

Equality, Uniformity and Sameness: Alternative issues around the *self* in contemporary India.

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The concept of the *self* has a long history of theorizations done from the intellectual Indian milieu. Since the ancient brahmanical, jainist and hinduist doctrines it's stated that the *self* is an autonomous entity different from the body and the mind, and that this self-existent entity is the real essence of the personality. However, in the long run of history, the *self* have come to be regarded as co-extensive with the body, mind and with the emotions, particularly in the post-colonial political discourse and in the current socio-economical analysis. In my opinion, the result of both of this divergent conceptualizations around the *self* could be synthesized in three categories, just for the porpoise of doing a brief discussion concerning the political aims founded in discourses and statements: a) the *self* viewed only as an individual, vision that engulf the personality in the category of a citizen and often seeks for equality as the main political target, b) the *self* viewed as a part of a whole social net, vision by which the individual is constrained to live in society and often has the goal of uniformity as an ideal status of everyone conforming the collectivity, and c) the *self* viewed as a transmigratory urged-by-ignorance entity, vision that seeks for freedom trough the awareness of the sameness. Over this last category that is introduced by me, I will argue that it is a supervivence of ancient doctrines that still alive in and out the political frame. In what follows, I will look for a brief debate on this.

Conceptualizing the 'self'

The intellectual Indian milieu is a highly renowned one among all the cultures and civilizations of the entire world. In the past, the Indian thought was dominated by the Sanskrit philosophical and literary productions. However, the thinking soil was along fertilized by parallel schools like the Jainist, Buddhist and the whole constellations of Hinduism branches. It was since around the first millennium a. C. that the vernacular languages came to be as well vehicles serving to the transmission of seed-ideas from which sprout novelty cultures: that's to say, new ways of thinking and of conceive the world and the personal interrelations. In regarding this, I guess that the turning point started with the Mughal court and go directly trough the British occupation, in which the intelligentsia India started to be more open in the reception of foreign ideas. One of the key concepts in which it could be critically seen the developing and changing in the Indian way of thought, is precisely the conceptualization of the 'self'. In the Upanishads –one of the earliest Indian literatures– the self is regarded as something autonomous and independent from the body. In fact, it's conceived that the relation in-between the 'self'

and the 'body' occurs only by ignorance, in the form of a superimposition doing by mistake on behalf the experiencer. In regards this, in the Taittiriya Upanishad it's shown how the self is cover by five sheaths which goes from the more dense to the subtlest, beginning with the food sheath, passing through the vital-breath, mental and intellectual sheaths, and ending with the bliss-sheath.¹ So the innermost essence of the personality is said to be this last envelope of the self made only of the joyful consciousness.

This difference between the 'body' and the 'self' is maintained in the Hinduism, in spite of the various forms that this last had taken. On behalf on Buddhism, even when they deny a kind of self (spirit, soul, *pudgala*, etc.), the point is taken as well because they also deny the so-called substances (*dharmas*) like the body.² However it is also true that still in the past there have been sects that accept the body and the matter as the real basis of the person, like the Carvakas for example.

Nonetheless the situation is of a different kind when we arrive at the end of the Mughal period and with the British occupation. For instance, when some British saw the naked bodies of the native people, they asserted that this were non-individuals, in the sense that they have not self-consciousness about their nudity. Moreover, the ladies were expected no to see a naked male-body, but standing in front of a slave there were no problem because the native was seen as something very close to an animal. My point is that the people from India started to feel the identification of the self with the body – not that the nakedness were something good or bad but that when somebody say 'I am so and so', 'This is me' or 'This is myself', he or she is referring to the body principally-. Anyhow it was since the independent movement that Indian thinkers put on their selves the western mind-clothing. In words of Professor Roland, who had been working in psychotherapy with middle and upper middle class patients in India:

...urban Indians such as these have been the most exposed to Westernizing influences through two centuries of British colonial rule, and since Independence trough relatives in one Western country or another who visit home... Although rooted within their Indian milieu and culture, these urban Indians have assimilated Western culture to a great extent both socially and psychologically.³

¹ See: Taittiriya Upanishad, II. 1-5. "Before they reach it (the self), words turn back, together with the mind. One who knows that bliss of Brahman, he is never afraid". Olivelle, P. *The Early Upanishads*...p.303

² Tola F. *Budismo Mahayana*...p. 27

³Roland, A. *In search of self in India*... p.xix

The intercultural study of Professor Roland is supported by the observational fact that people living in certain cultural patterns have a different experiential, affective sense of self and relationships, as well as vastly different internalized world views that give profoundly different meanings to everyday experiences and relationships.⁴ And finally, what is really new I guess at least in the postcolonial discourse is the identification of the self with the emotions.

