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## Indian Multiculturalism: Contextualizing Sarojini Naidu on the Basis of Her Prose Work

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### **Abstract:**

Multiculturalism in the context of changing character of nation state is a prominent issue which is characterized by the absence of any single national identity. Some look upon it as a menace of divisiveness while others accept it as a challenge for their dominant culture and nationhood. India, more than any other country, is in urgent necessity to grasp the full implication of multiculturalism for maintaining its pre-existing diversity in terms of its multi-ethnicity, religion, language, community, caste, and tribe. Sarojini Naidu, the poet, patriot and politician is relevant in the context of multiculturalism. In our age of interconnectedness, the cosmopolitan nationalism of Sarojini Naidu reflects, not just colonial condition, but wider global forces. In the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century globalization, she belonged to an international community motivated by multicultural ideas. In this paper, I would like to contextualize Sarojini Naidu from the perspective of Indian multiculturalism.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, Cosmopolitanism, Ethnicity, Democratic Multiculturalism Federalization, Politics of Recognition.

### **Understanding Multiculturalism**

“Multiculturalism is a body of thought in political philosophy about the proper way to respond to cultural and religious diversity.”(Stanford *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*).In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Multiculturalism has been defined as “the view that cultures, races, and ethnicities, particularly those of minority groups, deserves special acknowledgement of their differences within a dominant political culture.” The concept of multiculturalism emerged in the western countries in the 1970s especially in the context of Canadian attempt to tackle the problem of immigrants. It proved to be a part of Canadian official policy. From Canada it even spread to Australia, USA, UK some other European countries. Some important factors played a crucial role that contributed to its emergence as a dominant policy for various governments. Although Multiculturalism is a phenomenon with a long history and there have been countries historically that adopted multicultural policies, the systematic study of multicultural philosophy has only flourished in the late twentieth century when it began to receive special attention especially from liberal philosophers. The philosophers, who initially dedicated more time, were mainly Canadian. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is a widespread topic in contemporary philosophy.

The vain attempt to assimilate and harmonise various nation states created a situation conducive to a search for a new policy that would preserve and promote the diverse identities without adversely affecting the overall unity of the social fabric. Among

different groups there was a fresh awakening about their primordial consciousness and relative deprivation. To this trend, a new impetus was the predominance of human rights approach in public policy. The traumatic experience of ethnic cleansing during holocaust, end of colonialism and totalitarian regime also contributed a lot to the flourishing of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism springs from various sources, the significant ones are the new world trade regime affected by the WTO, the revolution brought about by Information and Communication Technology (ICT), rapid transportation, increased international migration etc. In short, it is the process of globalization that brought forth this change.

The term multiculturalism bears various connotations and has been used in different contexts. Will Kymlicka in his book *Multiculturalism Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* uses the term in restricted sense focussing on ethnic groups and national minorities and not marginal or disadvantaged groups like gays, the poor, women etc. According to Kymlicka, in the context of contemporary liberal political philosophy, there have been two waves of writings on multiculturalism. The first wave contains the discussion on what policies ought to be undertaken to protect minority cultures. The first wave of writing focussed in the extent of rights to groups that should be offered, from a liberal point of view, so that they can pursue their cultural differences. In this regard, the political philosophers have discussed the existing kinds of inequities between majorities and minorities. They have also explored what kind of intergroup inequities exist and what the state should do in this regard. Some liberal philosophers opine that state should remain blind to difference and the individuals should be licensed a uniform set of rights and liberties. The others have opposite view. They are sympathetic to the idea of ascribing rights to groups. Will Kymlicka hence suggests that recognition and positive accommodation of group differences is required through “group-differentiated rights”. Charles Taylor emphasises the necessity of developing a “politics of recognition” in favour of minority cultures indicating the supposed links between recognition and identity. Taylor’s proposition was for non-procedural liberalism, which is hospitable for collective goals. Therefore cultural communities need to be empowered over some jurisdiction so that they can promote their own community. To Taylor, recognition is important. Taylor believes that identity is immensely influenced by culture; therefore there is a moral social framework given by the language of one’s culture that individuals need in order to make sense of their lives. Recognition and protection of individuals’ cultural communities is required for respecting and preserving one’s identity. Bhiku Parekh, a prominent political theorist and researcher on multiculturalism, defines it as follows: “multiculturalism is not about difference or identity per se but those that are embedded in and sustained by that culture; that is, a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organise their individual and collective life.”. To him, multiculturalism is synonymous to cultural diversity. He underlines three types of cultural plurality: sub cultural diversity, perspectival diversity and communal diversity. In his view, groups like lesbians, gays and the like could be put under sub cultural diversity as they seek to pluralise the existing culture. Some other groups like the feminists try to reconstitute the dominant culture in their own points of view. It is the communal diversity, Parekh says emphatically, is what makes the core of multiculturalism.

