



Multiculturalism

Introduction

Since the **1990s**, **multiculturalism** became a buzzword in places like **Australia** and **Canada**, where governments consciously tried to recognize diversity.

- **Canada** embraced it—think of its strong policies on bilingualism, indigenous recognition, immigrant rights.
- **Australia**, too, experimented with multiculturalism, but—notice the contradiction—it recently **rejected the referendum** to give **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders** a constitutional voice. That tells us multiculturalism is **contested** even where it's "official policy."

On the other hand—

- In the **U.S.** and **France**, multiculturalism has **declined**. Instead of celebrating differences, the mood shifted toward assimilation, security, and nationalism.

Why Multiculturalism? Causes

- **Demographic Change through Immigration**
 - Movement of people across borders reshapes society.
 - Europe, North America, Australia—all changed dramatically with **waves of immigrants**.
 - New languages, foods, religions, and identities enter the public space.
- **Globalisation**
 - Borders may exist on maps, but culturally, the world is far more connected.
 - Bollywood in Toronto, McDonald's in Mumbai, Ramadan in Paris—**hybrid cultures** emerge.
- **Increased Consciousness about Rights**
 - Minorities, women, LGBTQ+, indigenous groups—people started **asserting rights** to recognition and equality.
 - Multiculturalism became the **language of dignity** for groups long ignored.
- **Securitisation of Ethnic Relations**
 - But here lies the tension.
 - In **France**, the **National Front** framed immigration and minorities as "security threats."
 - In **Greece**, groups like the **Golden Dawn** did the same, pushing back against multicultural ideals.

So multiculturalism isn't just a theory—it's a **battleground of politics**, shaped by **fear vs. acceptance**, **assimilation vs. recognition**.

The Essence

Multiculturalism rose in the **1990s** with optimism, but today it faces **pushback**.

- Immigration and globalisation continue to diversify societies.



- But **identity politics**, **security fears**, and **nationalist movements** test its limits.

At its heart, multiculturalism asks: *Can we build a society where differences are not just tolerated, but respected as equal contributions to the common good?*

Multicultural Rights

When we say “rights,” we usually think of **universal rights**—same for everyone.

But multiculturalism argues that **equal treatment sometimes requires different treatment**, because minority groups face unique disadvantages.

So, multicultural rights are **group-differentiated rights** that help preserve culture, identity, and dignity in diverse societies.

Types of Multicultural Rights

• Special Representation Rights

- These ensure that marginalized groups have a **voice in decision-making**.
- Example: In **Australia**, proposals for an **Indigenous Voice to Parliament** sought to give **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders** representation in law-making.
- Even though the referendum was rejected, the very idea reflects the need for special representation rights.

• Self-Government Rights

- Here, groups get **autonomy** over their own cultural and political affairs.
- Example: **Catalonia in Spain** enjoys a degree of **self-government**—control over language policy, education, and regional governance.
- This reflects the principle: minorities should have **space to rule themselves** within a larger state.

• Polyethnic Rights

- These rights allow immigrant groups to **maintain cultural practices** without being forced into full assimilation.
- Example: In **France**, Moroccan immigrants assert rights around **language use, religious expression, dress (like hijab)**, and cultural identity.
- These are not about self-rule, but about **cultural accommodation** in everyday life.

The Essence

Multicultural rights remind us that **“one-size-fits-all” rights are not always fair.**

- **Special Representation** → voice in governance
- **Self-Government** → autonomy for cultural groups
- **Polyethnic Rights** → space for immigrant cultures

Together, they answer the big question of multiculturalism: *How can we build unity without erasing diversity?*



Will Kymlicka – Multicultural Citizenship (1995)

Kymlicka is perhaps the **most influential liberal theorist of multiculturalism**. His book *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* is foundational.