So, I argue that in the contemporary political discourse, which is directly inherited from post-colonial and modern issues, the people's self is equated with their body and emotions, and for that very reason, when it's looked for the welfare of the people, the discourse is focused on bodily issues. In what follows I will look for an imbalance between two opposite political points of view that look in his own way for the people's welfare.

Right vs. Left?

I guess that it would be plainly simple to say that the political approaches are divided in two: the one from the right –conservative, traditionalist, elitist, etc. – and the one from the left –anti-conservative, non-traditionalist, popular, etc. I think it's evident that there are mingling between both positions, and also fields shared in common; paradoxical perspectives and enmeshment of ideologies. And the too simple sketch would result more complex if we add considerations as whether the right is the only democratic possible way or if the socialism is just to be realized plenty through a leftist party.

My argumentation is that the right wings have been more concerned with equality as a social plan, while the left is involved in the uniformity as their main goal. I'm self-conscious that I'm over-simplificating things but, I guess that is not too far from reality that democracy –at least in the liberal perspective–, match with the ideal of equalitarian citizens whose rights and obligations are constitutionally the same and that are protected by laws and in which the justice means equal opportunities to progress and self-enhancement. In words of Professor Post:

The association of democracy with the equality principles of distributive justice is widespread and common... I have so far argued, however that democracy presupposes a different kind of equality, an equality measured in terms of the autonomus agency required by democratic

⁴ Roland, A. *In search of self in India...* p.4

legitimacy. And I have also argued that the egalitarian principles of distributive justice or fairness can in particular circumstances be in tension with democracy.⁵

On the other hand I will argue that the leftist political discourses are concerned with the uniform distribution not only of opportunities but of goods, education, salaries and infrastructure. One of the best examples that could be given is the government of Kerala which is at the top of socialist states in Asia. There the balance for example in education between males and females is almost completely on a uniform ground.

However it may be, in my opinion both projects –equality and uniformity– have failed in offering the population welfare for the self. Just to start with, let’s take the issue of education which is considered now days very relevant for the development of the personality of the individuals. Krishna Kumar remarks that there are three scenarios in respect Education and Society since Post-Independence India: a) the drastic reduction in the number of children who proceed beyond the primary and secondary stages, b) the preponderance of higher education, with the culturally dominant and economically stronger sections of society using the state’s resources to consolidate their hold on the state apparatus, and c) the inherent divisiveness in the system which protects class interests.⁶ So it’s clear that the higher education has become a stated sponsored activity from which the unprivileged do not benefit.⁷ On the other side, idealistically uniform trends could be seen for instance in an alternative model for primary education in rural areas designed by Kumar et al. based on the next principles: 1) state will provide free and compulsory education 2) competition ensures better service at lower cost 3) every child yearns to learn.⁸ The main idea of these authors is that it could be designed special rooms divided in quarters in order that one teacher could be able to manage four classes at the same time. Besides, there would not have been exams and around thirty million children would get back to school, and this goes without saying that implementation wasn’t possible until now.

Another one self evident objection about the operability of the equality-based political agendas is the bulk of differences as regard sex roles, gender relations and access to public health. In this sense it’s notable that non-democratic regimes of east Asia work better on this issue by focusing their scarce resources on public health

⁵ Post, R. *Democracy and Equality...* p.32

⁶ Kumar, K. *Education and Society...*(Economic & Political weekly) p. 1391

⁷ Tilak and Varghese *Financing Higher Education...*p.94

⁸ Kumar, S. et Al. *Primary Education...*p. 3533

measures rather than on providing advanced medical care.⁹ And in regard the sex roles and gender relations, the notion of *Purda* and *Izzat* between Hindus and Muslims I guess is the reflection of serious behavioral patterns well internalized through centuries that cannot be denied or abolished just by the good will. In words of professor Mandelbaum:

