Cultural and Political Autonomy in Indian Society: Some Considerations*

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I

The ideal of autonomy has gained considerable significance in recent times. In theoretical discussions and analysis, social and political theorists and moral philosophers have questioned or justified the principles and practices of the liberal democratic states by invoking one or the other version of the ideal of autonomy. Similarly, political and cultural activists have invoked this ideal to defend the rights of individuals and communities to survive and flourish without any external interference and control. While autonomy is recognised and defended as a prerequisite for the very possibility of a civil society, there is an equally clear perception that the recent economic, political, technological and cultural developments have been significantly contributing towards the erosion of the autonomy of individual and communities. A major source of threat to the autonomy of the people of the Third World can be seen in the Western tendency to continue its domination with its control over technologies of communication, armaments, transportation and production. This needs to be understood not merely in cultural and political terms but also in terms of the requirement on the part of the West to control and perpetuate the existing patterns of consumption of the global resources by which its high standards of living are maintained. The West (also known as North these days) manages to do this by keeping a control on the global trade and financial markets through various mechanisms. Western domination, achieved by means of an unequal and unbalanced exchange of material goods, ideas, and skilled persons, is very much a part of the culture, politics and economy of the post-independent Indian society. Socio-political and economic decisions at the government level continue to be taken under conditions of lack of autonomy.

Autonomy, as self-rule, is to be seen as freedom from both external and internal heteronomy. Indian society not only faces problems in its autonomy from external pressures, both in the political and cultural domains, it faces equally strong pressures from within its own structures, traditions and practices. Therefore, any discussion of the problems of cultural and political autonomy is bound to be multi-dimensional and multi-contextual. Similarly,

the aspirations for autonomy may also be rooted in diverse backgrounds relative to the vantage point of the individual or the community which chooses to pursue the project of achieving autonomy. Autonomy should be seen as a project to be realised or achieved as it involves an active effort to give to oneself laws for determining one's conduct and affairs. Autonomy is derived from the Greek terms, Auto (Self) and nomos (Rule or Laws), used to distinguish such city-states which made their own laws from those which were governed by the laws made by others. In more recent times, Kant contrasted between autonomy and heteronomy to distinguish between free rational conduct and actions lacking the condition of self-control. In the utilitarian liberal tradition, autonomy has been seen as an individual's capacity to make choices and determine one's own goals. In the liberal individualist theory, autonomy is regarded as a standard by which actions and persons are judged in the sense that a person is not merely someone who *can* control his/her actions but someone who *should* control his/her actions as an autonomous free being separate and distinct from other persons. Since the quest for autonomy does not arise in a vacuum, it needs to be seen as an outcome of the reflective activity of reason on one's role and place in one's social environment. Individuals as well as groups or communities of individuals can aspire to exercise autonomy by gaining mastery over their circumstances by refusing to be merely passive bearers or instruments of their psyche and history. Without adopting a critical reflective stance towards one's inclinations, desires, emotions and ambitions (in case of individuals), customs, laws, traditions and future plans (in case of communities and societies), it is not possible to pursue the ideal of autonomy.

The above brief characterisation of autonomy may not cohere with many other conceptions or characterisations of autonomy. These divergent conceptions can be analysed and evaluated with reference to the contexts in which they have been characterised, sharpened and defended. However, in considering various conceptions of autonomy as expounded within the individualist and collectivist intellectual traditions, we may do well to remember that we are *not* born autonomous but *become* autonomous by acquiring certain intellectual and practical capacities which enable us to appraise, order and control our instincts, impulses and inclinations and to change our natural and social environment in accordance with our choices and decisions. 'Becoming autonomous' is not a matter of all or nothing, or once for all. The projects of becoming autonomous involve diverse elements and could be realised up to varying degrees in different ways. It is a part of our cognitive and active finitude that one could make mistakes in the formulation or realisation of the project of becoming autonomous. And this very integral feature of human condition lies at the root of conflicts in the pursuit of autonomy by different individuals and communities. It is possible for heteronomous persons to become autonomous and vice versa as it is possible for subservient, subjugated communities to achieve autonomy. Achieving autonomy from external heteronomy and internal heteronomy in

the context of individuals and communities may also need to be distinguished according to the specificity of the project.

