

## Objectivism, Relativism, Pluralism: Notes on the Study of Communities and Communalism

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The phenomenon of communalism in India has been richly theorized. The Marxist writers laid bare the economic factors behind the rise of communalism: Romila Thapar (1984) identified the underlying communal elements in the nationalistic historiography; Gyanendra Pandey (1990) discussed the British construction of communalism; Sumit Sarkar (1993) noted the similarities between the rise of fascism in Europe and the Hindu right in India; Partha Chatterjee (1994) questions whether secularism is an adequate and even appropriate ground on which the political challenge of Hindu majoritarianism can be met. And there are hosts of other studies highlighting similar or different dimensions of this phenomenon. These preoccupations are largely the attempts (i) relating communalism to secularism, fascism, etc.; (ii) undertaking historical analysis; and (iii) offering solutions to this social evil. However, none of these analyses focus on the fundamental relation between the study of communalism and the study of communities.

The study of communalism has to be prefaced by the study of communities. The study of communities carries important methodological apparatus. And Indian social theory is largely informed by the modern Western social theory—be it Marxism, liberalism, structuralism, functionalism, behaviourism or any other. There may be social theories that are non-Western and non-modern. However, the dominant social theory that is at work today has its origins in the modern West.

In turn, the social theory in the West owes its genesis to the Enlightenment discourse, more specifically to the individualism and collectivism in the 'social contract' theories. The individual in these theories is not an empirical man as he has often been understood. The individual in the-state-of-nature is a hypothetical construction. Hence, he is a hypothetical individual. The basic features of this individual are rationality, freedom and autonomy. The most important function that he performs is to enter into a contract and form a collectivity. And the collectivism in the contract theories is the transformation of the hypothetical individual into collectivities. In other words, structurally the individual and the collective don't co-exist simultaneously. This Enlightenment project has undergone many modifications. In recent times it concretized itself in the debate between objectivism and relativism. (I

have elaborated this in my 'The Project of Rationality and the Discipline of Social Sciences' [1995].)

Further, this Enlightenment project, it may be noted here, is a normative project. This normativity is not even internal to its own society but is postulated from outside, namely, in the state-of-nature. The underlying assumption of this project is the cultural superiority of its objective reason. It is from this notion of objectivity that the non-Western and even the pre-modern Western societies are looked at and evaluated. For example, the entire Western reading of Indian history is informed by this notion of objectivity. Thus there is a relation between objectivism/relativism and the study of communities and the communalism in India.

Following a brief discussion on objectivism and relativism, this paper attempts to expose the cultural politics of the former and the nonviable political programme of the latter. Subsequently, the paper distinguishes objectivism and relativism from pluralism. The paper concludes with a brief discussion on some aspects of pluralism as available in the writings of J.L. Mehta, K.C. Bhattacharyya and M.K. Gandhi, arguing for pluralism as a viable methodology for the study of communities and their coexistence.

## I

Objectivism affirms truth to be autonomous and independent. In logical positivism, truth is asserted through the verification principle. In contradistinction to this position, Karl Popper argues that theories can only be falsified. He, however, remains within the framework of objectivism. While logical positivists privilege truth, Popper privileges falsity, thus forming two sides of the same coin. Further, both logical positivists and Popper subscribe to methodological monism.

Following Wittgenstein, Peter Winch, while conceding objectivism within natural sciences, nonetheless, proposes a different methodology for social sciences. Thomas Kuhn radicalizes methodological discussions by making 'truth' within natural sciences dependent on paradigms and by replacing the 'logical' orientation of philosophy of science by a sociological one. It may be noted that different paradigms in Kuhn are sequentially ordered. That is, paradigm 1 replaces paradigm 2 at the time of crisis. In other words, Kuhn's philosophy of science is necessarily committed to sequentialising paradigms and for him 'paradigmatic pluralism' is a semantic anomaly.

Hermeneutics/deconstruction facilitates multiple interpretations of a single text simultaneously. This school maintains that there is not one unique 'right version' of the world, but rather a number of different 'right versions' of it. Nelson Goodman, a radical within this school, goes a step further in attacking the claim that our conceptual schemes are just different 'descriptions' of what are in some sense 'the same facts.' He regards this idea as empty. For him, it is immaterial whether we speak of versions as descriptions of world or say that there are no worlds and only versions.

