

# MINORITIES' DILEMMA And Democratic Polity

By PROF. JAMIL FAROOQUI

The concepts of minority and plural society developed during the emergence of the liberal democracy and its socio-political set up. The minority group is significant due to its critical position and the treatment it receives in the socio-political structure of modern society. A minority is a small group of people in a society, characterised by its socio-cultural and ideological distinctness which it wants to retain and by which it wants to be identified. It is out of power and thus discriminated against and not treated at par with the majority group.

In general sense, the word 'minority' refers to the group which has less numerical strength though the exact number is not specified, but academically it is identified by power differences among groups rather than by differences in numerical strength. Modern scholarship does not consider it proper to identify a group as minority on the basis of numerical strength

or representation. It describes people as minority as those having "less power, are oppressed, or are a subordinate segment within a political unit" (Myers, 2007:42).

According to Louis Wirth (1945:347), a minority is "a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore, regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination."

A group, in fact, is identified and known by its both objective and subjective characteristics. First, we distinguish a group of people by their physical characteristics, the way they appear and attract the attention of others. At the same time, they are also marked by their behaviour; the way they act and interact with others or in other words, by their lifestyles. The second, which I think is more important, is the set of ideas or the principles which members of the group cherish, apply to their practical lives,

mould their behaviour thereby and live accordingly, and want to be identified by those principles and retain them throughout their lives.

Feagin (1984) points out five characteristics by which a minority group is known: they (1) suffer from discrimination and subordination, (2) have physical and/or cultural traits, which are generally disapproved by the dominant group, (3) have a shared sense of collective identity, (4) apply socially shared rules, and (5) have the tendency to marry within the group. Anthropologists Charles Wagley and Marvin Harris, also observe five characteristics among minority groups throughout the world. They get unequal treatment, are identifiable by physical or cultural characteristics, share a sense of peoplehood, have ascribed status and a tendency to marry within their own group.

In international law, there is no legal definition of national and ethnic minorities. Daniel Smihula (2009) defines a

national minority from the theoretical point of view as a group within a given state which (1) is numerically smaller, (2) is not in a dominant position, (3) has culture, language, religion, race, etc. distinct from the majority of the population, (4) members have a will to preserve their specificity, (5) members are citizens of the state where they have the status of minority, and (6) has a long-term presence in the territory.

In contemporary sociology, a minority group is explained in a comprehensive way. According to Arnold M. Rose (1968; 365), a minority is "a group of people - differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion or

language - who both think of themselves as a differentiated group and are thought of by the others as a differentiated group with negative connotations. Further, they are relatively lacking in power and hence are subjected to certain exclusions, discriminations, and other differentiated treatment." In a nutshell, the minority group is characterised by three basic traits. It has a distinct socio-cultural and ideological system, it wants to be identified by that, and it is discriminated against for retaining that system.

