

Book Review

Living Together: Rethinking Identity and Difference in Modern Context, by Alok Tandon, published by Akshaya Prakashan, New Delhi, first published in 2023, Rs. 300/-p.152.

The concept of Identity was the central theme of cultural studies throughout the 1990s. Driven by the cultural politics of feminism, gay rights and multiculturalism, as well by philosophical and linguistic concerns, there has been a new mode of thinking, though it has been subjected to criticism. Identities are not universal, fixed or essential entities, but contingent on historically and culturally special construction of language. This means that identities are wholly cultural and cannot exist outside of representations. Identities are discursive constructions, i.e. descriptions of ourselves with which we identify and in which we have emotionally connected. While identities are matters of culture rather than nature, this does not mean that one can easily replace those ethnic or sexual identities into which one has been acculturated. While identities are social constructions, they are the ones that constitute us through the impositions of power and the identifications of the psyche.

The main objective of the book under review is to study and evaluate the different claims of various theoretical models available both in India and outside with regard to the notion of identity and difference. The author, Alok Tandon argues that his purpose is to develop a theoretical framework and also to examine the concept of identity and difference in the contemporary perspective. The question that is raised in this context is to examine whether identity is a matter of choice or discovery, and also how and why identity crisis is related to fundamentalism, revivalism and terrorism. Tandon, is able to do this by keeping thinkers like, Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser and others at the background. The book examines the above issues from Indian standpoint also though briefly, tries to work out a practical solution to be problem of identity and difference.

Though we have been talking about identity and difference from the philosophical perspectives in the past, it is essential for us to study it in the modern and postmodern context. Hence the book is the need of the hour where human society is facing a crisis in the name of caste, religion and politics. Is there a place for others in our search for identity, and whether identity a matter of choice or discovery is discussed at length.

The book contains eight chapters including Introduction and conclusion. In the introductory chapter, the author explains different characteristics of identity and how identities are multiple in nature. Here questions like, whether we need an identity and whether there exists a relation between community and identity is seen the light of modern society. By quoting Rajeev Bhargava and Charles Taylor, it is said that there is a connection between community and identity and identity is a social construct based on the collective social practices. Two aspects of identity, namely, subjective and objective are mentioned here and it is also shown how there lies a asymmetrical relation between them. Some of the characteristics of identity are worth mentioning here. The author is of the view that each and every identity is always with some labels or other and serves as the link between “I” and “we”. In India, the dominant identity is the caste identity which subjugates the other. It is also shown that our identities are multiple in nature and identity is not something which is imposed upon someone.

In the second chapter, the concept of recognition or distribution is discussed in the discourse of Taylor, Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser. All the above thinkers have dealt with the idea of recognition which is highlighted by the author. Also, their approach is seen from the critical standpoint to see whether it can solve the problem or not. The main focus here is study the idea of recognition of one’s identity. It is important, says Tandon, that we must have a proper understanding of the concept of recognition. There are two forms of politics of recognition: politics of universalism and politics of difference. While discussing Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition, Tandon makes a distinction between love, respect and esteem, as three modes of recognition. Similarly, in Nancy Fraser, one can see how she rejects the above position of Taylor and Honneth and suggests that there is need to develop “status model” which does not accept institutionalized patterns of cultural value as the only obstacles to participatory parity. It considers social justice as encompassing two dimensions of recognition and distribution. For her, emancipation can only exist on the basis of equal participation in all spheres of life and can only be understood in terms of social struggles. The benefits of status model which is explained by Fraser, is elaborated further by Tandon. Also, we find a critical evaluation of the above three thinkers and by quoting some of critics of Taylor, Tandon argues that Taylor’s politics of recognition would lead to the oppression of marginalized individuals. The critics like Stephen Rockefeller and Appiah clearly show the limitation of Taylor in the cross-cultural exchange. Similarly, thinkers like Marion Young and Judith Butler criticized Fraser for her understanding of dualistic account of capitalist society. Both the critics are of the view that it is not possible to separate political economy from culture, as they are

intermingled. The author concludes this chapter by saying that among these positions, Fraser's bifocal thought of economic and cultural injustice have more advantages than that of the others and Tandon tries to apply this in Dalit discourse in Indian context in the later chapter. No doubt, Fraser's theory of social justice is very much relevant in Indian context.

In the third chapter, the concept of modernity, culture and identity are discussed briefly. Tandon explains the relationship between modernity, culture and identity to show that modernity has both advantages and disadvantages. Reason and autonomy are the two major aspects of modernity. It is true that in modernity, there was political, social and cultural transformation. In fact, modernity emerged as a reaction to traditional society and was characterized by innovation, novelty and dynamism. Since premodern has not contributed much to the development of human race, we consider the modern and postmodern period as more important than the premodern period. In modern period, reason was considered as the source of progress in knowledge. Some modernists went to the extent of believing that reason was the only source of knowledge. It is the foundation of knowledge according to them. No doubt, modernity has produced many welcoming changes in the human society. One such change was the industrial transformation. Modernity also called for cultural transformation. New technologies and new modes of transformation and communication—all there are important features of modernism. It allowed urbanization, rationalization, bureaucratization, industrialization etc., which definitely have moved the human progress many steps further. It is true that in modernity, there was political, social and cultural transformation. It allowed urbanization, rationalization, bureaucratization, industrialization etc., which definitely have moved the human progress many steps further.

