



Pluralism in society: A critical review of the literature

Riyaz Ahmad Naik, Munir Ahmad Dar

Department of Sociology, Centre of Central Asian Studies (CCAS), University of Kashmir, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Abstract

At the very outset of this work, we firmly hold that 'discreteness of an ethnic group is an illusion', instead it has been found that it is hard to imagine a group living in isolation and without interactions with neighboring groups. The development of the concept of "plural society" was found in facsimile with the stepwise abandonment of 'tribal' concept by the anthropologists that got replaced with the emergence of 'ethnicity' as a term, that was in accordance with the accommodation to the dynamic world. The concept of 'plural society' is thought to be an offspring of the 'colonial era', when different British colonies in Africa and elsewhere were controlled by means of indirect rule through local courts and chiefs. Moreover, through this work our approach will be to locate a theoretical paradigm that pronounces an integrated approach of ethnicity in plural societies.

Keywords: pluralism, multiethnic, cohesion, identity, construction

Introduction

The concept of Pluralism and Plural society have their first mention in Furnivall's account on colonial analysis in South East Asia in 1940's. The other experts from social anthropology and sociology who elaborated the ideas of Furnivall and were also interested in plural society model were M. G. Smith, Leo Kuper, Van den Berge, Schermerhorn, Eriksen and others. Further the works of Stephen Morris, Daniel J. Crowley, Benedict Anderson, Fredrick Barth, Cohen and John Rex cannot be ignored in exploring pluralist nature of ethnic groups.

The concept of plural society has a gradual evolution beginning from maiden works on pluralism by J. S. Furnivall in *Netherlands India* (Furnivall, 1939) ^[4] and *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Furnivall, 1948) ^[5]. Furnivall was an economist and a colonial historian by profession and he defined plural society for the first time. He defined it as different ethnic groups living side by side but interacting with each other only in the market place. Furthermore, in his own words he defined plural society as "comprising two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit" (Furnivall, 1939) ^[4]. In the next lines Furnivall goes on to say that in the Netherlands the rulers and the subjects lived separately in different communities as they were belonging to different races. As an economist he focused on the economic aspects of the said community. Having mentioned that each community was in possession of separate community guidelines (values) that remained antagonistic to others values and at the same time lacking 'common social demand' to engage with one another, the only meeting ground was the 'marketplace'. So that it does not matter that two persons contradict culturally but at the same time they resemble economically as they were having a common desire of 'profit'. He further commented that economic activities were in accordance with the ethnic divisions so that the Chinese controlled the trade, Indonesians controlled rural areas and Europeans monopolized the world business and administration. This control strengthened the 'parochial' viewpoint among the members of these different ethnic groups. So, it is obvious that a unanimous nationalist movement in such communities is not possible when they are against one another. This question was answered by the same author in his *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*. When he reacted that there must have been an external force- or in his own words 'coercive power' that was used to bind together groups.

The scholars who carried further study regarding pluralism mainly relied on two viewpoints of Furnivall that they wanted to explore:

1. The different ethnic communities living side by side are more inclined to conflict (Naik, 2017) ^[7].
2. Coercion rather than cooperation maintain the necessary order of society.

Against this backdrop, Stephen Morris (Morris, 1956) in "*Indians in East Africa: A study in a plural society*" presented a report with regard to Indians in East African societies including Zanzibar, Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda. In this work he has presented the demographic structure of these societies. He has recorded 18,300,000 as the total population of East Africa. Out of which 198,000 are Indians, 79,000 Arabs, 50,000 Europeans and 18,000,000 Africans (largest ethnic group). He further writes that the persons holding different ethnic identities in these societies also spoke different language, have different culture and at sometimes also limit their social

contacts to their native ethnic groups. Economic divisions among these also coexist with ethnicity. Morris in his study finds that the Indian diaspora is further internally organized into various categories and sub-categories so that "more important to an Indian in East Africa than being a Hindu or Muslim, or even, on most occasions, than being an Indian is being an Ismaili, a Patidar, a Sikh, a Goan, or a member of a dozen or so other caste or sectarian groups (Morris, 1956)." At last Morris believes that in this society greater emphasis was on racial categories and thereby in effect of it, Morris, argues that *non ethnic cleavages can cut across racial lines and thereby encourage joint pursuit of some common multiethnic objective* (Rabushka, and Shepsle, 1972) ^[8]. For Morris in business matters, good relationship exists between Indian elites, Europeans and Africans. So, the non-accomplishment of Indians to have a joint venture with regard to business matters vis-à-vis the other communities made Morris to conclude that ethnic competition cannot be always true in plural societies as Furnivall has said.