#### ORIGIN OF MINORITY GROUP

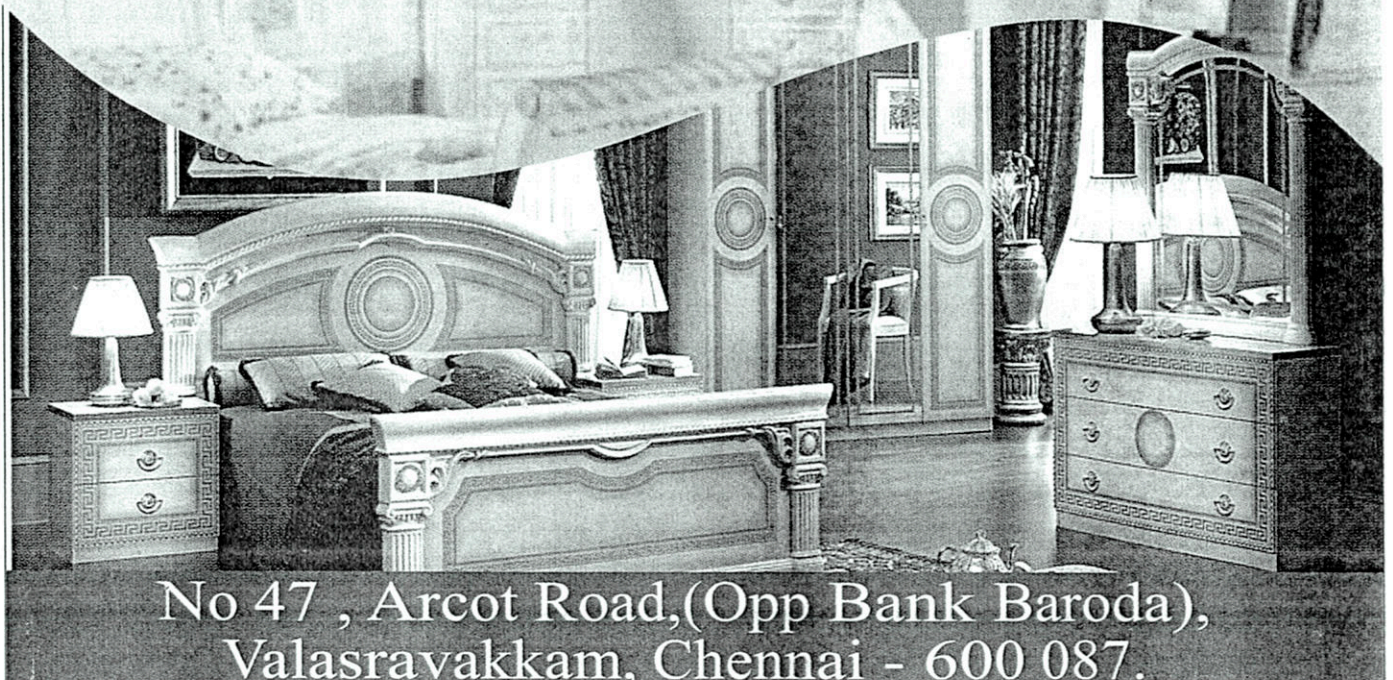
The concept was developed in Europe in terms of national minorities, which was

applied to various national groups residing in particular territories from a long time but had lost the control of those territories as they were dominated by people of other nationalities. In some places, they failed to maintain unity and spread over other places where they were treated as subordinates. Generally, they stayed at their original places but as subjects to the ruling group which run the administration for its own interests. The ruling group felt the need to enact a law to regulate the affairs of the minority group and tried to give them legal protection. They were, thus, given the right to send their own leader to the

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national assembly because they were not able to vote individually for candidates. Moreover, the area where they live in and the occupations which they pursue were legally determined.

Later, the concept became important and drew the attention of philanthropists and social scientists when they witnessed people of some groups who were denied basic rights of existence in modern states. They were small in number, had different social order and due to that they were neglected by the ruling group. They were denied the major privileges of the state and looked down upon by the majority group for sticking to their own distinct socio-cultural and ideological traits as well as for maintaining a separate identity. It was thought that such groups should be given protection so that they could survive with all of their specificities and peculiarities relating to race, ethnicity, language and religion.

As a matter of fact, numerous studies about the

minorities in Europe, the United States and Asia conducted by social scientists expose their critical conditions. Some of them highlight the conflict between majority and minority groups that, at the end, adversely affected the unity and solidarity of the nation. In the wake of modern humanitarian approaches and development of pluralism, modern nation-states are in continuous pressure to provide adequate safeguard as well as requisite facilities for the minorities to lead a dignified life. Consequently, many modern nations have made special provisions in their respective constitutions to protect them and grant them some basic rights to coexist along with their specialties with other groups.

In spite of these efforts, minorities are still facing problems of discrimination, subordination, prejudice and injustice. They have no proper opportunity to live with dignity. In some cases even the provisions of the constitution are not implemented in the true sense, and their lives and

properties are not safe. Danger is always lurking upon them; they are in continuous threat from the majority group and the establishment as well. They have low status in the society. They have become a problematic phenomenon in the socio-political structure of a society.

