooted in every aspect of religion, social practices and very identity of the Indian people (Irudhyadhasan, 2013, p. 55).

India is often called the world's largest democracy. This would suggest a politics of mutual respect of diversity. But in recent years have seen a number of political attempts to abolish India's pluralist tradition and replace it with a singular national interest. Even though India has been pluralist since its earliest period, the very notion of pluralism is now in jeopardy due to fundamentalist groups efforts to eradicate the freedom of minorities in the name of nationalism (Copland, 2010, p.124).

Even its constitution has been drafted to promote the ideal of the peaceful co-existence among the diversity of cultures, languages, social practices, traditions and religions (Ram-Prasad, 2013, p .681). The declaration of rights in the Indian Constitution functions as a safeguard for liberties as it seeks to define the extent of the authority of the government so that it does not encroach on any individual person's liberty. India's Constitution stands for pluralism, mutual-respect and the protection of basic rights for all, but these values are not seriously implemented and easily abused by the powerful groups and individuals. One might wonder why these values are not more adequately safeguarded when they are guaranteed by the Constitution. Is there a way to implement these ideal values in a more secure manner which impacts the real lives of the people of India?

Obviously, there is no easy answer for these problems, and there are many diverse approaches to the problems themselves. There have been many great Indian thinkers and many social crusaders who have offered deep insights through their speeches and writings on overcoming social inequities. But it would be worthwhile here to investigate a non-Indian thinker and his approach to value pluralism. Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) is a thinker who is well-known for his writings on liberty. But he was also deeply concerned with the importance and preservation of value pluralism. He therefore connects the support of democracy and the importance of value pluralism and for this reason his philosophy has special relevance for the situation in India today.

Berlin was born in Russia, but later his family moved to Britain due to the political unrest in Russia during his early childhood. His ideas have been shaped by the brutal political events of twentieth century Europe. His essay “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958) has had immense influence on the field of political theory. Through this essay, he has introduced the idea that conflict can exist concerning values, but that this conflict need not be seen as destructive. This led him to a consideration of the importance of value pluralism. Berlin’s value pluralism sheds light on the problems of a pluralistic society especially a pluralistic country like India.

Berlin’s Value Pluralism

The word ‘pluralism’ can refer to various things. It can refer to the variety of daily practices, the diversity of views concerning reality, or the many organized religions and ethnic groups. Berlin’s support for pluralism was an antidote to the tendencies in Western

monist thought. Moral monism holds that all ethical problems have a single correct answer and “that all these answers dovetail within a single, coherent moral system” (Crowder, 2006, p. 5). Many Western philosophers have argued for the truth of one ethical, religious or political system. Truth is related to the unity. All multiplicity is connected to illusion, error and relativism.

Berlin argues that this monism has given birth to political authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Based on the wish for a perfect society, many thinkers have urged individuals to surrender their freedom for the sake of a common good which means, for Berlin, to surrender one’s human essence. This is also the basis of his distinction between positive and negative liberty. Positive liberty is the *freedom for* something, while negative liberty is *freedom from* something. Positive liberty often leads to tyranny when an individual or individual culture is asked to conform to a monist idea of what it means to be free. Negative liberty is simply freedom from coercion and allows for the possibility of pursuing diverse aims. Berlin of course supports negative liberty because it protects us from tyranny.

Berlin is aided in his challenge of this moral monism by his reading the counter-enlightenment thinkers, especially from Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) (Berlin, 2002, p. 95). According to Berlin, the message of these counter-enlightenment thinkers is clear:

The ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict - and of tragedy - can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. (Berlin, 2002, p.214)

For Berlin, every individual is forced to choose between multiple moral claims. Individuals have “many possible courses of action and forms of life worth living, and therefore to choose between them is part of being rational or capable of moral judgement” (Berlin, 2002, p. 43) This need to choose gives a human being their essence, and their freedom to choose gives them their dignity. That is why Berlin emphasizes the connection between freedom and pluralism. Berlin argues that there has to be a minimum amount of freedom for any decent human life. Berlin's concept of pluralism has deep connections with his ideas concerning political liberty.