Hilary Putnam characterizes deconstruction as a version of relativism. He notes that the move of deconstruction is from relativism to nihilism. To quote him:

If you and I are not the first-person relativist in question, then the truth about me and about you and about the friends and the spouse of the first-person relativist is, for the first person relativist, simply a function of his or her own dispositions to believe. This is why first-person relativism sounds like thinly disguised solipsism. But it is hard to see why cultural relativism is any better off in this respect. Is solipsism with a 'we' any better than solipsism with an 'I'? (1992: 76)<sup>1</sup>

In sum let us note that objectivism makes truth autonomous conceding nothing or very little to its framework or paradigm. Relativism, on the other hand, treats the context as being active, makes truth passively dependent on the framework/paradigm/culture. While objectivism monopolizes truth, relativism-solipsism combine caricatures it.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the debate oscillates between the fringes of extremity. Here, let us note two important features not extraneous to this methodological debate.

#### Objectivism and Cultural Politics

This purely methodological debate is not innocent of politics in its formulation. For instance, objectivism often comes to be equated with modern West or Enlightenment rationality. This is evident in Leo Strauss, the liberal. For him, 'West is the culture in which culture reached full self-consciousness, it is the final culture' (1964: 2). Further, Strauss recognizes the factual inequality between Western and non-Western societies. He characterizes the latter as 'underdeveloped nations.' To quote him, 'The expression (underdeveloped nations) implies the resolve to develop them fully, i.e., to make them either communists or Western, and this despite the fact that West claims to stand for cultural pluralism' (1964: 6). The cultural superiority of the West that is explicit in Leo Strauss can also be found in the following quotation from J.S. Mill. In his celebrated essay *On Liberty*, Mill says:

Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one (1970: 136).

These are not stray instances. The cultural superiority of the Enlightenment reason is also upheld by Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Marx. In Heidegger, it becomes extremely explicit when he says that 'the Earth must be Europeanised.'

This attitude has often been characterized as Eurocentric. This characterization only problematizes the relation between the West and the so-called non-West. In this course, it distinctly retains the Orientalistic

categorization of East and West. It also implicitly assumes the West to be monolithic. And this assumption is not true. It is equally necessary to problematize the relation between modernity and the non-modern Western society. This relation is governed by violence, hostility, and is discontinuous. (For details, see my essay of 1993.)

I maintain the distinction between modernity or, to use Gandhi's word, 'satanic civilization' and both traditional Western and Indian society. Here it is worth noting that it is Gandhi who maintained, contrary to many other views, that modernity is bad not only for India but also for the West. In fact, the modern Western societies' attitude towards their own pre-modern societies is as hostile as their attitude towards Eastern societies. In other words, modernity is not only alien to Indian and other eastern societies but is equally strange to its own traditional culture.

This internal relation is equally important to understand the politics of colonialism. In other words, the internal colonization preceded or at least was simultaneous with the external colonization.<sup>3</sup> Further, West did not experiment on other cultures what it previously had not on its own culture. There is, however, an important difference: while experimenting on itself, it was not aware of the consequences; in experimenting on other cultures, it may not have been innocent of the consequences. Thus, the above attitude is not Eurocentric but anthropocentric. (This anthropocentrism is founded on two presuppositions: hypothetical man and artificial society. The details are worked out in my *Man and Society* [1985].)

### Relativism and Politics

Given this cultural politics of objectivism, let us look at the political intent in relativism/post-modernism. In the context of avoiding the extreme positions of objectivism and relativism, Richard Bernstein states that the need to go 'beyond objectivism and relativism is not a theoretical problem but a practical task. . . today the type of dialogical communities that are required . . . are being distorted, undermined, and systematically blocked from coming into existence . . . today, when we seek for concrete exemplars of the type of dialogical communities in which practical rationality flourishes, we are at a much greater loss' (1983: 229-30).