Since the various forms of quest for cultural and political autonomy have been influenced by different conceptions, some selective and brief accounts of a few possibilities may be considered here. These are only selective instances from the complex Indian scene. But sufficient issues for analysis emerge even from these limited illustrations:

I. A large section of the tribal and rural population of the country lives under conditions of acute poverty. Before one can envisage the democratic possibility of their being able to actively participate in the decision-making processes influencing the politico-economic and socio-cultural affairs of the republic, one has to think of their minimal needs, education, health care and so on. From the modernist perspectives on autonomy, as they have virtually no control over the decisions concerning their own living conditions, these populations cannot be regarded as autonomous. Activists of the voluntary organisations engaged in working with such sections of the population do speak of their empowerment through spread of literacy, imparting of skills for sustenance, hygiene etc. But some activist groups do speak of the 'cultural autonomy' in the context of these communities. It is contended that the outsiders from the so-called civilised modern world are responsible for their present unfortunate miserable conditions as they have deprived them of their natural resources and disturbed or damaged the ecology to satisfy their own greed. It is pointed out by these activists that these people may be illiterate and poverty-ridden but they have their own values, beliefs, skills, crafts and rituals which have been orally transmitted from generation to generation for centuries. In the name of their development, it is claimed, the outsiders have no right to deprive them of their cultural traditions. It needs a serious consideration as to what extent outsiders have a right to protect the autonomy of others? Does it not smack of some form of paternalism?

II. Among the major problems being faced by the post-colonial Indian state are the problems of (i) the relationship between the Central Government as the chief organ of the Indian state and its component parts, namely the provincial or state governments, and (ii) the majority-minority relations, (radically different from the electoral majorities-minorities of the Western liberal democracies) which are invariably identified in terms of regional, ethnic, religious and caste identities. In more moderate and sanitised versions, the problem is usually articulated in term of 'Centre-state relations' but has also been vocally expressed in terms of 'political autonomy' for a 'nationality', 'community' or a people claiming a distinct identity. Demands for the formation of new states to be carved from the existing state-boundaries have often been projected as aspirations for cultural and political autonomy of the people concerned. In this context, it would be relevant and significant to consider: (i) why has the project of a pan-Indian identity not been effective enough to contain and encompass the other identities? (ii) Will a restructuring of the Centre-state relations be sufficient for meeting the

demand for political autonomy or some other kind of radical restructuring in the political institutions is required to sustain the political unity of the republic?

III. During the colonial era, the periodisation of Indian history was done in terms of Hindu, Muslim and British rule. This periodisation was questioned and subsequently revised in terms of ancient, medieval and modern phases. But the revision in nomenclature did not succeed in undoing the damage which had been done by the earlier characterisation. Sections of Hindus and Muslims continue to perceive the past through this distorting prism. The ideologies of the Hindu Maha Sabha and RSS explicitly, and some others indirectly, maintain that the Hindus in India have lived under political and religious slavery and subjugation for several centuries, first under the alien Muslim rulers and subsequently under the British colonial empire. The upholders of this view claim that complete liberation from alien subjugation is possible only through a return to a pristine pure nativity. Aspiration for cultural and political autonomy in terms of a recovery of lost freedom is articulated as an ideology of Hindu self-assertion. This tendency gains strength from such interpretations of nationalism which glorify nation as 'coming to self-consciousness of a historical subject' through the 'discovery or creation of a common past' – it is the story of the victory and triumphs, defeats and betrayals which have formed the nation. Recent happenings are a disastrous manifestation of an exclusivist approach to cultural and political autonomy. This raises several significant questions about the characterisation of cultural and political identities, inter-cultural interactions, and resolution of conflicts in a complex pluralist society.

IV. Academics in the universities, research institutions and colleges have been engaged in the study of what have been traditionally known as the humanities and social sciences. During the post-independence era, they have used Western categories and conceptual schemes to analyse, interpret, describe, explain and understand the various facts and elements of Indian social reality. Some of them have gradually started realising that 'western models and concepts do not seem to apply to the Indian experience' but only contribute towards 'distortions in the analysis of Indian social reality.' Some of them go even a step further and point out that 'western education has alienated us' from the 'vital Indian intellectual traditions' and it only contributes towards 'a trained incapacity of Indian scholars to construct cognitive alternatives.' Many intellectuals characterise the prevailing academic scene as 'academic imperialism' with a call to free ourselves from the 'enslaving modes' of western thinking. It is also emphasised by a section of the scholars that we need to learn to recognise and appreciate the richness of the indigenous intellectual traditions in areas as diverse as mathematics, linguistics, philosophy, aesthetics, politics, medicine, architecture and so on. It is contended that without keeping these intellectual traditions alive, our fractured cultural identity is going to be further damaged to the extent of