Berlin is clear in his repudiation of a monistic political theory. The notion of a harmonious and perfect society is considered impractical. The ideal of a utopia is not realizable as he states, “The assumption on which this is based is that men have a certain fixed, unfaltering nature, certain universal, common, immutable common goals. Once these goals are realized, human nature is wholly fulfilled” (1997, p. 20). The fact remains that the ends humans seek are not identical. There is a diversity of communities, cultures, traditions and customs present in a society based on different aims. Value pluralism suggests a plurality of irreducible and potentially conflicting values.

Hampshire states two important features of value pluralism, “first, the idea that certain of our values are incompatible with one another, and second, the idea that some of these may also turn out to be incommensurable or incomparable with one another” (cited in Spicer, 2010, 19). This can mean that a single system or a human method is not possible to approach all human values. Conflicts and incommensurability are the unavoidable

outcome of any attempt which tries to reconcile various values in a single method.

Other way of considering this is by reference to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who was one of the first thinkers to recognize the value of conflict in human life (Spicer, 2010, 18). He affirms that “all things are in a state of flux, change” which means all the things in the world are in constant change and they are built-in with conflicts and tensions. So conflicts can exist within a good itself. For him, strife is essential, for without it reality would pass away. For that reason, he claims that Homer was wrong when he said, “Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!” (Homer, *Iliad*, 18.107) Unknowingly, in wishing for the elimination of strife, Homer was praying for the destruction of the universe. For Heraclitus, the motion of the universe requires strife and tensions just like the way some tension is required for the operation of lyre and a bow. He recognizes the fact that one cannot survive in the world without conflicts because one has to make constant rational choices. This is the spirit behind Berlin's support of value pluralism. Diversity and strife allow a culture to develop.

Berlin believes that there cannot be one unitary view of the human end. Instead, he holds that there are an indeterminate number of human values which are often incommensurable and irreconcilable (Adams & Dyson, 2007, p. 191). For this reason, “the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition” (Berlin, 2002, p. 214). Most often an individual is faced with plurality of incommensurable values. Often choosing between the values can be difficult but an individual cannot escape from this incommensurability. In his interview to Jahanbegloo, Berlin states that:

Some of the ultimate values by which men live cannot be reconciled or combined, not just for practical reasons, but in principle, conceptually. Nobody can be both a careful planner, and, at the same time, wholly spontaneous. You cannot combine full liberty with full equality; full liberty for the wolves cannot be combined with full liberty for the sheep. Justice and mercy, knowledge and happiness can collide. (cited in Spicer, 2010, 19)

It would be difficult to rank values like liberty, equality, justice and mercy, but ultimately one has to sacrifice some values for the sake of the other value. In such situation one tends to use practical reasoning based on a contextual situation rather than a scientific procedure or a principle.

When we recognize the diversity of human ends it encourages us to try to understand others' beliefs and commitments. It does not mean that one has to adapt others' views, but to have a respect for them, even though moral incommensurability and conflict is unavoidable between value systems. Crowder reflecting on Berlin states that "pluralism is the antidote he prescribes for the moral monism that forms the deepest foundation of twentieth century totalitarianism" (2008, p.127).

Berlin uses Vico's notion of *fantasia* and Herder's understanding of sympathetic historical insight to explain how human beings deal with incommensurability in a pluralistic situation. Following Vico, he asserts that one needs *fantasia* or imagination to place oneself in a particular historical situation and understand a cultural setting, human nature and ways of life concerning this *fantasia*, Berlin states:

Yet without *fantasia*, the past remains dead; to bring it to life we need, at least ideally to hear men's voices, to conjecture (on the basis of such evidence as we can gather) what may have been their experience, their forms of expression, their values, outlook, aims, ways of living; without this we cannot grasp, not merely physically or biologically, and in a narrow sense politically and institutionally, but socially, psychologically, morally; without this there can be no genuine self-understanding. (1990a, p. 64-65)

This self-understanding refers to a kind of core human nature which takes different forms in different cultures and environment (Lukes, 1998, p. 105). It becomes possible for each one to understand others because there is a *common human nature*. In emphasizing this fact, Berlin states "of course, there is a common human nature, otherwise men in one age could not understand the literature or the art of another, or, above all, its laws which Vico, as a jurist, know most" (2013, p. 9).

