Original article

Interrogating the Concept of Identity in Plural Society: Perspectives from Anthropology

Sekh Rahim Mondal[1]

ABSTRACT

This article critically looks at the concept of identity in plural social context of contemporary times. To deal with this the process and patterns of identity construction by the social actors shall be explored and examined. Finally, the dimensions and functions of identity construction shall also be highlighted in general with India in particular. The author argues that discussions and dialogues are very impotent amongst the diverge groups to meet up the challenges of negative aspects of identities.

Key words: Identity, Multicultural Society, Plural Society, Cosmopolitan Society, Diversity

[1]

INTRODUCTION

"The purpose of Anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences".
- Professor Ruth Benedict.

In contemporary times identity issues are widely debated and discussed. Contradictions and clashes between and among different groups on the basis of their

---

[1] Former C.C. Sanyal Chair Professor of Anthropology & Sociology, Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, rahimanthnbu@yahoo.co.in

identities, cultures and even civilizations are almost universal feature today. It is very true that everyone and every group has its identity, but how it constructed, formed and manifested are very complex in character. Up to middle of last century "identity" was not considered as much problematic in anthropological discourses as anthropologists used to study the groups those were bounded, circumscribed and obviously delineated by territory, language and culture. But today out of globalization, migration and many other forces of change there has been a conspicuous growth of plural society. As a result, the notions of bounded community become weak. In plural society various communities are now living side by side, interact with each other and there by resulting to the growth of multi-cultural society. In multi-cultural plural society various groups are living together, but separately. As a result, the emergence of identity became an issue and this is quite obvious. Therefore, the character of plural society necessitates the understanding of the dynamic nature of collective identity formation including how they form and perpetuate over times. In contemporary interconnected world how individuals or groups within in a nation state identify themselves and how they identify others are very important to know not only for nation building but also for national development. Last several decades Anthropologists are concerned primary with racial and ethnic identities or ethnicities. But there are various other forms of identity formation particularly in plural society, which needs to be examined though sound theoretical and methodological paradigms.

This paper is a humble attempt to examine the concept of identity. The critical scrutiny of this concept shall help us in understanding the multiple patterns of identity construction in plural multi-cultural society.

The paper is based on review of literatures supported by authors own research experiences on identity issues in Indian social context.

The author argues that there is a need of negotiating the issues of identity by way of dialogues and discussions on the values of identity and diversity. This will certainly help to tackle the challenges of emerging social complexity based on identity issues.

[2]

ON THE TERM AND CONCEPT OF "IDENTITY"

The term identity is very confusing. It is a contested concept which means there is no universal agreed way to define it. Identity is primary imagined and but has empirical relevance. There is a problem of defining identity, thus it may be described and explained. The term identity appears at least in three different contexts. First, how an individual or a group perceive it; second, how an individual or a group perceived by the other groups; and third, how an individual or a group perceive by state, media and even academicians (say anthropologists).

Ethnicities, linguistic, social and religious groups (communities) and even nationality often elicit a primary sense of identity. Identity has its relation with society, language and culture of a group. It is it interesting to note that in contemporary globalizing world when many of the elements of traditional cultural characteristics of human groups are either hybridized or vanishing why their identity issues are day by day increasing? Under such a social context study of identity is not just an academic exercise rather very important to know the complexities and challenges of identity matters for establishing social harmony.

Collective imagination creates solidarity among the members of a group in the formation of identity and there by provide basis for organization and action. One way of understanding identity is to see it as a collective truth of "self" rooted in layers of superficial and artificial "selves". This hidden self has historical continuity which shows common codes with others of similar descent and when consciously affirmed reproduced one people or one group. But there are other ways of examining the identity which needs to be explained. There are various theories of examining identity. These are: primordialism, constructionalism and relationalism. All these have different perspectives of looking towards identity formation and identity construction.

Identity issues are very significant in the context of plural, complex and multi-cultural society. A plural society is also designated as cosmopolitan society. In this society different sections or segments of population live side by side, mixed with each other in everyday life or in occasions, but do not combine. Such societies possess distinctive economic, social,

cultural and political characteristics where various diverge groups interact and mix but do not converge. To some extent culturally they converge by sharing some of the each other's cultural elements, but at the same time strictly maintain their social divergence. In plural social context the societies are held together primarily by means of political and administrative mechanisms exercised primarily by the dominant section of majority community. The nature of social and political composition and action in such a society therefore, demands a critical scrutiny.

Identity expresses such a social relation which connotes both the persistent "sameness" within oneself and also sharing some kind of essential characteristics with the others of the same place. Primarily identity means "sameness", which formed out of collective attributes. Identity signifies some things those are ascribed and some things those ore achieved. Identity also connotes how one sees "themselves" and "others". There is also another dimension of identity which may also be seen from the construction of difference from the "others".