Kukathas' approach towards multiculturalism is based on two ideas: what he considers to be human beings' most fundamental interest and his theory of freedom of association. The fundamental interest of human beings is to live according to their conscience because human beings are primarily moral beings and they want to direct their lives towards what they consider to be morally worthwhile. So identity is associated with morality. Kukathas contends that the state is under the duty to protect this conscience which is a fundamental interest. Another aspect of Kukathas' philosophy is the freedom of association. The member of the community has the right and liberty to have or dissociate from a group they are part of it. One can associate or dissociate at one's own will. There is no compulsion. Hence the function of the state is limited. They state should only guarantee the safety, security, and the right to exit of the citizen by preventing civil war. Some philosophers have looked beyond liberalism in arguing for multiculturalism. It is true for the theorists who are writing from a postcolonial perspective while justifying the sovereignty of the tribes. We are to take granted to consider the value of tribal culture but also the historical injustice perpetrated against them—the denial of equal sovereign status of indigenous groups, the dispossession of their lands, the destruction of their cultural practices. The history calls into question the legitimacy of the state's authority over aboriginal people, and provides a *prima facie* case for special rights and protections for indigenous groups including the right of self government.

Another basic substantial outlook is the cosmopolitan view of culture. People in many parts of the world live within cultures that are cosmopolitan, characterised by cultural hybridity. Jeremy Walden (1995, 100) says, "We live in a world formed by technology and trade; by economic, religious and political imperialism and other offspring; by mass migration and the dispersion of cultural influences. In this context, to immerse oneself in the traditional practices of, say, an aboriginal culture might be a fascinating anthropological excitement, but it involves an artificial dislocation from what actually is going on in the world." Walden believed that meaningful options available to an individual may come from a variety of cultural sources. Will Kymlicka (1995, 103) in response, agrees that cultures are overlapping and interactive, but still maintain that individuals belong to distinct societal cultures and wish to preserve these cultures.

### **Multiculturalism from Indian Perspective**

The development of multiculturalism in the west towards the end of the twentieth century after the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the US draws our attention in India to the importance of recognising, protecting and promoting cultural differences. Multiculturalism as a term of scholarly discourse of society and politics of India is of very recent vintage, originating in the 1990s when some scholars felt the need to respond with Indian experience to the global debate on the subject. The central question in any discussion of multiculturalism in contemporary India is how a vast, multi-ethnic country in terms of religion, language, community, caste and tribe—has survived as a state in condition of underdevelopment, mass poverty, illiteracy and extreme regional disparities. India's multicultural issue has assumed added relevance after the disintegration of the multi-ethnic

former Soviet Union and its European empire in the early 1990s.

It is interesting to note that the rise and development of multicultural theory took place when Sarojini was no more on earth. She died in 1949. Still I think that she is very much relevant in this context. In order to find out Sarojini's appositeness, we are to delve deep into the root of India's cultural plurality. And Sarojini was always vocal about this deep rooted cultural tradition of India in her numerous speeches and letters, the non-fictional prose works of her. Again, I will come back to recent phenomena. Recent Indian multiculturalism has gained two facets. First, multiculturalism has come as a state policy operative in the growing federalization of its political system, a process that politically accommodates ethnic identities. Multiculturalism is conjoined with federalism. Second, the definition, meaning and implications have been the subject of discussion among scholars centring round the issues of rights (individual versus group), culture, community and communalism, secularism, religion and so on.