Core Argument

- **Multiculturalism is *not* for immigrants**
 - Immigration, Kymlicka says, is a **matter of choice**.
 - People migrate because of **push factors** (poverty, instability at home) and **pull factors** (better opportunities abroad).
 - Since immigration is voluntary, it creates a **burden on the state**—the host society must already extend equality, rights, and opportunities.
 - Therefore, immigrants should integrate but cannot demand **separate nationhood**.
- **Multiculturalism is for *national minorities***
 - Example: **Indigenous peoples in Canada** or **Québécois (French-speaking Quebec)**.
 - They are not voluntary immigrants but **historical nations** now subsumed within a larger state.
 - They are numerically low (**numerical minorities**) and risk cultural extinction without **group-differentiated rights** like self-government or special recognition.
- **Multiculturalism = Logical extension of liberalism**
 - Liberalism already values **individual rights** and **toleration**.
 - Kymlicka argues that **culture is an essential part of identity**—without protecting cultural membership, individual freedom is hollow.
 - Hence, multiculturalism is not illiberal; it is a **necessity to expand toleration** in diverse societies.

The Essence

- For **immigrants** → equal individual rights, integration, not nationhood.
- For **national minorities** → group-differentiated rights, self-government, recognition.
- For **liberal states** → multiculturalism is not a threat, but a **natural deepening of liberalism** itself.

Think of Kymlicka this way:

He's saying *liberalism without multiculturalism is incomplete*, because freedom only makes sense when you can live meaningfully **within your own culture**.

Bhikhu Parekh – Rethinking Multiculturalism (2000)

Parekh gives us a **post-colonial lens** on multiculturalism. He isn't just writing from a Western liberal framework like Kymlicka—he's speaking as someone aware of **colonial legacies** and cultural hierarchies.



Core Arguments

Rejects the atomistic man

- Liberals often imagine individuals as free, self-standing, “atomistic” beings.
- Parekh says this is false: *culture shapes our sense of right and wrong*.
- Just as **ecology depends on biodiversity**, society thrives on **cultural diversity**.

Critique of liberalism

- Liberals, he says, suffer from **ethnic-centric attitudes**—their so-called “universal” rights often reflect **Western cultural biases**.
- He stresses that **every culture is hybrid**—no one has a monopoly on truth.

Rights only for national minorities

- Like Kymlicka, he grants **special rights to national minorities** (indigenous peoples, historical nations).
- Why? Because **rationalism** in practice often slips into **majoritarianism**—the dominant culture imposing its standards in the name of “reason.”

Harm principle & tolerance

- He uses the **harm principle** pragmatically. Example: **Friday being a holiday** instead of Sunday does *no harm*.
- So why resist? Toleration requires recognising harmless cultural variations.

Not a logical extension of liberalism

- Here he diverges sharply from Kymlicka.
- For Parekh, **multiculturalism is not simply liberalism stretched further**—it’s a **post-colonial corrective** to liberalism’s narrowness.

Human Rights & Asian values debate

- He warns: **Human Rights cannot be wasted on values**.
- In a world where Asian and other traditions feel resentment towards “Western rights talk,” we need humility.

Cosmopolitan world order

- Instead of imposing one culture’s values, we must have **free dialogue among civilisations**.
- Only then can we arrive at **basic terms acceptable to all**, building a **cosmopolitan order**.

The Essence

Parekh is telling us:

- Don’t imagine humans as isolated atoms—we are cultural beings.
- Don’t imagine liberalism has the last word—**dialogue among civilisations** does.
- Just as the planet needs biodiversity, the world needs **cultural diversity** for a just, cosmopolitan future.



Kymlicka says multiculturalism = **liberalism's logical extension**.

Parekh replies: *No—it's a post-colonial critique of liberalism itself.*

Multiculturalism in Democracy

At its heart, **multiculturalism** is about the **rights of minorities in democratic countries**.

Now, think about what democracy really means. If democracy is reduced to just “counting heads,” then the **majority always wins**. That's not justice—that's the **tyranny of majority**.