Izzat is mainly positive in connotation; it embraces what a man should do if he can. *Purda* is more negative; it covers what a woman might do but should not. There is some feedback between a family's *Izzat* and its *Purda* practices. The practices, properly done, enhance the *Izzat*. The *Izzat*, to be properly maintained, requires unflinching *Purda* observance. So *Purda* strengthens *Izzat* as *Izzat* strengthens *Purda*.¹⁰

The example of issues could be increased in an indefinite way, so let's take just other two examples: issues on population and poverty. The population issue is one intermeshed-wave of controversial lines. The growing of population has sometimes seen as a valuable help for the development of Economy and in other instances as a stopping factor. For example, in a study carried on in Punjab, Mamdani found that for the villagers people that he had studied, resorting to family planning would be "to court economic disaster", because the lot of children are seen as a help in the family economy rather than a obstruction.¹¹ So the will of the governors that is supposed to be in favor of the people could be rather against their own necessities. Besides, in February 2000, when the government of India adopted the National Population Policy in which, there were politics decisions just based on numbers, statistics and square models. In words of Professor Rao:

...(This policy) has population stabilization rather than health and well-being of the people as a goal, it is not integrated with health or indeed with the myriad other sectors that contour population.¹²

At this point, the Kerala policies are worthy to be mentioned, because: "the most socially advanced state in India, is particularly worth noting here, because of its remarkable success in fertility reduction based on women's agency".¹³ And this is a

⁹ Das Gupta, M. *Public Health in India...* (Economic & Political weekly) p. 5161

¹⁰ Mandelbaum, D. *Sex Roles and Gender Relations in North India...*(Economic & Political weekly) p.2002

¹¹ Quoted in: Cassen, R. *Development and Population...*p.1175

¹² Rao, M. *Population Policy: From Bad to Worse...*p.2120

¹³ Sen, A. *Population Policy...* p.14

favorable remark in where the policies can be led from non-Authoritarianism, and better to be inserting in the active field of Cooperation.

Finally, in the sphere of poverty, it's is believe that rapid economic growth remains the best bet for reducing India's immense problems of inequality and poverty.¹⁴ However I do not believe certainly that just economic growth would be the panacea, simply because the allotting is not equitable and owing to non essential changes in the zones of poverty since long before.¹⁵ And concerning the Poverty Alleviation Programmes the problem is not the lack of ideas to be implemented but the implementation itself that constitutes the biggest challenge in the drive for eradication of poverty in rural areas.¹⁶

People's grievance

As far as I'm able to see things and understand them, I consider that no matter how is it the way of ruling or the economic and political models to be implemented, the masses are the ones affected and the ones they never really care about. Is palpable the very fact that the elites are the ones ever self benefited. It makes no difference if we classify the elites and analyze them, because I guess everyone that has certain amount of power can become a member of any elite. The power I understand it as a kind of energy tangible in the instruments trough which the world keeps on turning, i.e. the mediums that revives in every instant the net of the world. For example, money is one of the highest mediums in order to keep the world alive, so it's natural that one who has a better access to transactions and doings that make money, surely will be a powerful person. The same goes along with those who have better relation with quality education, desirable resources, special information, etc. And the elite I conceive it as a hierarchical net composed by powerful persons, in alliance or just in good terms with each other. For example the relationship between businessman's and politician, or between land owners and the government, etc.

My point is that both right or leftist parties, when they assume the ruling post, is only the elite milieu that is the one self benefited, and scarcely the people for which they are supposed to stand. I call the people's grievance the fact that the masses are far

¹⁴ Jha, R. *Growth, Inequality and Poverty...*p.927

¹⁵ Jha, R. *Growth, Inequality and Poverty...*p.924

¹⁶ Rao, C. *Integrating Poverty Alleviation...*p.2607

away in the sharing of the state's welfare –which paradoxically owes almost all to their basic hard work– and deprive of any kind of equality or uniformity proposed just discursively.