At first, I will discuss on how Indian Government deal with the multicultural issue. India has initiated its multicultural policy. These state oriented multicultural policies maintain reservation treatment for the socially unprivileged or backward communities. The root of this kind of treatment could be found in the history of India, especially in the era of Mughal Empire when minorities had got special attention from the government development programme. Indian multicultural policies have its roots in Indian constitution. It is the basic multicultural document Articles 15,16,17,19,21,29,30,39,46,243D,243T,332,334, and 335 in Indian constitution contain fundamental right for the multicultural communities of India.(Mathews M. Mohan,2001:129).The constitution has provided political and historical recognition and accommodation of India's diversity.

India's anti-colonial nationalist leaders,(Sarojini Naidu surely was one of them) by and large, shore by the country's multicultural society, but it was Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister whose thoughts on the issue proved decisive in giving it a constitutional legitimacy and determining the policy framework in post-independence governance. He had respect for the traditional values and institutions of Indian society and of its contemporary diversity. He recognised India's diversity and emphasised "unity in diversity". Nehru's profound concern for the cultural plurality was reflected in his practical approach to governance. Commenting on the problems of integration in his state and nation-building efforts regarding various territorial units of the country, most notably in the north-east (characterized by complex diversity of tribes, religions, and non-tribal groups) he advised the Chief Ministers in his *Letters to Chief Ministers* in the early 1950s not "to treat them by some single formula because they differ greatly among themselves."

The second dimension of Indian multiculturalism relates to the negative impact of the government policies to the society and the increase of ethnic conflict, group inequality and social fragmentation which these policies have given rise to. Critical multiculturalism raises

question about the power structure. Chandhoke believes that the rise of multiculturalism means the end of the ‘grand vision’ of the culturally homogeneous nation-state, or of national integrity. (Chandhoke,1999, 35). So, Indian multiculturalism has faced a new challenge. Overemphasis on identity may exclude people or others from an essential identity, may deepen divisions and undermine the “common foundation of a viable society”, or may advocate “aggressive community power over individual freedom” eroding values of liberal democracy, rationality and universality.

Behind Nehru’s preference for liberal democratic approach we may hear the voice of what Sarojini once advised Nehru in her letter on 13 Nov.1937 on his election as Congress president at Lahore. Naidu wrote, “Remember Liberty is the ultimate crown of all your sacrifice...” In another letter on 29 September 1929 Naidu wrote to Nehru, “I have an abiding faith in your incorruptible sincerity and passion for liberty”

Frank De Zwart refers to three multiculturalism policy options to combat this challenge. These are “accommodation, denial, and replacement” (Zwart, 2005: 137). Accommodation includes group recognition, special reservation for minority groups etc. The second policy action denies any kind of minority rights and promotes the rights of the individuals. The third option is a compromise between the accommodation and denial. It means government does not recognise social division and fragmentation but it provides redistribution benefits to the most unprivileged group, but in a different way and different name.(Zwart, 2005:1400

Bhargava sees solution of the problem of identity in India in “democratic multiculturalism” which combines cultural and political communitarianism. On the one hand, it recognises the importance of cultural diversity, and on the other, is committed to bringing the issue into the political domain. The dilemma and conflict that result from the differences of identity are to be resolved through dialogue, discussion and negotiation. Democratic multiculturalism demands for an effective democratic state which can intervene in religious and cultural practices to get rid of oppressive customs, so that the possible subordination of the individual to the authority of the collectivity is curbed, if not abolished. Indian experience of secularism since independence is replete with such examples when an effective intervention of the state has been able to maintain secularism.

Indian debate on multiculturalism is sociological and normative. In spite of vexed issues of community identities, group rights, ethnic bias of nation state project, India has been successful in resisting disintegration. What is the secret of India’s unity and integrity its diversity, and complexity? India’s ideological and political multiculturalism provides the effective answer to this question. The federal debate, particularly since the 1980s, has emphasised the multicultural underpinnings of political institutional arrangements. (Bhattacharyya,2001b). India’s ongoing federalizing process politically accommodates ethnic identity. It is the most effective method of management and resolution of conflicts. Related to this method is democracy which stipulates the political association or institution that ethnic groups may demand as the fulfilment of their needs.

## Differentiating Western and Indian Multiculturalism

I have a long discussion on multiculturalism on the global perspective as well as in Indian context. It is true that every country has its own multicultural policy. In this respect, India is idiosyncratic. In the west, multiculturalism is a recent phenomenon, a political movement, while in India it is an accepted way of life. As far as India is concerned, multiculturalism is not a new reality unlike many other countries of the world.