While mentioning Daniel. J. Crowley's *politics in plural societies: A theory of democratic instability* (Rabushka, and Shepsle, 1972) ^[8], he presented similar stance which was in continuation to criticize Furnivall's statement of 'conflictual behavior of ethnic groups and ethnic competition'. In the same work, Crowley gave us an example of Trinidad which as per his analysis is highly plural in nature but with zero conflict among different ethnic groups. He has identified thirteen racial or ethnic groups that are not exclusive irrespective of their distinctiveness and all of them somehow know the cultural activities of other groups. Crowley calls it '*plural acculturation*'. So the members of each ethnic group as per Crowley maintain their identity while having at the same time familiarity with cultural activities of other ethnic groups. But as a social scientist it is hard to believe for anyone that plural acculturation of this type can exist in real world. Criticized for the same stance, Alvin Rabuska and Kenneth A. Shepsle quoted an example of *black power riots* of 1970 in Trinidad which negates the argument of plural acculturation in Trinidad put by Crowley.

Burton Benedict (Benedict, 1962) ^[2] in his field study reiterated what Crowley and Morris have already portrayed. He insists upon the fact that it was class in Mauritius than ethnic tie-up that impacted political alliance in Mauritius in 1962. As per Benedict's analysis, Furnivall's account of the plural society was, therefore, unbecoming because in Mauritius members are aligned as per their occupational activities (class) and not because they belong to different ethnic categories. It is these institutions as per him that promote relationships among different ethnic groups rather than ethnic competition. Benedict however in later part of his work admits that ethnic divisions can however sometimes play role in political arena.

Since we have witnessed many ethnic conflicts since second half of 20th century, none of the above scholars other than Furnivall stands true. Neither intra-ethnic divisions (Morris), mutual cultural knowledge (Crowley) nor cross-cutting class alignment (Benedict) attempts were successful in assembling many plural societies today. In a similar way sociologist M. G. Smith, having a great experience of studying plural societies especially Caribbean, also differ with the critics of Furnivall. Smith in his essay '*Social and Cultural Pluralism* (Smith, 1960)' maintained that disunity is inevitable in highly segmented society and in order to maintain cohesion, implicit and explicit coercion via various agents is a necessary exercise. In his own words, "given the fundamental differences of belief, value, and organization that connote pluralism, the monopoly of power by one cultural section is the essential precondition for the maintenance of the total society in its current form". Smith contends that plural societies represent 'a separate form of society.' Not all the societies having diverse cultural groups can be entitled as plural societies but according to Smith a plural society is characterized by mutual existence of antagonistic social institutions and therefore coercion is necessary to maintain order. In Smith's perspective plural societies are units of disparate parts which owes its existence to external factors, and lacks 'a common social will' (Eiksen, 2010).

Smith's comprehension of politics in plural societies can be understood in two ways. First, he exhibits that cross-cutting divisions belonging to ideology or class do not terminate divisions based on ethnic differentiation and the political complications arising out of it. At second instance, he wants to make us believe that it is not always true that all those societies characterized by cultural diversity can be attributed politically as plural ones. Hence the only difference of opinion between Furnivall and Smith emerges here which is that Furnivall's analysis is applicable to the situations where the divisions based on ethnic criteria are sharp and those divisions lead to formation of separate political chambers.

Before venturing further it is mandatory to write the efforts of Fredrick Barth, a notable sociologist and social anthropologist of his times who turned our attention towards cognitive dimension of *situational ethnicity* (Okamura. 2010). In his work "*ethnic groups and boundaries*", he developed a model which drifted cultural stuff from the prominent stage and replaced it with a focus on boundaries of ethnic groups that delineate the group. Standing against other predecessors of his time, Barth comments that such definitions of ethnic groups mislead us. In the same work *ethnic groups and boundaries* he says:

Most critically, it allows us to assume that boundary maintenance is unproblematic and follows from the isolation which the itemized characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, and social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organized enmity (Barth, 1969).