Identity is a social category may be viewed as "ourselves", i.e., "we" and "others" i.e. "they". This also signifies "insider" or "outsider". The notion and construction of "other" is very much linked with the formation of identity. The process of making "others" is very complex, where the notion of stereotypes and sigmas are also in operation.

There are two methodological paradigms to interrogate the issues of identity. These are 'identity as mismatch" and "identity as an asset" in the context of diversities.

The identity issue become problematic and mismatch when it is used in negative ways. The mismatch takes place when a self identity of an individual or a group does not match with the identities ascribed by the others, particularly the majority. The factors leading to mismatch includes social, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds and even physical appearance of a person or a group. Now the question emerges is the mismatch inevitable or there is a room to accommodate the narrow perspective of division and exclusion. Actually in plural multicultural society there is indeed a need of a space to accommodate the identities for each other's benefit. This can be achieved through the policy of true integration but not by planned assimilation in the name of the former.

The identity is also an asset if we see it as cultural capital and civilization enricher. To achieve this asset there is a need of advocating the positive values of diversity. In plural multicultural society it is necessary to redefine the identities which the individuals and groups carry. It is true that this is not an easy process to change the stereotypes and misconceptions around multiple forms of identity issues. However, it is possible through intercultural dialogues and exchange of views with each other. For considering identity as an asset there is a need to adopt the soft approach, but it depends on how much space the majority chooses to share with the minority groups on identity issues. In plural social context a nation state to be seen as a society of diversity, but not a society of majority or minority. It is the prime duty of the responsible bodies of a nation state to look at the valuable contributions made by the diverge groups of the country belonging to both majority and minority. This requires for the sake of inclusivity regardless of any social and cultural backgrounds of the peoples living together in a nation state. (Bouhamou and Liu: 2020, Cerulo: 1997, Erikson; 1980, Garcia: 1995, Hall:1990, Haredia: 1997, Mondal: 2017, Moris: 1967, Sen: 2007, Sokofeld: 2001, Phadnis: 2001, Huntington: 1996).

[3]

THE PROCESS AND PATTERNS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

It is very interesting to note that, the individual identity of a person i.e., self in the process of social interaction giving rise to the formation of a collective identity in the form of a "we" of a group on the basis of shared cultural attributes. Identity construction is a contextual phenomenon where the time and context are linked together. The people of a group bear multiple identities. Identity is not singular, rather highly plural and multiple. It is the situation, context, time and requirement out of which the people form and express the specific identity.

Group identity is a social artifact that can be molded, reformulated and mobilized on the basis of available cultural attributes out of the forces of "power". Identity is both given or attributed i.e. primordial identity and at the same time it is very much constructed on the basis of nature of relationship with the "others". Such as ethnicity, communality, caste, gender and

class etc. Collective identity is imagined and a social or political construct but what is important is to know the basis of such construction process. It is interesting to know when many of the traditional cultural elements of various social groups or communities are gradually vanishing or even converging, even then why their identities are day by day increasing.

For example, India is a land of many regions, peoples, societies, languages, cultures and religions. Country is very vast and a greater composite Indian society is very complex, which is characterized by many societies and communities of different types. So, idea of Indian society as a singular social whole is empirically not a reality, but a myth simply. Social and cultural diversities are very high in India and those are varied in types and characters. Therefore, the notion of Indian society is abstract and imagined. But it is unfortunate that most of the anthropological and even sociological discourses are titled as "Indian Society", which basically speaks about only one society and one identity i.e., dominant majoritarian society, in the name of mainstream identity. People(s) of India bearing multiple identities but the most important is how those are constituted and for what those are projected or reflected.

The concept of identity is associated with the concept of "self" and "in-group" formation to which the economic, political and social implications of the group plays a great role. Same people use different identities in different context those of different meaning and different significance. It is also to be noted that, collective or group identity construction differs in varied context and which may be changed over times. Presence of multiple and diverse identities are not problematic, but what is problematic is the ignoring or suppressing the diversities of identities. Constructing homogenous identity by sacrificing and ignoring the diversities is a dangerous socio-political trend which affects the plural character of a complex cosmopolitan society of present times.

If we look on the issue on why people claim and project identity, we may see that in the present context identity has assumed political connection and hence associated with the discourses of power, politics, authority and control. People throughout the globe now a day's claim identity in plural social context for various reasons. What is very alarming is that the

identity turned to be problematic when people insist on the communal or ethnic identity. This is because of the fact that the question of both power and resistance is associated with the claim of identity. People demanding things and even human rights, gender rights, indigenous rights, child rights etc. because these are linked with certain established rights and also when these rights are denied or violated by power the issues of identity obviously emerged. Politics of identity and politics of culture is now a global social problem.