In fact, the concept is very much familiar to Indian society. With diverse cultures, languages, religions, and communities, multiculturalism has its reflections in every sphere of social life in the country. The idea of India as given in Indian constitution is as “an egalitarian, multicultural society which is established in rule of law, human dignity and harmonious co-existence of diversity in all good forms, hues and shades.(EUC report,2008). Western multiculturalism portrays resistance against cultural hegemony, search for identity and struggle for the existence of difference. In India, the phenomenon is more assimilatory than the subversive. In spite of the cultural religious, social geographical differences, there seems to be integration, a unity in diversity. This is called confluent identity. This confluent identity is aware of the differences but at the same time maintain its own integrity. This identity negotiates a space for itself in the multicultural congregation that is India.

## Contextualizing Sarojini Naidu

On the context of India's contemporary multiculturalism Sarojini Naidu is very much relevant particularly for her thoughts on the necessity of peaceful co-existence of people of different cultures, subcultures, religions, customs and faiths. Indian multiculturalism, at present, confronts new challenges. Communal disharmony is a burning question of the day. It is really a big challenge for India to preserve her pluralistic tradition and to bring the various communities into the mainstream society by promoting the spirit of multiculturalism. Recently conscious citizens are worried over the alarming situation of current communal disharmony and there is a fear that it might resultantly bring forth disintegration. It is unfortunate that unscrupulous politicians with an eye on vote bank are indirectly supporting the force promoting religious sentiment, and linguistic and regional identity. On this context, we may remember Sarojini's speech on “Co-operation among Communities”:

“I ask you, children of the immortal south, during the forth-coming years to be true to yourself, just to yourself, sink all divisions, obliterate all differences, forget all feuds, annihilate all hatreds, become one in the service of the Motherland, for, as I said, your flesh, Brahman or non-Brahman, is made out of the clays and waters of the South and your spirit is filled by the breath of Her who is Bharata Mata.”

(First Annual Conference of the Madras Presidency Association, Dec. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1917).

It is astonishing to think that Sarojini said all these at a time when multiculturalism did not come as a political phenomenon. .She wrote before multiculturalism gained currency as a holistic socio-political movement even in the west. Still, she with her prophetic vision could realize the merit of the subject and brilliantly expressed in her speech

on the public stage. What she learnt, she learnt from her education, upbringings and inborn talent. Today both the dimension and relevance of multicultural heterogeneity has gained more and more consolidated ground. Will Kymlicka, a liberal multicultural theorist argues that societal cultures ought to be protected because they promote a context of choice for individuals to exercise their freedom. C. Kukathas' approach of multiculturalism is based on human being's most fundamental interest in living according to their conscience and freedom of association. Both the theorists put emphasis on the necessity of the presence of individual liberty. It is surprising to think that Sarojini Naidu long ago could realize it.

Sarojini Naidu had the sensibility towards comprehensive outlook of encompassing all the religious, ethnic and cultural multiplicities in the prevalent society. She believed that India possesses a wizard element that can reconcile, harmonise and bind together different races, religions, castes, creeds, cultures etc. But underneath the apparent diversities, there is always an undercurrent of unity that harmonises all superficial variations. In Patna City Students' Association (Oct.13, 1917) Sarojini said,

“It is because we are ignorant that we are divided and it is the sacred mission of enlightenment to bring not the lesson of quarrel but the lesson of peace.”

Sarojini Naidu was vocal not only about the utility of communal unity but also the means of keeping this unity intact. Rabindranath Tagore, her contemporary eminent poet and philosopher, showed two alternatives in his book “Nationalism” (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920, 100) in connection with the challenge that Indian multiculturalism, of late, has faced

“The most important fact of the present age is that all the different races of men have come close together. And ... we are confronted with two alternatives. The problem is whether the different groups of people shall go on fighting with one another or find out some true basis of reconciliation and mutual help; whether it will be interminable competition or co-operation.”

To Mrs. Naidu, there is only one option that is united attempt to glorify our country and humanity at global perspective. Referring to the “Seven Lamps of Architecture” by John Ruskin, she said:

“But we have seven hundred thoughts of lamps in the architecture unlighted because you have refused to give them the things that kindle the flame. If the “Seven Lamps of Architecture” illumine the whole civilization of the West, friends, think of the dazzling illumination that shall light the whole world with a conflagration and radiance that cannot be quenched when 700,000 lamps in our national structure are lit for the glory of humanity.”