This in his analysis is abject because of two reasons. One, ethnic groups defined via 'cultural uniqueness' portrays a wrong direction that groups have tendency to be discrete. Barth thinks otherwise as he says that groups may have attained that cultural uniqueness because of the continuous long-run social interactions and

processes over a time period rather than an ascribed or primordial feature of that group. Secondly, and as said earlier, such connotations based on mutual culture allow us to believe that boundary maintenance is unproblematic. But Barth thinks against it and suggests that maintenance and consequences of ethnic boundaries should be the prime focus of researchers.

'Differences between groups become differences in trait inventories; the attention is drawn to the analysis of cultures, not of ethnic organization'. (Barth, 1969).

It seems that Barth was an implicit critic of pluralism (Okamura. 1981). Through Barth, it was realized by other scholars of multiculturalism like Abner Cohen, Wsevolod W. Isajiw, and Y. Okamura to stress upon the subjective meanings rather than objective traits while defining ethnic boundaries and memberships. It indicates that objective differences like language, culture cannot be quoted while drafting group boundaries but instead it is the sum total of subjective interpretations that matters in differentiating group A from group B. This approach after Barth was appreciated and this necessitated the participatory observation or ethnography for all those scholars who want to study plural cultures. Further, Barth's approach with regard to ethnicity is that identity based on ethnicity is not fixed but is in flux and is used and manipulated by humans as per their choices (Okamura. 1981). Since Barth conceives of ethnicity in terms of meanings that actors accord, hence Barth's approach resonates parallel to 'situational ethnicity'.

Even this approach of studying ethnicity has its critics. Pierre Van Den Berge in *ethnicity and class in Highland Peru* (Berge, 1975) and in *ethnic pluralism in industrial societies: A special case* (Okamura. 1981) maintains that too much emphasis on cognitive characteristics of ethnicity reduces ethnicity to mere subjectivity and hence problematic. Other than criticism it was not only Barth who believed in such criteria of ethnicity but other scholars of his time or his successors too advocated subjectivity and restricted selection of ethnicity to individual's choice.

Abner Cohen was one among them who was finding it helpful to agree with Barth's situational approach of ethnicity. Cohen defined ethnicity as 'political organization' and a dual process that comprises aspects of utility and aspects of meaning. This dual process gets utilized by the ethnicity to meet specific ends. As per the study of Abner Cohen namely, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (Cohen, 1969), defines ethnicity as an informal interest group to gain when the resources are in scarce.

Ethnicity as we have seen after Barth is emerging as a purely 'situational phenomena' and hence 1993 work of Wsevolod W. Isajiw *Definition and Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Framework* (Isajiw, 1993) has become prominent in this regard who believe that ethnicity is based on *rational choice theory*. As per this theory, ethnicity can be relevant in some instances and not in others. Hence individuals may switch their identities based on ethnicity as per their advantages. In the same work he adds that ethnicity in modern times is discussed and constructed in everyday life. Ethnicity thus is a process that is constructed and reconstructed by the upholders hence situational and hence open to attach new meanings to the term.

The next milestone in continuity of pluralism debate is of Jonathan Y. Okamura's *Situational ethnicity* (Okamura. 2010) which according to him is actor's cognitive subjective perception of the situation. Hence ethnicity for a participant in plural society is based on either self-ascription of symbols and signs and the meanings attached so as to make categorical ascriptions of ethnic identity and hence to draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them' for the purpose of interactions. During interaction people as per their benefits might advance their claims to attain group membership via different ethnic categories in which they fall or do not fall. But, most importantly what Okamura connotes by situational ethnicity is that individuals can also intentionally befof ethnic symbols that they carry with them whenever they found them of no use and utilizes other status symbols to interact with others. This situation as per Okamura usually arises when the second group in interaction is in relative power and may not necessarily accord the due regard to the ethnic identity claiming group and may 'define the situation' (Thomas, 1923) as it pleases the second group.

The available literature suggests a rhythmical shift in conceiving a plural society. All the approaches and sub-approaches to comprehend ethnicity cannot depict the whole story, so we have to locate that particular integrative approach that pronounces a stable theory of ethnicity. Seeing the tremendous support for constructivist approach to ethnicity, we among many believe that constructivist analysis can provide a stable theory to comprehend ethnicity.

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