total disappearance. The aspiration for autonomy is characterised in terms of 'articulation, critical evaluation and creative development' of the indigenous intellectual traditions. The aspiration for cultural autonomy is proposed to be pursued through a conceptual reconstruction of the Indian intellectual traditions which have been 'elaborated, refined, and developed over milennia.' In this context, it would be relevant and significant to consider: (i) To what extent is it possible to use the indigenous concepts from the classical texts to analyse, interpret and understand the contemporary social reality? (ii) Can such a pursuit be possible within the existing educational system? (iii) To what extent this quest for going back to the rich traditions of the past is rooted in the perception or recognition that the Indian intellectuals are isolated or cut off from the complexities of contemporary Indian social reality such that they find themselves irrelevant and their work inaccessible to the people at large? (iv) How will it become possible for the Indian scholars to become more relevant and active participants in the social and cultural life of the Indian people?

V. 'The middle class "superior" Asian intellectuals – Indians in Delhi or Japanese in Tokyo – will argue in the drawing rooms about the deleterious effects of Western culture on their society, their kids wearing Jeans, Joggers and . . . will tell them not to make so much noise as they wish to follow the next episode of *Twin Peaks* on the television'.[1]

VI. 'Nearly every village in India has its untouchables, and their social and economic position have been uniformly low. . . . In addition to social discrimination, the untouchables are also subject to economic exploitation by the caste Hindus. . . . An untouchable child, particularly in a village, is subjected to stigmatised identity from the time he can begin to walk and to touch things and people. Since this is not an abstract thing but a matter of day-to-day oppression and exploitation, educated adults always try to discard it and to accept another identity. . . .What then is the meaning of identity to an untouchable adult? I think the new identity an untouchable seeks is in the form of adopting new values, norms, goals, new associations and all that promotes just and right social relations, which in turn would give him social and cultural equality and due social respect. His opposition is not merely to the caste system and the practice of untouchability but to the entire Hindu philosophy which supports social inequality and injustice, along with practices which perpetuate hatred, blind faith and ignorance.'[2]

II

Society as an orderly system of interaction among its members is possible only so long as the participating individuals believe and accept that their own specific ways of conduct, reflected in their customs and codes, are right and proper. So long as most communities lived in small and isolated settlements, it was possible for different cultural groups to take pride in their distinctive ways as the only right way or the most superior way. Using the categories of

savage, barbarian, uncivilised, primitive, etc., to condemn the alien cultural practices while holding one's own community as the civilised, cultured and, thus, superior to others was an important way of legitimising and perpetuating the dominant practices of the community.

But over the millennia, cultures in different societies have changed gradually and significantly. These changes became possible because each new generation not only learnt and assimilated the cognitive and active skills from the previous generations but also analysed, appraised and gradually extended them in an endeavour to confront the previously unresolved questions and the new problems faced by it. In these efforts, mistakes were often made which were left for the next generations to identify and rectify. But till these mistakes were/are discovered, they remain as much an accepted part of the received heritage as the achievements and successes of the past generations.

Ethnocentricity, narrow sectarian attitudes, dogmatism and close-mindedness are related to the safer and convenient approaches adopted by individuals in hierarchical and rigid social formations during the early periods of civilisation. In the early social formations, one of the major obstacles to individual autonomy was the dominant trend of unquestioned acceptance of the prevalent customs, codes and norms as deviance was not only punished severely but the options available to potentially dissenting individuals were extremely limited. The lack of effective alternative courses of action tended to encourage individuals to follow rather than deviate from the received traditions. These attitudes have not only survived but also continue to operate quite effectively even when members of different cultural communities fight one another with the same weapons, compete against one another for acquiring the same technologies, use common satellite networks for communications, and seek to outwit one another in the common arena of global market. These attitudes continue to dominate because many of us find it difficult to get rid of the ancient fallacious assumption that our unique and specific socio-cultural heritage is not only superior or better than others but is also an essential feature of our distinctive identity, unity, solidarity and survival as specific cultural communities. In doing so, we tend to forget that, over the millennia, there has been considerable exchange (sometimes voluntary but sometimes forced, sometimes deliberately planned and sometimes by the exigencies of circumstances) and interaction among different cultural communities that it would be impossible to visualise how any cultural tradition would have developed in total isolation from the other cultures. Therefore, any attempt to search for a pure unpolluted indigenous cultural identity rests upon a neglect of the ways in which cultural traditions have evolved and functioned in history. Such endeavours also rest upon an essentialist, monist, exclusivist ahistorical view of cultural 'identity' which invariably moves a mental closure against the perception of possible inconsistencies within a cultural tradition, and the possibility of conflict or clash between different structures, elements