Thus, relativism is not merely a theoretical exercise but also has a practical dimension. This dimension, however, requires dialogical communities which, within the West, are blocked from coming into existence. Given this non-availability, the case for relativism remains at the theoretical level. While objectivism, through the process of homogenizing cultures, is the political programme of modern Western society, relativism and post-modernism are, at best, a critique of modernity. They became exhausted in this preoccupation, bereft of a political programme. While the success of modernity within the West is not total, its movement is towards totalism.<sup>4</sup>



## II

Thus, we have the political project of objectivism striving towards homogenization of cultures. Alongside, there is methodological relativism that cannot translate itself into a political programme. If worked within these parameters, the options for Indian society would be either transforming its cultural differences through commitment to a single truth privileging Indian state or the rightist *Hindutva* and/or similar other unitary categories; or acceptance of each culture having different a truth—tribal truth, Hindu truth, Muslim, Sikh, Christian truth, and what have you. Each of these within the framework of relativism, as apprehended by Putnam, can lead to social solipsism. These are the only options that might be available to us if we continue to use the social theory that is wedded to the above methodological apparatus. This, in fact, is what exactly seems to be happening in Indian social theory. This results in the following possibilities and options:

1. The possibility that the structural transformation of the Western society is re-enacted here. We do see both the beginnings and the successes in this direction. However, there are two important factors that do not allow this reenactment to sail smoothly. (i) This modern Western programme in a transplanted context may issue out many deviations. (ii) Unlike the Western society where modernity and its dissent were sequentially ordered, a society like India has both modernity and its dissent simultaneously.<sup>5</sup>

2. Secondly, if the necessity of and the desirability to retain the cultural differences of communities are accepted; further, given the plurality of cultures in India, and the conditions mentioned at (i) and (ii) above, the social theory in India need to go beyond objectivism and relativism.

In this context, a different methodology in the form of pluralism needs to be seriously considered.<sup>6</sup> Pluralism, unlike objectivism, accepts the possibility of as many truths as there are communities. Each community can even have more than one truth. Further, unlike objectivism which does not accept any society as given, pluralism does accept the society as given. Within objectivism, norms stand outside the society and the latter is transformed to fit into this normative framework. In pluralism, on the other hand, norms are internal to and form part of society's way of life. However, the social boundaries are not completely closed.

In contrast to relativism, pluralism does not locate truth entirely within the community. Through this it avoids the danger that is anticipated by Putnam, namely, relativism relapsing into solipsism. Within the pluralistic perspective each culture projects its own universals. These universals are immanent insofar as people in that community practice them. They are also transcendent as they are not exhausted by the use of their community. Alternatively formulated, each community has its own context and universals. The boundaries of communities at times are clearly demarcated and at other times overlap. To use a metaphor from Gandhi, a plural society is like living in a house with its windows wide open. The house is protected by walls, but its windows are open to all winds from all directions to blow through it and

to enable the dwellers to breathe free air at their own place and in their own way.

Further, while relativism has problems in becoming a political programme, pluralism in India can have a political programme. In the modern West, alternatives to modernity are envisaged in the future or are salvaged from the past like the classical tradition of Alasdair MacIntyre (1985). Whereas one can find alternatives within the Indian present.<sup>7</sup> It is here that we arrive at the plural cultures and communities of Indian society.

### III

Before discussing the nature of these communities and their relation to each other, let me distinguish different levels of meeting between communities.

(a) A culture can meet the context of other cultures out of curiosity or to learn from their experience. When a culture meets the context of another culture for criticizing or rejecting, then this can give rise to communal conflict. This is what really happens in many cases. For example, the controversy regarding different civil codes in India. Similarly, this is why the idea of conversion conflicts with Gandhi's world-view.

(b) There is also this possibility of one context meeting other's universal and *vice versa*. Evaluating one community's universal from the context of another is similar to reading only a literal meaning in a metaphor. And evaluating a universal by a context or *vice versa* is to commit a categorical mistake. Even here there is a possibility of conflict.

(c) Ideally speaking, visiting of one universal by the universal of another community, and looking at others' contexts through their universals can facilitate a meaningful interaction among communities.

Now let us discuss the nature and interaction of communities in pluralism.

(i) In pluralism, each community has an internal preoccupation. They provide to their members a vision of the world and a relation with the past and the future.

(ii) Critiquing is largely an internal preoccupation. Criticizing the texts of other cultures should not be the major preoccupation. M.K. Gandhi emphasized respect towards other cultures and not criticism and rejection. This is evident in his reply to a letter by a Muslim. I reproduce both the letter and Gandhi's reply. The letter-writer said:

You regard Mohammed as a Prophet of God and hold him in high regard. You have even publicly spoken of him in the highest terms. I have heard and even seen reports in cold print to the effect that you have studied the Quran itself. All this, I must confess, has puzzled me. I am at a loss to understand how a person like you, with all your passion for truth and justice, who has never glossed over a single fault in Hinduism or to repudiate as unauthentic the numerous corruptions that masquerade under it, can holus-bolus accept all that is in the Quran.