Identity issue is very much associated with the inequality and security of a group, particularly of weaker sections and marginals. The process of alienation, exclusion and so also the inclusive policies are also associated with the group identity in plural social context. Say for example ethnic, caste and community-based alienation and exclusion in India. This is also true for recent inclusive policies of the country for once alienated and excluded groups through protective measures based on identities like STs, SCs, OBCs, women, third sex and other marginal groups of the country. (Anderson: 1983, Appadurai: 1996, Anderson: 1989, Brass: 1991, Cooper: 1997, Danda: 1991, Lewellen: 2002, Mondal, 2007, 2009).

In India the perception of people's identity is very complex. Anthropologist commonly perceive an ethnic group as tribe, but the Indian state perceived it as scheduled tribe (ST) and people of the concerned group perceived them

 by their own group or community name. While by non-ethnic people such as caste people perceive them as *adivashi, modeshi, janjati, upa-jati* etc. It is to be noted here that the dominant people(s) never like to designate them as "ethnic". Similar is the case of Hindu caste society. Anthropologist designated it as caste or *jati*, state perceive it as General Caste (GC), Schedule Caste (SC) and recently Dalit etc. But the concern people perceive them by their own caste name or by the state connotations as General, SC or Dalit at present. Further, caste Hindu people, perceive them either as *ucchu jat* or *nichu jat*. This is also true for Indian Muslims. In academic, media and popular discourses Muslims as a whole now perceived as minority. But the state perceives them as General, OBC and even as Dalit Muslims. But the Muslim group perceives them either as *asraf* or *ajlaf* or *arzal* etc. and now also by state perceptions like General and OBC Muslims. Sometimes on the basis of identity derogatory

terms are also used to perceive and refer a group belonging to weaker and marginal sections and those are highly stigmatized.

In India where people live side by side with diverge identities in the forms of languages, ethnicities, traditions, cultures and religions there is a need of social bridging. This is very fundamental for building and strengthening social relations, reconciliations and breaking down stereotypes and assumptions. It will help to deal with contemporary challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, inequality, gender discrimination and environmental issues. In plural social context of India, a wider form of people's identity could be a possible solution to meet up the identity challenges. The wider form of people's identity may be conceptualized as the form of an inclusive identity that tackles the mismatch between the self-identity and the identity ascribed by the others in multicultural India. It may be understood as the process of true integration of multiple identities for which there is a need of amalgamation of values, cultures, relations, ethnicities, communities and so forth. The people's identity is a collective term of having multiple identities of the citizens of the country. This will be the asset which may be utilized in nation building or nation making, where the citizen's cultural capital is heavily valued. This is only possible if all forms of identities and diversities are respected and recognized by each other.   To achieve this, communications and dialogues between majority and minority groups needs to be welcomed and encouraged by the state and non-state agencies.

[4]

DIMENSIONS AND FUNCTIONS OF IDENTITY

The question of identity usually not emerge when a group live in isolation. But as soon as it comes in contact with two or more alien groups the issues of identity emerge among the groups. Identity is not a thing, but "relationship" with the other groups like majority and minority or dominant and subordinate or advantaged and disadvantage categories.

There is a need of shifting methodology for examining the identity issues. It should not be seen only as a matter of "sameness" but also to be seen in terms of "difference"

amongst the groups. The identity of difference is getting importance when the notion of "other" is created. Identity is constituted not only on the basis of "sameness" but also in terms of "differences". In constructing identity, the notion of reference group is very important, since all the groups have their own group boundaries based on traditions. When a particular group perceives them different from the other(s) and how they maintain the differences for perpetuating their group identity should also be explored and examined critically. In such a context a group use some particular elements of their culture in order to select of and identify the members as belonging to the same group and exclude the others those who do not possess such cultural elements of the former. The identities of difference one maintained through social boundaries.

The concept of identity has immense importance as it has three main functions. These are (a) identity as a category, (b) identity as an analytical tool and (c) identity as a practice in socio-political context. The concept of identity may be used as a theoretical frame and also as methodological tool for classification, identification and analysis in academic and administrative works and practices. As a category of practice, it may also be seen that how people of various groups living in the plural society and use it in their every duly life as social actors. This will help us in understanding how the social actors in their social context make a sense for themselves of their acts and activities of what they share with their own group members and how they are different from others. Identity of practice is not simply the acts and activities of common people it is also used for categorization of peoples for extending social services by the administration. But alarming is how it is diploid by the politicians to day for dividing the people on the basis of their primary identity for fulfilling their political goals. The construction of "other" such as "unwanted other", "dislike other", "permanent other" or "other forever" and even "other as enemy" are typical examples of identity of practice in political arena today. One can easily see these attributes in the Indian socio-political context of contemporary times. (Barth: 1969, Borah and Dekha: 2017, Routherford: 1990, Srivastava: 2004).