and norms within the same culture. This attitude is contrary to the aspiration for autonomy as any exercise of autonomy demands not a blind conformity but a critical questioning of the received traditions. Any quest for cultural autonomy involves a willingness to compare different cultures, recognising their relaltive strengths and weaknesses, powers and limits.

Why do we find a tendency to protect and safeguard one's cultural traditions in the garb of cultural autonomy? Partly, it has to do with the hangover of the past dogmatic, sectarian and narrow-minded attitudes which have been mentioned earlier. But partly it has to be understood as a response to the rightly or wrongly perceived threats in an atmosphere charged with deep prejudices, fears, apprehensions and suspicions arising out of the use of cultural, religious and ethnic identities for narrow political gains. The process of dialogue and openness towards one another, indicating a willingness to learn from one another, is likely to result in consequences inconvenient to those sections or groups which are beneficiaries of the existing inegalitarian and hierarchical structures. To contain, mask and distort the prevailing structures which obstruct the realisation of aspiration for autonomy on the part of individuals and oppressed sections of society, the cultural and political elites find it convenient to organise and activate the masses under the banner of protection of ethnic, communal and casteist identities by reclaiming collective memories of past oppressions, invasions, injustices and conflicts. These tendencies are not specific or exclusive to any particular part of India. At different times they may seem dormant in one part and manifestly active in another. Whenever and wherever the situation crosses the critical point, it is only then that we start hearing of a crisis. Otherwise, we tend to remain oblivious of what has been constantly happening all the time simply because it does not directly harm or hurt the relatively privileged and more articulate sections of Indian society. In this context it also needs to be noticed that the modern liberal discourse of autonomy is taken advantage of to propagate traditional communal and caste identities. Thus the secular language of political and religious tolerance is used for non-secular goals. Perhaps such distortions are not only convenient but also become necessary when there is only a semblance of civil society in the name of a democratic polity. The old feudal and colonial tendencies and methods of obtaining submission and obedience through brute force of contrived manipulations continue to operate despite the constitutional provisions of fundamental rights and directive principles of state policy.

A careful look at the construction and projection of pan-Indian identity during the freedom struggle may also be of some help to understand the complexities of the present situation. Being an 'Indian' provided an ascriptive unifying identity against the British. This identity was adopted by the middle-class, western-educated elite to pursue the goal of political autonomy. But communal, caste and regional identities were also invoked and used for mobilising the masses to participate in the freedom struggle. How the encompassing pan-Indian identity would be sustained (without

threatening the other ascriptive identities) in the post-independence era was not given sufficient attention during the period of struggle for independence. Consequently, we continue to face the constant tension between the homogenising universalist tendency, superimposed by the leadership of the nationalist freedom movement, and the heterogenous particularising tendency expediently involved to launch various struggles against the post-independence ruling elite by the newly emerging leadership. But these patterns and strategies are a continuation of the political processes initiated during the pre-independence period itself. During the post-independence era, the old politics of co-option, adjustments and compromises has only been taken to its logical conclusion in an effort to maintain and safeguard the structures of power and authority inherited from the colonial masters. Political autonomy for the Indian people would be possible only through a questioning of the policies of this new ruling elite and struggling for alternatives which may contribute towards the setting up of a civil society. It seems uncertain, at the present moment, whether an alternative political movement will emerge and sustain itself. Whether the lure of ethnic, religious and linguistic identities would permit the requisite sense of discrimination to identify and reduce, if not eradicate, the real sources of subordination and marginalisation – it is difficult to conjecture. But it would be a wishful thinking that the goal of decolonisation, one form of political and cultural autonomy, can be achieved simply by taking a collective decision to not be trapped or lured by the western sensibilities and striving for a re-construction of indigenous or 'authentic' belief systems and values.

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