But the evil effects or ill effects of modernization are too many. The industrialization has alienated the common man and woman from the society. They were removed from the public sphere. The colonialization reduced man to a machine. Man's values were lost. Modernity was the rule of domination and control. Horkheimer and Adorno very rightly defined it as a process whereby reason turned into its opposite and modernity's promises of liberation masked form of oppressive and domination. These aspects are important when we are evaluating modernity. Tandon claims that globalization is a logical consequence of modernity because of the fact that modernity is inherently universalizing in nature.

In the fourth chapter, an attempt is made to explain the concept of identity and violence, mainly from the perspective of Amartya Sen. Tandon starts with the

assumption that it is difficult for us to avoid identity. Some questions like, “Why do we need identity?”, “Is it a matter of choice or aspective”? “What is the crisis of identity”? are discussed. Three conceptions of identity, namely, enlightenment subject, sociological subject and post-modern subject are highlighted. Stuart Hall identifies three different ways of understanding identity: the ‘enlightenment subject’, the ‘sociological subject’, and the fractured (de-centred) or ‘postmodern subject’. The enlightenment or Cartesian conception of the subject pictures a conscious and unified individual marked by inherently rational capacities that allow her/him to experience and make sense of the world according to the actual properties of that world. In the ‘sociological subject’ the social and the individual are mutually constituting. Thus, the internalization of social values and roles acquired through the process of acculturation stabilizes the individual and ensures that they fit with the social structure. The fragmented or ‘de-centred’ self is, according to Hall, composed not of one, but of several shifting, sometimes contradictory, identities. It is argued that there is a need for us to transcend the essentialist and postmodern conception of identity. With regard to the postmodern conception of identity, Tandon says that “we cannot evaluate the claims made on the basis of identities cause identities behave in anarchist manner, cut off from socio-economic structure”. This position of Tandon is not acceptable because we know how the “socio-economic structure” has been playing an important role in the postmodern conception of identity. Foucault is a good example for this.

In the fifth chapter, the problems of identity politics are seen from the perspective of thinkers like Nathan Glazer and Judith Butler and from here the author moves towards Indian context, especially, how Dalit identity politics challenges varna system. Also, the feminist identity politics, Gay and Lesbian identity politics, race and ethnicity identity politics are some of the ideas which are evaluated in this chapter. The advantages as well as disadvantages of identity politics are also examined. Here the identity politics is discussed wherein one can include the blacks, the women and caste and other liberation movements. For the author, identity politics has certain advantages. For example, it gives scope for a “new social subject”. There is solidarity involved in them. But the fact is that identity politics would create “false antinomies between closed wholes”. Tandon points out some of the dangers of identity politics. “Women, Blacks and Dalits, etc., cannot liberate themselves by some kind of unilateral declaration of independent, others (men, whites, upper class etc.) must change their views and attitudes too” (p.70). This is unacceptable for the main reason that only “sufferers” know their pain and the “outsiders” cannot penetrate into their problems. So, what is needed is the unity among the suppressed. The micro-cultural politics must be properly

connected to the “macro politics”, which means the different Dalit movements must be connected to each other so that it would be easy for them to fight for their rights. The micro-political dimensions should be properly united to develop it into a macro-politics.

In chapter six, the above issues are seen from Indian perspective. In Indian situation, the notion of identity as well as difference has been playing an important role from the ancient time onwards, though in premodernity, identities were ascriptive in nature. Different conflicts like, religious as well as caste are examined. Religious conflicts are the conflict between communities on the basis of religion. One way solving the problem is to encourage the “inter-religious dialogue” so that one respects the other. While discussing the caste conflict in India, Tandon, explains the importance of recognition and redistribution. He develops the critique of Dalit politics in post-independence India by his interesting study on E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram. The seventh chapter attempts to propose some models for integration. The significance of multiculturalism is suggested here. This is largely seen from Western perspective especially in the context of Taylor and Will Kymlicka. Here the author could have highlighted the significance of Indian approach to multiculturalism during the colonial and post-colonial periods. It is very much essential to show how Indian tradition always has a concern for multicultural and multiethnic society from the ancient time onwards. This approach would have strengthened the book by showing the practical approach to some of the issues raised.

The book of Alok Tandon raises many philosophical issues in context of Identity and difference. The book is well written and argued in a logical way. This book is a contribution to knowledge and I am sure that teachers and scholars would be benefited by the approach of Alok Tandon.

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