But real democracy must be **deliberative**.

- It's not just about *votes*, it's about *voices*.
- It's not just about the *rule of numbers*, it's about the *ethics of dialogue*.

In a **deliberative democracy**, minorities are not merely tolerated; they are **heard, respected, and represented**. This means democracy becomes not just a mechanism of power, but a **culture of negotiation, accommodation, and dignity**.

The Essence

- **Multiculturalism is democracy's test.**
- If democracy collapses into **majoritarianism**, minorities live at the mercy of the dominant culture.
- If democracy becomes **deliberative**, it transforms into a space where *differences enrich*, not divide.

In other words, democracy is only **real** when it listens to its smallest voices.

Critics of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism sounds noble — protecting minorities, preserving cultures. But critics remind us: **every coin has another side**.

1. Feminist Critique – Susan Moller Okin

She warned that **cultural sovereignty is dangerous**. Why? Because most societies are **patriarchal**. If we protect culture blindly, we risk protecting the **oppression of women** in the name of tradition.

2. Amartya Sen

Sen worried about **ghettoisation** — when communities close themselves off, living in cultural silos. This weakens **national unity**, turning democracy into islands instead of a shared space.

3. Politics of Identity vs Politics of Development

Some argue that focusing on **identity politics** divides society, while real progress comes from the **politics of development** — roads, jobs, education. Too much stress on “who we are” may distract from “what we need.”

4. Chandan Kukudas

He reminds us: inside every culture, there are **subjugated internal minorities**. Example: **LGBTQ** within traditional communities. If we defend “culture” as a whole, we may silence these vulnerable voices.



5. Jeremy Waldron – The Cosmopolitan View

For **Waldron**, multiculturalism is too narrow. He argued it **restricts cosmopolitan emergence** — the idea of global citizens. It also **underestimates people's capacity** to mix, adapt, and create new shared cultures.

6. Bruce Bawer (Right-wing critique)

In *Surrender*, Bawer claimed that **appeasing Islam** in Western countries **threatens liberal values** like free speech and gender equality. For him, multiculturalism risks becoming moral weakness.

7. Isaiah Berlin – Value Pluralism

In *Two Concepts on Liberty*, Berlin offered perhaps the **wisest critique**.

- He rejected **value monism** (like utilitarian utility = one supreme value).
- He also rejected **value relativism** (like extreme multiculturalism = all values equal).
Instead, he proposed **value pluralism**:
Values are **incommensurable** — no neat hierarchy exists.
Example: **liberty vs equality**. Or, the choice of a **nun vs housewife**. Both valid, but pursuing one may involve sacrificing the other.

This was his middle path: **respect diversity, but recognise trade-offs**.

The Essence

- Okin shows us: beware of **patriarchal traps**.
- Sen shows us: beware of **fragmented societies**.
- Kukudas shows us: beware of **internal oppression**.
- Waldron dreams of a **cosmopolitan world**.
- Berlin teaches us humility: there is no perfect value, only **plural paths**.

Together, they remind us: **multiculturalism is noble, but not without dangers. It must be balanced, critical, and self-aware.**

Contemporary Relevance

Country	Example	Significance
Australia	Anti-immigration rallies targeting minorities	Multiculturalism under strain in public discourse
South Korea	Integration programs and evolving immigration policies	Demographic change driving inclusive policy shifts
Canada	Legislative support and public backing for cultural diversity	Enduring model of multicultural success

**PYQ**

1. The debate on human rights is caught between the limitations of both universalism and cultural relativism. Comment. 2024, 20
2. Comment on; Multicultural perspective on rights. 2023, 10
3. Comment on: Cultural Relativism. 2022, 10
4. What do you understand by Multiculturalism? Discuss Bhikhu Parekh's views on Multiculturalism. 2017, 20
5. Explain Berlin's notion of value pluralism. 2013, 15
6. Examine the multi-cultural perspectives on rights. 2012, 15



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