Should interethnic encounters be based on culture or citizenship ? : Implications for the politics of language

Satish Kumar Mahadeo

SHOULD INTERETHNIC ENCOUNTERS BE BASED ON CULTURE OR CITIZENSHIP ? IMPLICATIONS FOR THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

DR SATISH KUMAR MAHADEO
LECTURER, UNIVERSITE DE MAURICE

Résumé

Le dilemme du multiculturalisme à l'île Maurice se situe au niveau de l'antagonisme entre une politique identitaire qui a pour visée d'accorder des droits d'appartenance à différents groupes ethniques qui peuplent le sol mauricien et une politique fondée sur les droits de l'individu, une politique qui ne tient pas compte de l'héritage ou de l'appartenance culturelle des bénéficiaires. La problématique à l'île Maurice de vivre dans une société à caractère multiculturel surgit en raison du besoin de trancher entre un choix de promulguer des droits civils connus comme la politique de « citoyenneté » qui implique l'attribution des prérogatives corollaires notamment l'accès à des droits fondamentaux et des opportunités égalitaires et d'autre part, le choix ou le besoin de prendre en considération et de faire preuve de respect envers le concept de « diversité culturelle ». La discussion s'oriente dans la perspective de déterminer le besoin de souligner l'importance de la nature interactive des relations interethniques ou de promouvoir la notion de diversité culturelle. Ainsi, l'aboutissement vers un choix ultime entre ces alternatives s'avère très crucial et de grande envergure car il entraînera des répercussions considérables sur les politiques langagières adoptées et vulgarisées à l'île Maurice.

Mots-clés : interethnicité, culture, politique des langues.

Abstract

The dilemma of multiculturalism in Mauritius lies in the confrontation between a politics of identity which grants rights of belongingness to groups and a politics based on individual rights where culture is deemed irrelevant. The Mauritian dilemma of living in a multicultural society, in other words, boils down to a choice between the notion of citizenship or « *la citoyenneté* » with its corollary values such as « equal opportunities » for all and on the other hand, respect for cultural diversity. The debate as to whether interethnic encounters should be based on the notion of citizenship or cultural diversity has profound implications for the politics of language in Mauritius.

Keywords : interethnicity, culture, language politics.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I would like to begin with a critical examination of the concept of multiculturalism before presenting the conflicting claims of the notion of « citizenship » and culture in the elaboration of interethnic en-counters in a society like Mauritius. I wish to postulate the view that a complex society like Mauritius must steer a middle path between the much publicised notion of « la citoyenneté » and cultural markers of identity. This debate has profound implications for the politics of language in Mauritius. So I will end up proposing that the shape and nature of interethnic encounters will be determined strongly by the way we Mauritians handle our language politics.

WHAT IS THE MAIN SOURCE OF TENSION ?

Every first year student of Shakespeare knows that tensions, disagreements and conflicts that create discord make up the ingredients of drama, yet the aspiration towards a better state of affairs is one that most people share.

The Mauritian drama has at its origin a tension which has permeated the fabric of political, social and cultural life in Mauritius. If there exists a main source of tension in Mauritian identity politics, it lies in a paradox and a contradiction between an orientation towards the past and an orientation towards the present and the future. Our attitude to time is almost schizophrenic. A major conflict within Mauritian society is between a fight for equal rights, on the one hand, and the right to be different, on the other hand ; between claims to a way of life based on secularism, individualism and meritocracy, on the one hand, and claims to cultural specificity, on the other hand – whether « specificity » takes the form of the Oriental language issue, admission to Catholic schools, or the Muslim Personal Law. An influential member of the Catholic church, with regard to admission to confessional schools, writing in a newspaper article, asked : « Dans quelle proportion faut-il rester ouvert aux autres sans perdre son identité ? » (Le Mauricien, 29 March 2000). This question, I think, epitomises the dilemma of multiculturalism in Mauritius. It strikes at the heart of what has been called the Mauritian malaise or « mal-vivre ». The confrontation that we experience, almost on a daily basis, is between a politics of identity which grants rights of belongingness to groups, and a politics based on individual rights where culture is deemed irrelevant. The Mauritian dilemma of living in a multicultural society, in other words, boils down to a choice between the notion of citizenship or « la citoyenneté » with its corollary values such as « equal opportunities » for all and on the other hand, respect for cultural diversity.

