

The Role of Minority Groups in Enriching Canadian Culture

By Gyan Nath

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Canada is a multi-racial society. As a young country it needs to develop, strengthen and broaden its own distinct Canadian culture. For a long time the dominant culture has been English complemented by French. This duality of culture has been a political, legal and social issue ever since the Fathers of Confederation founded this great country. However, this English culture has been distinct from the typical British culture. The English culture has been influenced and modified by the Canadian belief in egalitarianism and the large number of immigrants drawn from various European countries. The European cultures including English, diverse as they may be in their languages and history, are bound by common western traditions and thoughts based upon Judaic-Christian beliefs. The Canadian culture typifies this kind of western culture.

Patterns of Immigration

The influence of Eastern cultures upon the Canadian culture in general has been negligible. Until recently the migration was restricted. The people who had originally come from Eastern countries like China, Japan and India were brought in as unskilled labour. Insignificant as the number was, their problems were compounded not only by their level of education, but also by the de facto second-class citizenship that they acquired. They worked hard to preserve their cultural identity and to get social, political and economic equality.

Canada of today permits only one class of citizenship and that is Canadian citizenship. All citizens, whether their origin be Greek, Hungarian, Chinese, Indian or British, enjoy full democratic rights and due process of law. The immigration practices have become non-discriminatory with an emphasis on skill and education. This has allowed skilled and educated people from Eastern countries to enter Canada in increasing numbers.

Under the changing laws the people who have come to this country in the last decade or so obviously are of exceptionally high standard of education and calibre. It is a well-known fact that people generally like to adhere to familiar surroundings. Even within their native land, they enjoy the familiar life of family, friend and relatives. They like the communality of the cultural influences with which they are familiar. They usually do not move from one province to another. They remain attached to their country and will not leave under normal circumstances. Generally it takes a special type of person who has intelligence, ambition and drive to explore the unfamiliar and to create new opportunities for himself. This explains the fact that immigrants are able to compete successfully with their co-patriots. Since the number of immigrants of this calibre is still

insignificant the threat to local people is not of any concern. On the contrary they go out of the way to help them settle in their new mode of life.

As full and active partners, immigrants enrich the economic life of this country by their conscientious contribution and hard work. Do they work just as hard and conscientiously to enrich the Canadian culture? This question is important and needs to be considered in some detail.

Meaning of Culture

Usually when we talk of culture we are referring to it broadly in an anthropological context. For example, when we talk of East Indian culture, we are referring to a specific culture the components of which are religion, traditions, language, history, geography, economics, music and art, etc. An East Indian, therefore, represents the sum total of all these factors. He will always tend to show in an undefinable way and in undefinable situations, the influence of his East Indian culture and heritage in his social behaviour.

Cross-Cultural Interaction

When two distinct cultures interact with one another they are bound to influence each other. Under four hundred years of British Raj in India the western culture has left a deep mark on Indian culture. Indians have adopted British institutions and form of government. Education is patterned more or less on British lines. Even the language has been retained. In upper classes the Indian adaptation of the western way of life is very much in fashion. The British on the other hand developed tolerance and respect for the ancient civilization and culture of India. They liked Indian customs and their way of living. They appreciated Indian art, carvings and paintings. They admired the broad view of Indian life.

Although we have come a long way from when one who was not a Christian was called a heathen, there is still a lot of misunderstanding and ignorance about other people in the world. Canadians know that cows do roam around free on the streets of India. They know about the Indian rope trick and the snake-charmers. They know about the poverty and the starvation of Indian people. They may also know about the seventy per cent plus of illiteracy. A patent question though asked of Indian professionals is: "Where did you learn your English?" Yet they are not likely to know of Ajanta and Ellora caves, magnificent temples which abound, the calm and serene view of life, the philosophic Indian mind and an Indian's firm belief in the basic goodness of God and the realization of how small he is in comparison with the universe created by the Almighty. As a follower of Hindu religion, one of the very few non-converting religions of the world, a Hindu sees human nature and the world around him with compassion and humility.

Thus it is clear that in this day of super-jets and space age, the world has become a very small place. It is not only healthy but vitally important that interaction between diverse cultures is actively encouraged and supported. This will certainly create a much better world to live in.

The Role of Minority Groups

The minority groups in Canada have several choices open. First, they may want to seek total assimilation and absorption in the mainstream of Canadian culture. Secondly, they may want to live in complete isolation. Thirdly, they may want to remain passive as far as their own cultural values are concerned and do nothing about them. Fourthly, they may want to develop a balanced integrated outlook where they become "true" Canadians and yet actively maintain and share their cultural values with others. Each of these choices requires some elaboration. This analysis will be made in reference to East Indians as representing a minority group. However, it is contended that the analysis should be valid for other minority groups.

1. Assimilation

The people who believe in total assimilation and absorption of their identity in the mainstream of Canadian culture may be called assimilationists. They are idealists and sincerely believe that, since they have come to this country of their own choice they must try to become an indistinguishable part of the society. When they come to this country, they are likely to be relatively young and in general not married. Compared with their traditionally restricted environment at home they enjoy the freer atmosphere of their acquired country. Their taste-buds may perhaps take years to adjust to the Canadian food but they still learn to live with it. They try hard to prove equality with their Canadian counterparts in sports and recreational activities. They would try extra hard to associate with Canadians and sometimes deliberately avoid contacts with other Indians. They would probably marry outside their own race, partly because of lack of matrimonial opportunities (they would rather marry here than to face an arranged marriage), and partly due to emotional reasons. This adds further strength to their beliefs.