Gandhi replied:

I have nowhere said that I believe literally in every word of the Quran, or, for the matter of that, of any scripture in the world. But *it is no business of mine to criticize the scriptures of other faiths, or to point out their defects.* It is and should be, however, my privilege to proclaim and practice the truths that there may be in them. But *I welcome every opportunity to express my admiration for such aspects of his life* as I have been able to appreciate and understand. *As for things that present difficulties, I am content to see them through the eyes of devout Mussulman friends,* while I try to understand them with the help of the writings of eminent Muslim expounders of Islam. It is only through such a *reverential approach to faiths* other than mine that I can realize the principle of equality of all religions. But it is both my right and duty to point out the defects in Hinduism in order to purify it and to keep it pure (emphasis mine) (1950: 275-76).

(iii) To come back to the elucidation of the nature of plural communities. The internal elements, of the vision and self-criticism, don't exhaust the domain of plural societies. They too have an external axis to interact and understand each other. J.L. Mehta puts forward a novel idea of pilgrimage as a basis for cross-cultural understanding and coexistence. He pleads us to set aside for the moment learned and bookish models for religious understanding, and suggests the model of a pilgrimage as more appropriate and helpful:

Imagine a group of people, rich and poor, of various classes, coming from different cultural regions of the country, speaking different languages, not necessarily belonging to an identical religious sect, coming together at the starting points of the pilgrimage and venturing forth together on a perilous journey on foot to a common destination, to a major *tirtha* in India up in the Himalayas. They come together and walk and live together for a while, a week or a month, and will go their separate ways again when the pilgrimage is over. . . . The pilgrims walk merrily on, listening sometimes to the tales told by passing holy men, sometimes relating to each other the story of their lives, and sometimes praying, much of the time in playful exchanges and fun among themselves. The difference in the languages they speak, as in other things, hardly prevents them from making themselves understood. Recognizing and respecting these differences, they yet arrive at an understanding which goes deeper than words . . . What is understanding among people worth if it does not take place in full awareness of our common mortality, common yet beckoning to each of us to meet it alone, in the privacy of our solitary pilgrimages? . . . Their scripture gives meaning to the pilgrimage, and the latter in turn transforms a shadowy mass of words into a source of meaning in life, of which now the whole purpose may be seen to lie in discovering at last what that scripture means in relation to the life to which it has given such fullness of meaning. Not until living itself is transformed into a pilgrimage, which is nothing if not living in the face of death—one's own—does scripture disclose its sovereign majesty, become truly scripture. We scholars play around with words, study them, manoeuvre them, and torture them, do things to them. But our pilgrimage through words is no pilgrimage until words begin to do things to us and become the word by which we live. *Then* scripture begins to disclose *its* meaning, the meaning of *our* life and, with luck, the unity of these sorts of meaning as the end of our quest.

Scriptures of different religious traditions differ, yes, but if regarded from the perspective of the remark I threw out in passing earlier, that life is a pilgrimage

towards scripture, that difference may yet be seen to shrink into a mere inconvenience. For, like all pilgrimages, life itself, all scriptures transcend itself, cancel and empty itself into the disclosure of a dimension in which there is neither the toil of understanding, nor words, nor wayfaring.

(iv) In the above there is a metaphorical suggestion regarding communities transcending their contexts and meeting in pilgrimage. In the following, K.C. Bhattacharyya offers a more realistic account of the possible interaction between different independent domains. He shows that when the universal of one community moves nearer to the universal of an other community, it is possible that it moves farther away from the universal of a third community. He also notes in the context of different religious experiences that universals of different communities can never be transformed into a single unitary form:

Religious experience as consciousness of being is simple and admits of no variation within itself. There is, however, an infinite plurality of unique religious experiences. Their relation is determined by themselves and not by any external reflection. Each experience by its self-deepening gets opposed to or synthesized with other experiences. One experience may enjoy another as a stage outgrown or as in absolute conflict with it, where a third experience may emerge as adjusting them to one another. There is no possibility of systematizing them by secular reason and so far as they systematize themselves, they present themselves in many alternative systems. . . . The Hegelian notion of a single and exclusive gradation of religions would appear from this standpoint to be intrinsically irreligious. . . .