But please let me state better my opinion, in order to avoid misinterpretations. I think that equality is an abstract idea stained by emotive ways of reasoning, and that uniformity is another abstract idea but rather tainted with a lack of any emotions. If equality means an equal access toward the acquisition of goods –from the basic ones to those of luxury enjoyment– and to the opportunities of better positioning in the social net –by better jobs, salaries, posts, etc.- I guess that it is a illusive idea, because of its factual impossibility. To start, I'm not noticed of any kind of culture or civilization in which these kinds of ideas were managed, until maybe the French Revolution. But, if we take a look back, I guess is evident that the societies –and I mean the big ones- were always organized by hierarchical principles, an staggering order and clear-cut divisions working together as a whole integrated society. It may be objected that even in those societies the masses were not in better conditions or that no one could really embodied the ideal planned-society. And I can only be in agreement with both objections, but it still stand the fact that hierarchy, order and organical division are three principles that make long-living civilizations.

In regards the abstract idea of uniformity, I said that this in one notion with no emotion involved at all, because if we analyze it in a little deep manner, it means that everybody can be thrown in a box-set, be numbered in order to conform a lineal-statistic pattern and be given the very same satisfaction of necessities just as any other in the supposed uniform-shaped network. In order to illustrate this I found no better exemplar that the soldiers in-line in front of any army: everyone porting a similar uniform, uniform look-like, and a set of ideas alike.

In sum, I guess that neither 'equality' nor 'uniformity' could solve the peoples grievance and, at the same time, that nothing can alleviated it but the people itself by trying sincerely to know themselves. Next I will carry a discussion on that.

The establishment in the vision of sameness

The third issue that is especially introduced by me around the debate on equality and uniformity is what I call the vision of sameness, that's to say, the recognition of the identity of one's self with the Self of All. This statement I do have to mention I take it

as a heart-minded reading of the Gita, in which the attainment of the *Samadhi*¹⁷ is extolled in various ways, for example in the verse VI.29:

With equality of vision everywhere (*sarvatra samadarshana*), he whose inner sense has been attuned to Yoga beholds the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self.¹⁸

What I understand in regards this is that there are two selves, one relative and contingent and one absolute and necessary, the first called the ‘individual self’ accepted as real by natural ignorance, and the second named progressively in a teaching of it, the ‘Inner-Self’, the ‘Self’, and the ‘Transcendental Self’.¹⁹ The relativity of the individual self is stated owing to its passenger and tortuous fate of living and dead again and again, dominated by impulses and tied up by passions. But, according to Vedanta teachings, in the quotidian sentence expressed as: ‘I am Devadatta’, the name ‘Devadatta’ corresponds to the body –which is the result of all instruments of action and perception– the pronoun ‘I’ corresponds to the person –which is the particular manifestation of every individual self that transmigrate in different bodies– and the conjugated verb ‘am’ corresponds to the Inner-Self that pervades everything, ‘worlds’, ‘persons’, ‘bodies’, ‘heaven’, ‘earth’, etc. So, the first teaching is that the individual self is not different but identical with the Inner-Self which is conceived as ‘Vayu’ between the Gods, ‘Air’ between the Elements of the Universe, and ‘Prana’ between the faculties of the body.

The second step corresponds to the investigation of the real nature of this Inner-Self. Because if we were following just the first teaching it may be raised the objection that the Inner-Self is relative and contingent too because of becoming involved in close contact with the faculties of the body –like vision or excretion for instance. However that’s not the case owing to the purity of the Self, which is the previous ontological state

¹⁷ The word *Samadhi* comes from the root *dhi*, which D. Gordon remind us that has a semantic field which covers the concepts of knowledge, vision and luminosity: “one truly knows what one sees in light-filled visions” (*Sinister Yogis...*p.44) So, with the prefix *sama* it convey us the meaning of “contemplation of the sameness” in the sense of one’s own been absorbed. Besides, the Professor Gordon distinguish two kind of *yogas*, i.e., the *yoga* of yoking –since the time of the Vedas, meaning particularly the junction of one’s self with the *devata* through the car of the mind-, and the *yoga* of clear and luminous vision –in which the meditation is a principal factor (Ibídem).

