

Governing Cultural Diversity and the Question of Well-Being in India

(Draft Paper)

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As Partha Dasgupta in his *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution* (1995) argues that the right to membership to a group or community and be socially constituted is an integral part of human well-being, little did he realize that this right is neither simple nor unproblematic. The existing literature on well-being particularly in India is so deeply obsessed with the task of finding out the enabling mechanisms or more particularly the mechanisms of capability enhancement that it more often than not loses sight of these problems and complexities: For one thing, insofar as the individual already exists as a socially constituted - or to borrow a phrase characteristic of the Communitarian writings - 'socially embodied' being - before she exercises the right, she is left with very little choice – if at all - to constitute her own self. Her apriori existence as a socially constituted being makes any exercise of this right redundant; or if she ever exercises this right, she can only by way of hoping to subsequently reconstitute how she has been *pre*-constituted. As an extreme example, one may say that one's membership to an ethnic community is, for all practical purposes, both given and unalterable. By contrast, that a certain streak of methodological individualism marks Dasgupta's writings should not escape our notice.

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For another, it is also important to find out whether our exercise of this right takes away the same right from those whom we perceive as the *other* with the effect that everyone in the society is subjected to the same grids and modes of social constitution and membership - eventually steamrolling and wiping out the cultural diversity altogether that has historically come to mark the Indian society. India, according to a section of commentators, has increasingly been facing the threat of turning into an essentially homogenized and monochromatic society. Most importantly, one can raise the question: does not the exercise of this right take away from us our own right to be alternatively constituted? In the process, our irreducibly multicultural existence is 'underestimated' or 'downplayed' with violent repercussions for our society: "It becomes highly dangerous when one identity seeks to 'downplay' and 'underestimate the richness of the multiple features of her "social situation". (Sen 2006:177-178). It is on such occasions, as Mahbub Ul Haq argues, our right to freedom from being socially constituted could as well count as a measure of human welfare (Haq 1995:69). In short, the literature on well-being seems insensitive to the debate on multiculturalism in India.

Shift in the Technology of Governing Cultural Diversity

If the first-generation technology of governing well-being was addressed to the problem of finding out appropriate ways and means of empowering us and enhancing our capabilities, the second-generation technology is increasingly becoming appreciative of the problems and complexities involved in the exercise of the right of being socially constituted with the rider that cultural diversity unless reined in and governed runs the risk of plunging into utter anarchy eventually threatening to tear our social fabric apart. Governance is supposed to provide the missing link between cultural diversity and well-being. Thus to cite an instance, in the 1950s and the 1960s thanks to the sudden surge of violence accompanying the demand for linguistic states, such 'prophesies of doom' were very common in the landscape of Indian Social Science. Selig Harrison in 1960 made the grim prediction that India was destined to be dismembered into as many as 14 linguistic nations.

This led to a serious quest for second-generation technologies of governing a society that remains perpetually fragile and unstable precisely because of its bewildering cultural diversity. In the 1970s the scenario changed completely with the rising concern for governing the cultural diversity in a myriad of ways and not allowing it to stretch itself beyond a certain threshold. Besides revamping and overhauling our federal institutions to accommodate the country's cultural diversity particularly in the 1980s (Sarkaria Commission report that pleaded for greater federalization is an example), there was also the concern for organizing and reconciling various contending rights claims (like the right to culture of the majorities as well as the minorities) within

a common framework or what I called 'a regime of rights'. What the multiculturalists and theorists of recognition have been debating on in India for the past few years is the issue of what could be the possible normative contours of such a rights regime. Right to culture is being sought to be subjected to a 'culture of rights'. Primarily since the 1990s and through the first decade of the new millennium, the importance of civil society as the key mediating institution for governing India's cultural diversity and the contending rights claims associated with it was more deeply felt with the imperative that civil society instead of merely reflecting and representing the existing cultural diversity must work for finding out ways to reconcile these claims, to negotiate and cope with the diversity in a way that makes it possible for all the diverse groups and communities to live together within a common societal framework without harming one or the other.

A good deal of the existing literature is preoccupied with the task of rediscovering the common cultural threads that run through the diverse groups and communities notwithstanding the great diversity and heterogeneity that apparently mark them. The concern is as old as that of Vincent Smith – the colonial historian who devised the famous doctrine of 'unity in diversity' in India. The problem with such a doctrine is not so much that such cultural threads are non-existent but that such threads do not seem to be powerful enough to stem wanton violence erupting at regular intervals and hold the society together in times of crisis. In simple terms, the literature that developed thanks to Vincent Smith and his followers views culture in static terms – not in terms of their dynamics as they unfold themselves over time and the terms of power that are implicated in these dynamics.