Every system of religious philosophy has its distinctive theory of the spirit, metaphysics and logic. The fundamental differences within logical theory are, as has been suggested, implicitly metaphysical, those in metaphysics are implicitly spiritual and those in the theory of the secular spirit are implicitly religious. Religions may indefinitely multiply and indefinitely get synthesised. So is there indefinite scope for differences and syntheses in philosophical theory in general. There is no question of philosophy progressing towards a single unanimously acceptable solution. All philosophy is systematic symbolism and symbolism necessarily admits of alternatives (1983: 477).

What Bhattacharyya says about the religious experience may be true with regard to the plural community: its plurality, its self-deepening, the numerous alternative configurations in its experience attempt at synthesizing themselves with other experiences, with adjustments and conflicts that constitute these attempts, showing the questionability of systematizing such experiences through a unified secular reason.

These above voices inform us of some important shades of the way of life of a plural society. Gandhi's reverence for other faiths, Mehta's pilgrimage and Bhattacharyya's notion of alternatives, reveal different ways of looking at communities. These readings of communities are radically different from the fashionable views like removing cultural differences or merely tolerating other communities. The plural world-views of cultures and communities may not give us a grand social theory but they facilitate a meaningful coexistence



between communities.<sup>8</sup>

Further, it is quite possible that these views of contemporary Indian philosophers may not find place in the contemporary discussions on communalism. This may be largely because the thematic of the contemporary discussions largely comes from Indian social theory. And Indian social theory, though it displays many important internal differences, nevertheless, is committed to certain common assumptions that delimit its purview. Identifying these assumptions, though important, is not undertaken here, as that would constitute the substance of another paper. However, it is necessary to note that this specific instance of incompatibility, is related to the larger fracture between contemporary Indian philosophy and Indian social sciences. This fracture either advertently or inadvertently consolidates the fact-value distinction. This distinction, in my reading, is the second fall in the history of the West. Both philosophers and social scientists in India are responsible in taking this fracture for granted and consolidating it. Though this is largely true, there are, however, some important exceptions where this fracture is either debunked or transcended.

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#### NOTES

1. Partha Chatterjee recalls some important arguments in the debate between objectivism and relativism. He says that while rationalism is ethnocentric, a strictly relativist position makes any kind of interpretation, whether from within or without culture, impossible. He notes a paradox where the relativist accuses the rationalist for upholding essentialism. However, relativism, insofar as it claims a distinctive philosophical foundation, itself rests on an essentialist conception of culture (1986: 13-14).
2. Subsequent to these scholarly developments, we find a new order of alignment. Here objectivism is accepted not merely for its virtues but to avoid the anarchistic implications of relativism. Likewise, relativism is accepted to avoid monopoly of truth. It is useful to distinguish the first and second order adherents of these schools of thought.
3. I have discussed four instances of internal colonization in my paper (forthcoming: b). They are: (a) The subjugation of pluralist agrarian societies by

the nation state. (b) The subjugation of non-reason by reason. (c) The subjugation of the human sciences by the natural sciences. And (d) the subjugation of the empirical man by the idea of the abstract and hypothetical man.

The exposure of these internal colonizations carries an implicit critique of Edward Said's Orientalistic thesis. In Said, only the external colonization is discussed. Our understanding of the external colonization would be much better if we alongside understand these instances of internal colonization.

4. I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming: a) that West's dissent to modernity has to necessarily become either romantic or anarchistic but cannot become a political programme.
5. This structural facility should not make the dissenters in India complacent. They must actively build a moral case for plural societies in India.
6. A recent issue of the journal *Political Studies* (1994, XLII) published a debate regarding whether pluralism can be accommodated and/or promoted within liberalism. George Crowder (1994) shows the incompatibility between liberalism and pluralism. Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams (1994), on the other hand, maintain that pluralism can be incorporated and even be promoted by liberalism. The focus of this debate is different. Therefore, it has not been discussed in this paper.
7. My use of the present here is loose and definitely needs more elaboration. My friend Sasheej Hegde has worked out a very complex notion of the present in his paper of 1993.
8. One reason for the rise of communalism can be the attempt at violently transforming these plural cultures into unitary state or nation. This transformation creates in society a strong propensity towards some sort of generalized violence and out of this propensity comes one possible trajectory, along with socially-specific history of causes, called communalism. It is this transformation that underlies the political programme of not only modernity or statism but also the ideology of Hindutva and other communal organizations. While the first undertakes inter- and intra-cultural transformation, the latter two attempt at the internal homogenization. (I owe this clarification to Javeed Alam.)

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