MULTICULTURALISM AS A SITE OF DEBATE

Multiculturalism has itself become a controversial concept. The question of multiculturalism has become an intense site of concern and debate. As a discourse, multiculturalism can broadly be understood as the recognition of co-existence of a plurality of cultures within the nation. Celebrated by some and rejected by others, multiculturalism is controversial precisely because of its real or perceived compatibility or incompatibility with national unity. Critics of multiculturalism generally consider it as a centrifugal movement (i.e tending to move in a direction away from the centre), it is described with much concern by some observers as a threat to national unity, the reason being that the growing emphasis on our « multicultural » heritage exalts racial and ethnic pride at the expense of social cohesion. In a world plagued by ethnic and racial antagonisms, the argument goes, the quest for a unified and cohesive identity, the search for unifying ideals and a common culture becomes all the more urgent. Some even argue that multiculturalism inevitably contains a « separatist » impulse which might ultimately lead to a decomposition of Mauritian society. A multiculturalist programme which puts emphasis on identity politics leads to an endless fragmentation of society into different subordinate identities and groups. Multiculturalism, then, is, for some people, an inherently destructive concept when it engenders the « cult of ethnicity » as demonstrated by movements such as Afrocentricity, Indocentricity, or Islamocentricity, which aim at constructing a collective consciousness (African or Indian or Islamic consciousness) to help a people rediscover or reinvent their « authentic » identity (whatever that means !). Such movements that emphasise and glorify the roots of our people might, on a psychological level, perhaps lead to a new sense of empowerment, but do nothing to change the social or economic conditions of their existence. If all these centricities are dogmatically embraced and deemed beyond critical examination, the risk will be to try to rationalise our behaviour, while applying different standards to other groups. Then, we must inevitably accept the negative consequences of having embraced such simplistic views. Besides, identity in a mixed society such as ours is not fixed, static, monolithic, or something which is predetermined by the colour of one's skin. Identity is something which is socially constructed and continually in the making. In this connection, a postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha (1994), has stated that the unity of a nation is an impossible one because of the fluidity of identities, and he described national culture as « permanently unfinished business ».

NOTION OF CITIZENSHIP

Now, opposed to ethnicity is the notion of citizenship. The clearest case of a society which bases itself on the notion of citizenship

(« *la citoyenneté* ») is that of France, where the natural tendency is to deny and seek to destroy the ethnicity of minorities. France, with its republican dogma of fraternity and equality, insists on treating everyone only as individuals and — most important individuals who really want to be French to the exclusion of any other identity. Cultural identity is so codified that official statistics don't record the ethnic or national origins of French « citoyens ». North African immigrants try to speak French to their children, and their own languages, Arabic and Berber, tend to disappear by the third generation. In France, the chosen basis of policy, therefore, is assimilationism. This demands equal rights for all individuals, but this is accompanied by the discouragement of minority cultures or minority political organisations. On the social level, this means the exclusion of minority cultures from the schools, as in the famous « *foulard* (Muslim headscarf) » incident. On the political level, there is no place admitted for ethnic politics, and even anti-racist organisations such as « S.O.S. Racisme » have been sponsored and organised by parties of the indigenous left.

At one extreme is multiculturalism, the view that groups should maintain their heritage languages and cultures as much as possible. At the opposite pole is assimilation, the belief that cultural groups should give up their « heritage » languages and cultures and merge into their new society to make a new homogenized whole (e.g the « one people, one nation » concept). The assimilationist viewpoint is pictured in the idea of a melting pot as against the metaphor of a salad bowl. Now, the idea of the melting pot immediately throws up two different perspectives.

First, there is the idea that the final product is made up by a contribution of all the cultural groups that enter the pot. The cultural groups melt together until the final product is a unique combination. No one ingredient dominates. Each cultural and linguistic group makes its own contribution to the final taste. A genuinely interethnic viewpoint is based on the idea that an individual can successfully hold two, three or more cultural identities. In this sense, identities are merged, the parts become a new whole. A redefined ethnicity creates a person who is not a replica of an Indian in India, an African in Africa, a Chinese in China. Rather that person becomes a more or less integrated combination of parts of both, and many things else. My question, however, is : is this the usual view associated with the melting pot ? Choosing to use the term « interethnicity » to replace « multiethnicity » or « multiculturalism » will remain a mere semantic exercise, as long as we do not clarify our concepts. To come back to the « melting pot » picture, the perspective often associated with it is not that no one ingredient dominates, but that cultural groups are expected to give up their cultures and conform to whatever is perceived as the « dominant » culture in mainstream society.