#### WHY MINORITY IS A PROBLEMATIC PHENOMENON

The minority everywhere is not treated well. It has always been given grievances subject to atrocities, discrimination and injustice. It has been denied the proper share of the privileges of the state and has no proper opportunity to live with dignity. There is always threat to its survival as a distinct group with certain specialities by which it is characterised. It is degraded, considered low and often humiliated. The majority group has a different view of the minority. It considers the minority an extra burden on the national exchequer and a liability to the nation. It also

'Did the disbelievers (in the teaching of the Prophet) not realise that the heavens and the earth were one solid mass, then We tore them apart...'

Al-Qur'an- 21:30

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considers the minority takes privileges of the nation and enjoys all facilities at the cost of the majority, and relishes the fruits of other people's labour. The members of the minority group, so thinks the majority, are thankless, maintain their own identity, do not take part in the mainstream society, do not own leaders of the majority and do not share the culture and the ideological ethos of the majority. Thus, we find a contradictory situation that leads to tension and sometimes violent conflict between the minority and the majority groups.

There are various reasons to this episode. The important one is the wrong notion of nation. The majority group considers that it, being the possessor of a particular culture, language, religion, ethnicity and descent, only constitutes the nation, and as such the land, resources and wealth of the nation are the property of the group, and only its members have the right to enjoy its privileges. Others are outsiders and it is unnecessary to share the resources and wealth of the nation that can be used for the welfare of the majority group. The minority is the encroacher

to the privileges of the nation. This idea creates antagonistic feeling among members of the majority group and they are always against the minority.

Further, being the largest part of the population, the members of the majority group want that the nation should only be known and characterised by their culture, language, ethnicity and ideology and not by those of the minority groups. Secondly, the majority group has a sense of superiority; their members consider the minority, its culture, social order and way of life inferior and sometimes dangerous to the majority

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group. Consequently, the majority wants the minority either to stop some of its practices or not be allowed to do so. Thirdly, the majority group always holds power, controls the resources, the media and the institutions through which it propagates and spreads its viewpoint, tries to dominate the minority and puts different types of pressures on it to adopt the lifestyle of the majority.

This situation creates different reactions among the minorities. In a few cases, they yield to the pressure of the majority that holds power, particularly when they do not have many differences with the majority's culture or their ideological basis is not very strong. But in most cases, the minority resists against all pressures, tactics and strategies of the majority, wants to maintain its distinct identity, tries to practise all those things which it considers valuable and

by which its distinctness will be maintained. This results in a conflict, mild or wild. If both of them accommodate the pressure of each other, the social order with some modification will be integrated.


In other cases, if the excess and the discrimination continue, the minority feels it difficult to exist along with its distinctness and resorts to agitation and sometimes to revolution. At the end of the day, the minority demands separate land for its members and a struggle of a serious nature takes place and goes on. This adversely affects the progress of the nation. People, instead of doing constructive work involve in undesirable activities, waste their time and energy in blaming and harming each other, and peaceful and harmonious life become a dream.

In a democratic system, the tension and turmoil between the

majority and the minority are more common and often take violent shape. The government in this system is generally formed by the majority group, and its ruling elites are obliged to provide benefits for the members of the majority group. They get access to the power structure by the support of the majority, and as such they always try to please it. The fact is that the sympathy, support and help of the power group are always towards the majority even the group supports the atrocities and enormities of the majority.

In case of the polarisation of the group at the time of election, some political groups require the support of the minority and for that purpose show their favour towards the minority, but only in theory and not in the real sense because they always fear of losing the support of the majority. Ultimately, the minority group becomes frustrated and a strong feeling of alienation develops among its members and motivates them to adversely react against the nation.

This situation is not good and healthy for the integrity and solidarity as well as for the development of a nation. A nation cannot be strong, prosperous and peaceful unless it absorbs and engrosses all its population with all their variations and differences, takes care of them, provides them with protection and safeguards and assures their prosperity and welfare. At the same time, the entire population should closely link with the nation and associate its future, benefit and harm to the nation. In the light of the




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above facts, it is necessary to resolve and reduce the conflict, hostility and antagonism between majority and minority groups to maintain the integrity, prosperity and continuity of the nation. Developed nations have taken the problem seriously and developed mechanism to reduce the conflicting situation between the majority and the minority. Social scientists in general and sociologists, in particular, have studied majority-minority relations in a

cross-cultural situation. Some of them highlighted two theoretical processes to explain the nature of the American society.