(Speech on *The Children's Tribute to Gokhale*, 10<sup>th</sup> Jun, 1915).

Sarojini is relevant today, on the context of Indian multiculturalism, because she much earlier

became expressive about the necessity of unity, co-operation, and mutual understanding. And hence we hear the voice of a very recent cultural theorist in political philosophy—Bhargava who says that the differences of identity which is a challenging threat to Indian multiculturalism can be solved through “democratic multiculturalism” i.e. through dialogue, discussion and negotiation.

### **Sarojini Naidu as a Cosmopolitan**

Criticism on multiculturalism has some basic substantial views like liberal multiculturalism, post-colonial multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism etc. Now, I would try to find justification and appropriateness of Naidu on the perspective of her cosmopolitan outlook. In her presidential address to the All India Women's Conference in 1930 she said:

“I am a bad nationalist. I am a nationalist only by the compulsion and the tragedy of the circumstance of my country. I am first and last a human being and I do not recognise divisions of humanity merely because of race or geographic barriers...I oppose every separationist movement except for possible transitional purposes.” (Stri Dharma, Feb.1930, 138-139).

Naidu's nationalism must be seen in the context of a broader humanist vision. In the same speech Naidu continued:

“We must rise above nationalism, above religion, above sex. Our common humanity is the bond that cannot, that must not be broken.”

Naidu was deeply committed to the cosmopolitan ideals of global interconnectedness and cultural exchange:

”As global civilization progresses, as the world becomes more and more international in giving and receiving enlightenment, we are absorbing from other countries as we are giving to other countries”. (Speech to Men's Literary Association, July5, 1915, Speeches and Writings, 35).

‘Cosmopolitanism describes Naidu's career’. This point has been referred to by Anupama Arora in “The Nightingale's Wanderings: Sarojini Naidu in North America. . ( The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 44:87, 2009).

“Mrs. Sarojini Naidu was the first of India's orator to visit almost ‘every country of Europe, later to accomplish a famous lecture tour of the United States, and to visit South Africa at a time of crisis for Indians there...vividly an internationalist, a world citizen, the needs of India focalise her activities”

Sarojini claimed to identify with multiculturalism at a profound, almost instinctive level. Born to Brahmin parents in the Muslim princely state of Hyderabad, she was especially

encouraged by her Edinburgh-educated father to be “a citizen of the world.” ‘Sonalini’ with its allegorical depiction of a sophisticated pluralistic culture, can be seen as Sarojini’s tribute to her cosmopolitan upbringing. Cosmopolitanism is used here not to solely denote multiculturalism( although this was certainly feature of her formative years) but to specially suggest that Naidu’s childhood education encouraged her to turn a global, rather than a purely Hyderabadi or Indian vision. The older Sarojini would later explicitly claim a cosmopolitan heritage:

It is because my beloved father said, “be not limited even to the Indians, but let it be your pride that you are citizen of the world “that I should love my country.( Speech in Madras,1903, Speeches and Writings,21).

Tara Ali Biag, the social worker and writer and also the author of official biography of Sarojini Naidu, wrote:

“In Indian history, notwithstanding famous queens, and warriors, there never has been a more liberated woman than Sarojini Naidu. Coming as she did from traditional India at the turn of the century wherein a woman’s role was cast in a narrow mould, hemmed in with all sorts of restrictions, Mrs. Naidu in her extraordinary career proved that such restrictions imposed upon Indian women by her ancient society could be cast off as easily as gossamer veil.”

In this context, one may recall the address of Mrs. Naidu delivered in Madras at a youth rally in 1903:

“Having travelled, having conceived, having hoped, having enlarged by love, having widened by sympathies, having come into contact with different races, different communities, different religions, different civilizations, friend, my vision is clear. I have no prejudice of race, creed, caste, or colour...”

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru rightly commented on her when he said:

“She was a curious combination of so many things. She herself was a composite, both of various currents of culture in India as well as various currents of culture, both in the East and West. And so she was, which being a very great national figure, but truly internationalist, and whenever she might go in the wide world, she was recognised as such and as one of the great ones of the Earth.”( In the Service of the Nation’, Sarojini Naidu Centenary volume.)

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