¹⁸ Krishna, W. *Srimad Bhagavadgita Bhashya...*p.239

¹⁹ All this sum up I did take it from a personal Upanishadic reading, especially from the Shankaracharya’s commentary upon *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* II.1.20 (Madhavananda *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad...*pp.202-220) in which it is exposed the ‘Secret Name’ [*‘Upanishad’*, the word being explained as ‘that which brings (one) near (Brahman)’].

of the Inner-Self before it has manifested the Universe. All this Universe –consisting just in Name, Form and Action, is thought by tradition that it was not-manifested before it could have been seen. So despite the fact that now the Universe is seen it could be return by the sage’s effort into its previous non-visible condition. The Inner-Self is like the trend in which they are weaved the beads of All the worlds but if we are going to do a deeper investigation into its the real essence we must pass trough this conception of Unicity and get to the point in where the Self is considered in its purity and sole Unity, often represented as the purity of the Space (*akasha*) or the vacuity of Heaven (*vyoman*). At this moment the Vedanta teaching has leaded the individual self to the intuitive feeling of been identical with All -like any other spark sprouted from the Fire or like any other drop in the Sea- by showing that in the beginning All of these was but the Self alone. But here comes next the merging of All in the non-dual Bliss.

The Self has been thought as Air first and after to be alike Space. However it may be now raised the objection that the Self is subject to modification because of the undergoing change of its own nature into a relative self, and because of even when All is conceived in All, it would have thence to be posed the conception of a suffering modification of the Self -as for instance that of a hair, that of a jar, or that of the milk- or a second production or division of It –like that of a thunderbolt or the rain, resulting in a dual perspective-. In any case the Self would be limited by it have been modified or doubled in a way or another.²⁰ And moreover the Vedanta teaching would be useless in getting emancipation from the transmigratory cyclical-circle, because of its failure in reach a Self non-limited by a suffering-modification nor by a dual entity, and it would be a lie for instance what is said in the Gita verse VII.19:

At the end of many births, the man of knowledge directly reaches Me, realizing, “Vasudeva is all”. Such a magnanimous soul is extremely rare.²¹

The scholar editor of the Shankaracharya’s Bhashya of the Gita comments that the frase ‘Vasudeva is All’ is the peculiar way of the Gita-Upanishadic language for to

²⁰ In regards the supposed modifications, a) the hair correspond to the modification of a portion of a whole, b) the jar to that modification of a part from a whole, and c) the milk corresponds to the entire modification of the whole; and on behold the supposed doubleness, d) the production of a thunderbolt correspond to the new formation of any other entity, and e) the inner division of a cloud (and subsequently raining) corresponds to the surging of an entity by partition of a previous one.

²¹ Krishna, W. *Srimad Bhagavadgita Bhashya*...p.265

say 'All this is Brahman'.²² This last sentence means not the individual self but the Self (*atman*). To be explicit, the 'All this' of the Upanishadic maxim corresponds not to the 'ego' or nucleus of every person, animal or god, but to the pure Self reached through the identification with All. And the third lesson is that this Self is in reality the Transcendental-Self or Absolute (*Brahman*), which is described neither in a monistic way nor in a pantheistic form, but rigorously metaphysically as: "The One without a second".

Some conclusions

The political discourse around the people's self is concerned with its basic mundane priorities as alimentation, health and education, and particularly with the celebration of emotions. In my opinion, the evident failure of reaching some equality and the non-factible possibility of getting into social uniformity, could be not denied. And I guess that in reality there are little options to do better. However, when talking of social justice I am not supposing that things could be boxed in a kind of monotone equilibrium. What I propose –if I am able to say it–, is to start for recognizing that the nature of things is the hierarchical and dynamical order in which everything is accommodated in one or another domain and constrained to do certain works and not others. And I guess that what the state could do for the people's welfare is only to permit the organic development of every human talent or vocational activity.

And lastly, in my opinion the knowledge of the Self been cultivated by any person could be a powerful way of dispel its own grieves, quenching all of its desires with the potion that's goes in growing "Unicity-Unity-and-Non-duality". However, it would be against what I have been saying if I ensure this kind of knowledge for everybody without restrictions. I guess that the knowledge justice result exactly in being for those who desire it just as every body is free of been longing for any other things that are not their own's self.

²² Krishna, W. *Srimad Bhagavadgita Bhashya*...p.xii

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