



The Politics of Recognition: A Reflection on the Sami Minority in Norway and Rohingya Minority in Myanmar

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Abstract

The politics of identity is central to the current socio-political discourses. People, who have been left behind and oppressed historically by the majority culture, are struggling for their rights and recognition. Non-recognition or misrecognition is the denial of ‘existence’ in a sociological sense. The idea of identity emerged from the concept of authentic self; however, the collective sense of being has driven the wheel of politics of identity giving rise to multiculturalism. This article draws upon the theoretical insight of ‘politics of recognition’ developed by Charles Taylor and ‘intercultural dialogue’ propounded by Bhikhu Parekh in order to analyze how Sami and Rohingya communities engage in their endeavor for recognition and self-determination. The article argues that a collective sense of identity and intercultural dialogue are the remedies for historically oppressed group identity.

Keywords: *Minority; Oppression; Identity; Recognition; Equal Dignity*

Introduction

The politics of identity have mainly characterized contemporary politics. The concept of distinct identity is central to the emergence of the idea of recognition because “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition” (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). The absence of recognition is a state of being ‘non-existent’ in society, whereas misrecognition can be seen as a ‘false being.’ Therefore, it is a fundamental human need to be recognized equally as other individuals or groups to ‘exist’ socially and enjoy humanity. Although the idea of identity emerges from the authentic individual self, the collective sense of being has given rise to the politics of ‘multiculturalism.’ This article explores how Sami in Norway suffered misrecognition in the past and argues that the communitarian sense of distinct identity helped them with their recognition, self-determination, and preservation of the culture. It also sheds light on the Rohingya minority in Myanmar and dramatizes how non-recognition results in inhuman treatment and a crisis of identity. The article draws upon Charles Taylor’s concept of the

‘politics of recognition’ and Bhikhu Parekh’s notion of ‘intercultural dialogue’. Firstly, it briefly presents the literature review and dramatizes how two modes of recognition, namely ‘universality of equal dignity’ and ‘the politics of difference,’ come into conflict. It then engages with the recognition issue of Sami and Rohingya, discusses their historical oppression, and analyzes identity politics within both communities.

Literature Review

There is an increasing tendency to define identity in the modern and postmodern eras with different nuances. Will Kymlicka, a liberal culturalist, insists on individual identity and freedom. He argues that “there are compelling interests related to culture and identity which are fully consistent with liberal principle of freedom and equality” (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 339). Individuals sticking to a particular culture is a matter of choice but not a need; hence, they should be free to choose what is good life without fear or punishment. Therefore, Kymlicka argues that multiculturalism does not necessarily have to be communitarian but can resort to the liberal framework.

Stuart Hall’s notion of cultural identity focuses on a collective sense of identity, which gives people a sense of belonging. Contrary to the liberalist sense of identity, which focuses on who I am, cultural identity refers to who we people are. Cultural identity is a group identity that “arises from our ‘belonging’ to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, and above all national cultures” (Hall, 1996, p. 596). This communitarian sense of identity rejects the liberalist idea that the individual is prior to society and that the individual should be valued above the group’s necessity. It instead acknowledges the collective goods of a group that is “irreducibly social” (Taylor, 1995).

For Taylor, identity is not monologic; it is interactive instead. He further argues that we need to define our identity in relation to others to be fully human agents; “we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us” (Taylor, 1994, p.33). The production of a false and distorted image of a person or a group is depreciating and demeaning. It may inflict harm and create an identity crisis. There comes the struggle against significant others. The portrayal of imaginary and unreal images creates hierarchical status, whereas higher status normatively is assigned to white, Christian, able-bodied, west, heterosexual, and the like. “Struggle against these status hierarchies generate a ‘politics of recognition’” (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 332). The solution to this struggle for recognition and true identity is “a regime of reciprocal recognition among equals” (Taylor, 1994, p.50). The dialogic concept of identity, which leads to intercultural dialogue, can solve the issues of non-recognition and misrecognition, establishing a harmonious society.