Canadians in general are informal people. They are genuinely interested in other people and cultures. Therefore, the assimilationists find themselves, when in Canadian company, answering questions regarding Indian beliefs, culture and value systems. Since this kind of interaction is an ongoing process the assimilationist tends to find himself as a part separate from the whole and finds it difficult to "disintegrate" his identity. This sort of approach also creates problems for their children. Since they as parents had the benefit of growing up in an Indian cultural environment they were able to answer the Canadian questions. However, their children who were deliberately denied the opportunity of knowing something about their cultural heritage will unfortunately grow up being uncertain and confused.

Besides, from the assimilationist's approach, a time may come theoretically when there is no longer any interaction since his primary culture has been fully absorbed by the secondary culture. At that point the real meaning of the values between two cultures will also be extinct.

It is also suggested that an assimilationist forgets that by being dissimilar we become more similar and by being unequal we become more equal. Total assimilation denies further enrichment of the Canadian culture because it does not provide the variety and the breadth that a truly rich culture demands and expects.

2. Isolation

The people who believe in isolationism tend to come from rural walks of life. They may have less than grade 12 education and are likely to be employed in unskilled occupations. They will tend to converse in their native language because it is the language they have grown up with and they have not been exposed to others. They are able to learn enough English to get by. They are extremely conservative by nature. They may teach their children the native language and insist that they speak it at home. They may be very strong in their religious beliefs and may be prepared to undergo any sacrifice to create opportunities for proper religious observances. They tend to lead a routinized way of life with distractions few and far between. They exercise stricter controls on girls compared with boys and insist upon parental authority. Their weekend diversions are limited to exchange visits with relatives and friends. They may like their children to profit from the rich educational opportunities that this country provides, but the home environment for advancement of learning may be sadly lacking. They may maintain strong sentiments and attachments with India. They are likely to provide financial support to their relatives in the native land. If a suitable match is not available for their children they may arrange to import one from India.

They remain grateful for the opportunity to live in this affluent society. By maintaining their religious beliefs and practising them and by living a simple life they are able to preserve their dual identity both as an Indian and as a Canadian. They are enriching the Canadian culture by providing the strong points of their own culture. However, the value of their contribution tends to get lost due to lack of communication. The Canadian participation in their home life or religious life is neither solicited nor encouraged.

3. Passivism

This choice concerns those who have passive attitudes towards their own culture and values. They usually come from middle-class and upper-class families. They tend to have above average intelligence, drive and ambition. They work hard at their jobs and take their professional tasks seriously. They are broadminded in their religious beliefs. They lead a generally active social life. They enjoy movies, concerts, and other recreational and cultural activities. They speak English in their own home and generally have a very high educational and professional background. They are concerned with the problem of imparting Indian cultural values to their children. When it comes to what cultural values are worth nurturing and sustaining, the ideas become diffused and confused. In India, religion and culture are so much blended that they become a way of life. Religious practices vary from one person to another and from one province to another. Coming from diversified backgrounds Indians here represent a microscopic picture of Indian society. To take the example of constructing a Hindu temple, there will be an immediate problem whether it will be Ram's temple, Krishna's temple, Saraswati's temple or Vishnu's temple.

There are some who firmly believe that since the cultural values are personal they should best be left to the individual families. Of course, they tend to forget that cultural values are also acquired in a major

sense from the cultural environment that surrounds a child. Unless an opportunity is created for a child to share the East Indian way of life beyond the confines of the family it will be difficult to acquire the best of this cultural heritage.

Then there are others who believe that since a person is a product of his environment and since a child is being brought up in western culture, they should limit him to only this new way of living. Even if they initiate any change it is bound to be lost by the time the next generation arrives.

Generally all the members of this group are firmly convinced of the rationality of their arguments. As professionals they may seldom agree with one another. If somebody shows some leadership and arranges a course of action there is usually opposition. The opposition will be increased in the degree of intensity as it comes to devoting their own time or financially supporting such an activity. It almost seems that for a person who belongs to this group there is no cause because he is the cause.

4. Integration

The people in this group understand western culture and take pride in their own cultural heritage. They share their beliefs and value systems with Canadians and their own children. They show the same drive, energy and determination to provide rich cultural experiences for all to share, as they do towards their own jobs.

Cultural values are not something intuitively learned but are acquired by actually experiencing them. Therefore, people in this group actively organize opportunities for observing and following religious beliefs, rituals and practices. They provide opportunities to learn music, dancing, art and languages. They organize seminars, talks and discussion groups on Indian philosophy and cultural heritage. They provide every opportunity for Canadians to share in these experiences.

Unfortunately, in most minority groups those people who believe in this balanced-integration approach are few and far between. Those who believe in it get little support from the majority. Yet it is this approach that makes a sincere attempt to enrich Canadian culture. This does not make anyone less Canadian or sectarian. On the contrary, this will tend to develop in a person a broad and humane view of life.

If this balanced-integration approach is adopted by minority groups it will help make Canada a truly multi-racial community extremely rich in its diversity and yet bound by a common bond of being a Canadian. In addition to being a proud Canadian we will be proud of our respect for plurality of beliefs, customs, traditions and value systems.

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