A Critique of the Governmental Power

The search for technologies of governing cultural diversity was inspired by the realization that cultural diversity left as it is without being controlled and governed is likely to tear our body politic apart. How can one conceive of well-being when the integrity of the social order is in jeopardy? The underlying dichotomy between well-being and cultural diversity that has its built-in propensity towards disintegration and destabilization is also an invitation to subject the latter to a new form of governmental power.

In this section, I would like to tell a different story – different from what appears as a seamless story of how governmental power engulfs cultural diversity, controls, contains and subsumes it – but the story of its cracks and fissures, of how cultural diversity interrupts the flow and circulation of governmental power and serves as its 'permanent limit' (Foucault 1982:794) without tearing our society apart. This paper is only a modest inquiry into the nature of power with 'p' in small - that interrupts the technologies of governing our cultural diversity. For obvious limitations of time, I will refer only to a couple of instances from my own ethnographic work.

Performative Power

The Assam movement (1979-1985), as we know, was predicated on the perceived opposition between the citizens and the foreigners mostly from Bangladesh settled illegally in different parts of the state. At the peak of the Assam movement when hundreds of people were rendered homeless and took shelter in the relief camps, a delegation of medical students visited some of those camps, which housed only the Assamese-speaking victims. On being asked by Nirupama Borgohain why they had not visited the Nalbari camp, they told that they had no desire to go to the Bangladeshi camps to render service there. She reminded them of what she calls 'doctor's ethic' in these terms: "You are doctors, you are respected, to render service to the affected people is your religion; you should therefore make no discrimination ...". At a time when the society was passing through heightened ethnic conflicts, such an advocacy surely fell on deaf ears. She describes the boy who humiliated her ('pierced her heart' as she puts it) by using a very insulting word 'in the presence of a bus full of passengers' as one 'of the age of my eldest son'.

Was she performing her role of a mother as she was asking the children of her son's age to learn an essentially non-discriminatory professional ethic? In her performance of the role of a mother, she subtly changed the role from a biological mother with an abiding concern for her family and community to a universal mother who does not discriminate between the Assamese and the Bangladeshis and cares for any child in distress regardless of its ethnicity. Performative power is the power that one retains as the indissoluble remainder of one's subjectivity while 'impersonating' a social role (in this instance like that of a mother) - without 'inhabiting' it. Bargohain's understanding of a mother is that of a universal mother and not a biological mother. As she transgresses the contours of biological motherhood, she is crudely reminded of the 'precarity' that her performativity entails. Precarity is linked – not so much with the norms associated with the role of the mother, as much as it is with the very way she performs it – the way that is significantly at variance with what the young doctors wanted it to be performed' (Butler 2009: ii). But she does it at grave risk for she does it without the accompanying conditions that would have otherwise made it possible for her to perform the role in the way she does without any risk of harassment and violence.

Thus to cite another instance, when twelve elderly women bared themselves in front of the Kangla Fort exhorting the Indian army to 'come and rape' them in protest against Thangjam Manorama's brutal rape and death – may not have happened in that sequence – and all of them introduced themselves as Manorama's mother while none of them was her biological mother - they were both performing the role of a mother and exceeding it, for, no society accepts mothers taking off their clothes in public (Das 2008: 54-77).

Biopolitical Power

Back in 2013, we conducted a series of case studies and interviews in Gerukamukh area in Upper Assam – the hub of anti-dam protest in the Northeast. While recent violence in Lower Assam is predicated primarily on the demand for homeland - whether for driving out the ‘outsiders’ or against being driven out by them - the movement in Gerukamukh marks the arrival of a new form of power in the wake of a series of developmental policies initiated since the early 1990s. The interviews were conducted across various age groups and communities like the Mishings, Dewris, Ahoms, Assamese, Nepalis, Hajongs, Bodos and other Tea tribes like the Kurmis etc.

Most of our respondents extend unflinching support to the anti-dam protests – although not all of them actively take part in them. When asked why they support it, all of them have been unequivocal in pointing out that the issue is integral to ‘security of their life’. They argue that unless their life is not secure, development becomes ‘unthinkable’. What will they do with development if they are not alive? Economic development or for that matter any other kind of development has no meaning unless there is security of life, which according to one respondent, cuts across the ethnic boundaries and is ‘greater’ than economic development for any ‘particular’ community. When collective survival is under threat, it is imperative that all people irrespective of their ethnicity, creed and community identity come together and put up a joint resistance and collective struggle.

Does well-being then necessarily consist in governmentalization of the right to social constitution of the self which protects our cultural diversity? Or does it lie in interrupting the flow and circulation of this power? Is the discourse of well-being capacious enough to account for these interruptions? Or we have already reached a time when we need to discard it and articulate an alternative notion of well-being?

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