Theoretical Framework: The Politics of Recognition

The notion of recognition emerged as a necessity for every individual to be identified in society; “due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need” (Taylor, 1994, p. 26). Charles Taylor discusses the two modes of recognition: ‘the politics of equal dignity and the ‘politics of difference.’ Despite having the same principle of equal respect for all individuals, these two modes of current politics end in an antithetical stance. The politics of equal dignity focuses on sameness, whereas the politics of difference urges distinctiveness and particularities. The notion of equal dignity originated as a critique of ‘honor’ based on hierarchical social status. Honor in the ancient sense was connected to ‘inequalities’, which was later replaced by the modern concept of dignity, “emphasizing the equal dignity of all citizens, and the content of this politics has been the equalization of rights and entitlements” (Taylor, 1994, p. 37). The politics of equal dignity gives primacy to the equality of all individuals, whereas it is blind to group differences and particularities. It has established that equality means to “be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities” (Taylor, 1994, p. 38). Contrarily, the politics of difference got developed by the modern notion of identity and “as the denunciation of other-

induced distortions” (Taylor, 1994, p. 37). The ‘politics of difference’ believes that a majority’s culture often distorts images of a minority, suppresses identity, and denies recognition; hence, it contests the idea of identical immunities. It rather emphasizes recognizing “the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else” (Taylor, 1994, p. 38). The ‘politics of difference’ is the cornerstone in recognizing marginalized communities and bringing them on equal footing with mainstream culture.

Sami in Norway: From Oppression to Recognition

Sami is an indigenous group in Norway. They live traditionally depending on fishing, haunting reindeer, and other foods found in nature. Although Sami people were not excluded from their right to vote in national elections, they were marginalized culturally and politically for a long time. It is essential to analyze how the liberal notion of citizenship and nation-building, which advocates for everyone’s equal rights, contradicted the rights and recognition of indigenous Sami in Norway.

From the 18th century onwards, Sami people in northern Norway were exposed to the Christian missionaries who attempted to change traditional Sami culture. After the independence from Denmark in the 19th century, there sprouted the sentiment of nation-building in Norway. Therefore, the policy of Norwegianization was introduced with the motto, “En nasjon, ett folk” (Ellingsen & Donald, 2015, p. 37), meaning ‘one nation, one people.’ The nation-building project was discriminatory because of the forced assimilation policy, which led to the homogenization of cultures. This was the blind-difference fashion of recognition where the mold of the majority is implicitly a norm for marginalized communities. It merely concealed the injustices and discriminations of minorities under the carpet.

Moreover, language became the primary tool for Norwegianization, where the Sami language was made unlawful to be used in schools until 1959. Harald Eidheim writes that Sami “were forced into a school system designed to promote competence in the language and culture of the majority population” (qtd. in Jakobsen, 2011, p. 4). The forced assimilation of Sami and other minorities was even professed in public spheres through law. “The Land Sales Legislation of 1902 has hitherto been considered as having had its main influence in prohibiting the sale of land to people lacking proficiency in Norwegian” (Jernsletten, 1986, p. 3). This legislation was in effect until 1965. It was intended to assimilate other languages into Norwegian.

After the second world war and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, a changed attitude emerged toward tribal and indigenous people. Countries began recognizing minorities as having equal rights and entitlement as the dominant culture, as the majority do. “The initial post-war period of sociopolitical development was marked by the need to recognize Sami as equal members of the state, itself comprised of individual members, implying a uniform treatment of all without any recognition of cultural difference” (Broderstad, 2014, p. 83). This changed attitude is seen as Norway ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1966; however, there were no active measures to promote Sami culture, language, and tradition from the state. It also lacked the recognition of cultural distinctiveness. There came the need for politics of difference.