They are important to ensure the relation between the majority and the minority smooth, pleasant and stable.

#### MELTING-POT THEORY

America, being a developed society and affluent nation, attracts people of the world towards it. A considerable number of people with different

socio-cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds migrate to that society, live there permanently and gradually assimilate in the main and broad features of that society. American population is not homogenous; it consists of different ethnic and cultural strands that intertwine with the main socio-cultural traits and become part and parcel of the whole. American society also absorbs them within it. It is a place where different cultures are blending into the main one.

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When a particular cultural group comes and interacts with the indigenous one, it gradually adopts the local way of life and loses its originality. The accent, language, dress and lifestyle of its members are shaped by the indigenous one. In other words, we can say that it indigenises or Americanises its cultural ethos. If we peruse the American society, we find glimpses of many cultures but none of them is in the original form. They are going under the process of change and ultimately coloured by the indigenous one. This is identified as a 'melting-pot'. In this process it is difficult to resist against the trait of indigenous society and sooner or later one has to merge into it. The other groups of thinkers are not comfortable with this process. They accentuate other process called orchestration and claim that the American society adopts it.

### ORCHESTRATION

Orchestration is a musical composition combining a variety of instrumental sounds and arranged in such a way as to produce a new one expressing beauty of form, harmony and expression of emotion. In a nutshell, it is an arrangement of a piece of music of performance by an orchestra or band. The important feature of this process is that all instruments that take part in the composition do not lose their individuality; they produce their typical sound and arrangement of their sound in a distinct way produces better, melodious sound. This is applied to society, which as a composite whole consisting of all of its segments combined and completed as whole.

In fact, every society is composed of different segments having different socio-cultural, ethnic and ideological traits. Sometimes these segments are similar and some other times they are quite different, but they want to be identified by their peculiarities and want to retain them. Society absorbs them in its structure and an integrated view of all segments gives a distinct form and shape to the society. The integrity and continuity of the society depend on the fact that these segments would survive with all of their peculiarities, maintain their strength and potentiality and contribute their role to the completion of the society. That being so, a society has to take care of all segments and its constituent parts, assure their survival and provide them with all the necessary requirements to make them potential; otherwise, the society will lose its structural form and meet severe challenges to its solidarity.

Sociologists give an analogy between society and organism. An organism is composed of different parts and subparts; their strength and capability provide strength, potentiality and stability to the organism. If any of the parts is weak and suffers from any abnormality, it affects the working of the organism and ultimately its survival. Further, organism when fed distributes the strength to all parts; it does not afford partiality whereby it provides strength for one part and neglects the other. The same is the case with society; it is characterised by all population not only by the dominant one or by the majority but also by both dominant and subordinate; majority and minority; affluent

and non-affluent. The vitality of a society depends upon how it accommodates its different segments and groups within its structure and how it distributes its privileges to them. In fact, how it tolerates differences.

The majority and minority relation should be based on and guided by the principle of orchestration. All segments and groups are the essential parts of the nation; their existence, specialties and strengths add to the vitality of the nation. As such they should be provided with full opportunity to survive and flourish with all of their specialties so that they might contribute positively to the beauty and grandeur of the nation. Members of the majority should not consider the minority alien but their younger brother and provide them with protection and security as well as all possible help to exist and become the potential part of the society. The more the minority is potential, the more it can serve the country, maintain the solidarity and vitality of the nation and devote to its development. The majority should not be too much insular and parochial but embrace them as a significant part of the society.

At the same time, the members of the minority should also show tolerance and generosity, consider members of the majority group their seniors and elder brothers, cooperate with them and join hands in building the nation. They should not create confrontation with them. If we apply this process seriously in our practical life, we will not only resolve the conflict between the majority and the minority but also succeed in establishing a peaceful society. **R**