[5]

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The foregoing exploration and interrogation of the concept of "identity" clearly reveals that, it has potential to understand the nature and character of a plural complex society. The critical scrutiny of the concept is very requiring to understand how the identity operates in social and political context and how it is perceived by social actors. Identity is not singular and one, but multiple and diverse in character depending upon context, time and situation. The concept of group and collective identity may be seen both as theory and methodology in anthropology and sociology. Identity is a social construction which is very complex as it is characterized by primordial, essential and relational characteristics. As a methodological tool of analysis, it has high potential in the context of identification and categorization of social categories. Finally, it is also used as a category of social and political practice of contemporary times.

Identity may also be considered as level that how someone assigns him/her or his/her group members. Similarly, it is also a level how the others designate him/her on the basis of ascriptions. It is to be remembered that identity formation and construction is a social action of making choices based on situation. As a result, individuals may present various identities in various contexts.

The fluidity of identity clearly reveals that for dealing with the negative impacts of identity there is a counter need of shaping the benefits of identity. Therefore, more debate and discussions among and between the peoples of diverge groups possess different identities should come closer for dialogues to create an inclusive society. Thus, negotiating diversity is very important in plural society to face the challenge of identities. To achieve the success the roles of state and non-state agencies and actors including the social leaders have a very crucial role to play.

Anthropology is a holistic study of man and society of all times, all places and of all types. The concept of identity in anthropology and sociology has theoretical, methodological and empirical significance. Anthropologists should focused their attention towards complex plural society of rural and urban India for examining the identity issues of various groups and how those are perceived by the peoples, state agencies, social activists, media personals and above all the politicians of the country. Hope budding scholars of anthropology will come forward to work on the subject of identity issues from holistic perspective.

REFERENCES:

Anderson Benedict (1983) *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism*, Version, London:

Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernization at large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization,* University of Milneaplis Press, Mineapolis

Barth, Fredrik (1969). *The Ethnic Group and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference,* Little Brown and Company, Boston

Benedict, Ruth, 1989 (1934) *Patterns of Culture,* Honghton Mifflin, Newyork

Bouhamou Chahida and Cha-Hsuan Liu (2020) Negotiating a Global Identity. *News Letter, International Institute of Asian Studies, No 85,pp-14-15.*

Brass Paul R, (1991) *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison,* Sage Publications, New Delhi

Barah P.P. and P. Dekha, (2017) Some Aspects of Identity in Plural Societies. *North Eastern Research Bulletin,* 25: 22-33

Cerulo, Karen A. (1997) Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23:385-409

Cooper Fredric and R. Packward (1997) "Introduction", In: F. Cooper and R. Packard (Eds) *International Development and the Social Sciences,* University of California Press, Berkely

Danda Ajit Kumar (1991) *Ethnicity in India*, Inter India Publication, New Delhi

Erikson, Erich H (1980) *Identity and Life Cycle,* Norton, New York

Garcia, Canclini Nester (1995) *Cultural Hybridity: Strategies for Entering and Living Modernity,* University of Mineapolis Press, Minneapolis

Hall Stuart (1990) "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" In: Rutherford J (Ed.) *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference.* Lawrence and Wishart, London

Haredia Rudolf C. (1997) Ethnicity, Class and Nation: Inter-relationships in a Multicultural State. *Economic and Political Weekly.* 32(19): 1010-1015.

Huntington, S. (1996) *The Clash of Civilization: Remaking of World Order,* Simmon and Schister, New York

Lewellen Ted. C. (2002) *Anthropology of Globalization,* Bergin and Garvey, London

Mondal, Sekh Rahim (2007) "Ethnic, Social and Cultural Matrix in Hills and Plains of North Bengal" In: B. Choudhuri and S. Choudhuri (Eds.) *Indigenous People, Traditional Wisdom and Sustainable Development,* Inter India Publications, New Delhi

Mondal, Sekh Rahim (2009) The Muslims in India – In Search of a new Identity in N.K. Das and V.R. Rao (Eds.) *Identity, Cultural, Pluralism and Safe – South Asia in Perspective,,* Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata & Macmillan, New Delhi.

Modnal, Sekh Rahim (2017) "Interrogating Cosmopolitanism from Anthropological Perspective", In: S. Sengupta (Ed.) *Contemporary Anthropological Research in Easternand North Eastern India,* (PP.23-31) Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi

Morris H.S. (1967) "Some Aspects of the Plural Society. *Man, New Series,* 2(2):169-184.

Phadnis, Urmila and Rajat Ganguly (2001) *Ethnicity and Nation Building in South Asia,* Sage Publications, New Delhi

Routher Ford (Ed.) (1990) *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference,* Lawrence and Wishart, London

Sokofeld Martin (2001) Reconstructing Identity. *Anthropologist,* 96(2):527-544.

Sen, A. (2015) *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny,* Penguin Books, New Delhi

Srivastava Vinay Kumar (2004) *Methodology and Field Work,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

———