The politics of difference resists the sub-standardizing and marginalizing of group identity. It is “full of denunciations of discrimination and refusals of second-class citizenship” (Taylor, 1994, p. 39). Sami began voicing their dissatisfaction against the prejudiced treatment of language and culture. The dialogue between Sami and the Norwegian state began taking place. Bhikhu Parekh believes that Liberal theory cannot provide an impartial framework where all cultures can be recognized equally. He views that “dialogue is certainly necessary to resolve deep moral and cultural disagreements” (Parekh, 2006, p. 267). Consequently, the Sami language regained its status as a second language in some districts and schools in the 1930s and as a minority language in 2005.

There was a significant development after the late 1940s that helped Sami reach the state of self-determination. The political and cultural organizations of Sami's interests came to the fore as revitalization movements. The movement was concerned with the Sami identity and Sami self-image. Popular cultures like music and art also aided it. Moving forward to self-determination and positive self-image, Sami, in the 1970s and 1980s, made their own flag and map. Through their active interest in politics, Sami established a Sami parliament in 1989, ultimately rejecting their status as 'second-class citizens.' Intercultural dialogue has "a profoundly transformative effect on all involved" (Parekh, 2006, p. 271) which can be seen in the amendment of the Norwegian constitution in 1989; "It is the responsibility of the authorities of the State to create conditions enabling the Sami people to preserve and develop its language, culture, and way of life (The Constitution of Norway, Article 110a). The amendment helped to change people's attitudes towards Sami, recognize their distinctness, and obligate the state to treat them equally.

Rohingya in Myanmar: Non-Recognition, Statelessness, and Identity Crisis

Society suffers from a lack of intercultural dialogue. It leads to the non-recognition and suppression of minority cultures by the majority. The minorities are often forced to assimilate into the majority culture or to leave the country but are not recognized by the state as an equally significant cultural group. "Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (Taylor, 1994, p.25). The majority in society exercises certain power and always tends to rule over the minority. The majority's dominance does restrict the rights and equal status of minorities, which ultimately culminates in the conflictual relationship between them. Rohingya have suffered non-recognition by the state and the Buddhist majority in Myanmar. They are an ethnic and religious minority who reside in northern Arakan, known as Rakhine state in present-day Myanmar. Rohingya have been living in Myanmar for generations, and the history "traces the attachment of the Rohingya to northern Arakan and thus their firmly established link to what is modern Burma" (HRW, 2020). However, after independence from British rule in 1948, Myanmar started considering Rohingya "illegal immigrants" (Tinker, 1957). Consequently, Rohingya are transformed into an unrecognized ethnic minority in Myanmar. Rohingya, a small Muslim sect today in Myanmar, are also oppressed due to their minor religious status. The demographic construction of Myanmar by religion shows that 87.9 percent of the population is Buddhist, whereas only 4.3 percent is Muslim (Stokke, 2020, p.154). The Buddhist nationalist majority seeks to drive off Rohingya from the country.

The identity crisis of the Rohingya stems from non-recognition, which further leads to statelessness. The authority in Myanmar regards the Rohingya as 'illegal immigrants from Bangladesh' and persistently refers as a 'Bengali problem' (FN, 2023). Contrarily, Bangladesh's prime minister Sheikh Hasina once stated, "Myanmar should soon 'take their nationals back'" (Al Jazeera, 2018). Here, neither Myanmar considers the Rohingya as its citizens nor Bangladesh does so. Hence, the Rohingya are a prime example of nonrecognition. The identity crisis of the Rohingya is mainly a direct consequence of structural discrimination, persecution, and exclusion by Myanmar law, policy, and practice over the past three decades. By Citizenship Law 1982, the Myanmar government refused to grant Rohingya citizenship as a minority ethnic group from 135 recognized ethnic nationalities (Chan, E. 2022). In 1962, Military Junta seized the Myanmar government's power and introduced another law that stripped the Rohingya of access to full citizenship. It effectively makes them stateless. Furthermore, the military government started to dissolve the Rohingya social and political organization. The lack of intercultural dialogue resulted in a conflict between the Rohingya and the majority of Buddhist nationalists. The Burmese military and immigration authority initiated Operation Nagamin to infiltrate the Rohingya in 1977, just before the census. By 1978, 200,000 Rohingya had fled the country to reach Bangladesh. It is argued that the Burmese army had forcibly evicted them and alleged widespread army brutality, rape, and murder (Smith, 1991). As Taylor mentions, "only the minority or suppressed cultures are being forced to take the alien form" (Taylor, 1994, p.43). This concept applies to the vulnerable group of the Rohingya community