This also indicates that his conception of human nature admits of a certain content of morality. Berlin credits humans as having moral feelings and are apt to feel 'revulsion' when moral laws are broken. He thus states, "When I speak of men as being normal, a part of what I mean is that he could not break these rules easily, without a qualm of revulsion" (2002, p. 211). The core of being human itself suggests that individuals are able to understand the viewpoints of others due to this aspect.

According to Berlin, human nature is such that it is capable of rising above the bounds of one's own culture or way of life, to an understanding of other diverse traditions,

practices and cultural patterns. He asserts that the ability to overcome these boundaries, depends on freeing oneself from the ideological prisons of social class, national identity, or religion doctrine. Otherwise the other's customs and practices will continue to remain alien or may not make any sense to oneself (1990b, p. 86). One can understand the existence of a number of values and take cognizance of this fact, although one may not agree with another value system which is not one's own.

Application of Berlin's Value Pluralism

The situation in India today is a challenge to a long tradition of pluralism which made India a rich and influential culture. But if we recognize the long tradition of Indian pluralism we might ask why do we need to appeal to a Western philosopher like Berlin? What is distinctive about Berlin's philosophy is the combination of ideas of freedom related to liberal democracy and the support of value pluralism. It is a recognition that these two are not incompatible. Indian democracy does not need to take a nationalistic stance or adapt itself to one particular form of culture or religion.

Globalization in India has a large impact on the country's socio-political life. Along with the need to compete globally, the temptation is to re-create India into an identity which leads to the problems of crude nationalism. This has created threatened the older tradition of pluralism and has eroded the toleration which is a part of India's tradition. While national identity is important, it should be in the service of promoting the well-being of every individual rather than forcing individuals to follow a single pattern way of life.

National reform needs to address a problem that has existed even throughout India's pluralistic past. That is the marginalization of human beings. In a democratic society one should not be mistreated because of one's social background. When one exercises "imaginative insight" (*fantasia*) to understand others' pain and humiliation, then such things might not take place in the society. As Berlin understands it, the dignity and commonality of human nature is that a human being is an individual who chooses their own goals. Individuals have "many possible courses of action and forms of life worth living, and therefore to choose between them is part of being rational or capable of moral judgment; they cannot avoid choice for one central reason" (Berlin, 2002, p. 43) because eventually individuals have to choose. A person needs a certain amount of freedom so that one can make a right decision. That is why Berlin emphasizes the connection between freedom and pluralism. Berlin argues that there has to be a minimum amount of freedom for any decent human life. So the nationalism of a democratic country like India should focus on the empowerment of people as individuals who can choose their diverse cultural, religions and individual goals. Tharoor upholds that "the twenty-first-century world is one in which an emphasis on the shared values of ... democracy and pluralism, tolerance and transparency, and respect for personal liberty and human rights—has greater salience than ever" (2013).

There is an Indian motto, *sarva dharma samanabhav* ('all religions have equal respect'). While it is not possible to eliminate the clash of values of religions and cultures inherently different in nature, human beings can arise above these conflicts because they

possess a unique capability to understand the others religions and cultures. India is a land of plurality and diversity which needs secularism and democracy for its survival. The nation has been held back due to some of its outdated cultural practices and policies and it continues to suffer from poverty and various social evils. The nation has to make an effort to face the challenges with greater honesty and courage in order to ensure diversity. Therefore, India needs to embrace its long tradition of value pluralism. Berlin's philosophy demonstrates that this tradition of pluralism is not incommensurable with modern liberal democratic frameworks. Nationalism does not need to reject pluralism, but to address the needs of its diverse population.

Berlin insists that an individual must be given a space to maintain one's dignity and freedom regardless of their position in society. Therefore, he opposes coercion and the limiting of human choice. For him, each individual has a *fantasia* or imagination to forge an understanding and tolerance of the other's values and customs. His cultivation of *fantasia* can help to alleviate conflicts in any society, be they cultural, religious or class-based. Even when cultural values are incompatible with each other, we can still understand the other's values by making the effort to do so. While diversity in a culture leads to strife it also gives a culture a richness and leads to its development. Berlin's value pluralism gives a valuable framework for understanding these contradictions and connections.

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