living in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and elsewhere because of forced displacement by Myanmar (Hossain & Hosain, 2019). Rohingya people live the status of aliens who do not belong to any state on the planet. They are stateless people unrecognized by any countries they are living in.

As a minority Muslim group, the political parties and the Buddhist majority of Myanmar repeatedly refused the identity of Rohingya as their citizen. Denial of citizenship involves the problem of recognition, and “withholding recognition can be a form of oppression” (Taylor, 1994, p.36). In addition, Myanmar Buddhists considered Rohingya illegal migrants of Bangladesh without substantial evidence, although they lived in Myanmar before British colonization. As a result, the Rohingya suffered mass violence, oppression, disenfranchisement, and anti-Muslim movements in 1978, 1991-1992, 2012, 2015, and 2016 (De Chickera, 2018). In August 2017, they became the subject of massive ethnic cleansing by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Incidentally, they fled to the neighboring country of Bangladesh as illegal immigrants. Nowadays, around 1 million Rohingya are living in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh (Sakib & Ananna, 2022)- the world’s largest refugee camp.

The intrastate conflict has had a long hold in Myanmar since its independence in 1948. Such conflicts mainly revolve around the antagonism between majoritarian, centralized, and militarized statebuilding and demands for ethnic self-determination, representation, and equality (Smith, 2018). A multicultural society must involve mutual recognition of different cultural groups to build peace and harmony. Taylor argues that “the monological ideal seriously underestimates the place of the dialogical in human life” (Taylor, 1994, p.33). Therefore, Buddhist nationalism and militarized state-building in Myanmar shoves the nation into conflict and oppression of minorities, avoiding dialogue with ethnic communities like Rohingya. Officially, Rohingyas are deprived of citizenship or passport, due to which their rights and freedom have been abridged. They can neither take education nor any official careers. Instead, there are many restrictions on their movements as internally displaced communities in Myanmar. Consequently, they are forced to live and work in such a system where there is no safe future for them, and their identity crisis remains unsolved. Parekh emphasizes intercultural dialogue as a remedy for the lack of recognition and cultural conflict. He believes that dialogue has transformative power on both parties involved. Each party becomes conscious and critical of the values and practices of their own culture. Over time, dialogue creates common ground to reach a tentative consensus or at least negotiated compromise (Parekh, 2006). Hence, Buddhist majoritarians should create a conducive environment for intercultural dialogue with Rohingya and other ethnic groups in order to resolve the conflict and recognize the dignity of all.

Conclusion

Identity gives a sense of being and belonging. Therefore, it is requisite for an individual and collective to be identified by others. Cultural identity is central to social recognition. Mutual recognition is necessary for justice and peace in society. There is virtually no country where a single culture exists; hence, it is essential to have intercultural dialogue for the co-existence and recognition of cultures. It is evident from the two cases analyzed above that mutual recognition of cultures strengthens solidarity and contributes to nation-building more creatively. Intercultural dialogue between Sami and Norwegian society is a prime example that recognizing minority culture can be the nation’s pride. In contrast, the case of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar exhibits that oppression and non-recognition of minority cultures lead to instability in the country and stark injustice to non-majority cultures. It instead leads to human rights violations and the identity crisis of Rohingya. A collective sense of identity and intercultural dialogue are the remedy for equal recognition of minorities and for building justice, peace, and harmony.

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