The « melting pot » picture is a specifically American idea, and it is based on the concept of assimilation, thought to be essential for American

national identity. Assimilation is defined here as the acceptance of values or principles which supposedly transcend cultural and ethnic specificity. But the assumptions of assimilation have been challenged, with the result that groups in America such as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and so on who regard themselves as excluded from the American mainstream have politicised the discourse on multiculturalism. The expectation was that immigrants into the U.S.A, Canada and the U.K., for example, would be pleased to have escaped political oppression or economic disadvantage and be jubilant to embrace equality of opportunity and personal freedom. The expectation was that an individual would be pleased to give up his past identity and make a commitment to a new national identity. Yet heritage culture and cultural identity have persisted, resisted and insisted. The most important point to be made about the American melting pot is that it never occurred. Rather than eradicating ethnic differences, modern American society has actually created a new awareness in people, a concern about roots and origins. In a recent study, it was found that many prefer to live in neighbourhoods dominated by people with the same origins as themselves, and they continue to regard themselves as « Italians », « Poles » etc., in addition to being Americans two generations or more after their ancestors left the country of origin.

Interethnic encounters, as I understand it, involve living together with an awareness of cultural diversity. We accept our differences and appreciate a variety of lifestyles rather than expect everyone to fit into a standardised pattern. Eriksen, who has studied the Mauritian situation, closely has reached the conclusion that :

> « The Mauritian nation aims at striking a balance between the binary logic of the state (dividing the world's population into citizens and foreigners) and the segmentary logic of the ethnic mosaic, where degrees of membership and loyalty are made relevant ».
>
> He goes on to remark that :
>
> « The openness of Mauritian discourse, public and private – in particular, the fact that ethnic tension and cultural differences are universally acknowledged as facts of social life, and the absence of a clearly hegemonic ethnic category – are some of the conditions for the kind of interethnic compromise realised in Mauritius ».

LANGUAGE POLICIES

The debate as to whether interethnic encounters should be based on the notion of citizenship or cultural diversity has profound implications for the politics of language in Mauritius. How we Mauritians handle our politics of language will, I think, determine strongly the shape and nature of inter-ethnic encounters in the future. Language can be seen as a problem or as

a resource. Either we see unity within a nation as being synonymous with uniformity and similarity. Or we argue that it is possible to have national unity without uniformity. Diversity of languages is not incompatible with national unity. In spite of the oriental language issue, the co-existence of three or more languages is rarely a cause of tension, disunity, conflict or strife. Economic, political and religious differences seem to be prominent as causes of tensions. Language is seldom the cause of conflict. Rivalries between different religions, rivalries between different political parties and economic aggression tend to be the instigators of strife. Language, in and by itself, is not a cause of unrest. In a study on causes of civil strife, Fishman (1989), a well-known sociolinguist, found : « The widespread journalistic and popular political wisdom that linguistic heterogeneity per se is necessarily conducive to civil strife, has been shown, by our analysis, to be more myth than reality ».

In the nineteen-sixties, in the aftermath of independence, avoidance of conflict seemed to be uppermost in the minds of our leaders. The move was to opt for an official medium which was free of ethnic associations. In the nineteen-seventies, when Mauritians experienced a brief spasm of nationalistic fervour, the search for national identity was the underlying rationale for movements in favour of the Creole language. But today, we are living against the background of economic globalisation, and its countermovement, namely the politics of identity. What this implies in terms of our language politics is that we need to reconcile the economics of language with a politics of identity. On the one hand, we are living in an increasingly multilingual world, with trade barriers being broken, with single markets in areas such as Europe growing, and with economic competition rapidly developing on a global scale, competence in languages is increasingly important. Those who have multilinguistic capital may be in a position to increase their economic capital. Alongside the English and French languages, the list of modern languages for marketing and trading purposes is likely to grow significantly. For example, Mandarin and Cantonese, Hindi and Arabic may each become increasingly valuable. But, at the same time, while languages may be viewed in terms of their economic bridge building potential, they may also be supported for their ability to build social bridges across different groups, bridges for cross fertilization between cultures. The appeal of the ex-Minister of Arts and Culture to Mandarin speakers to learn Hindi, or vice versa, is, after all, not a far-fetched idea. Two or three languages and two or three cultures enable a person to have multiple perspectives on society. Those who speak more than one language and own more than one culture are more likely to build bridges than barricades and boundaries. Rather than being subtractive as in assimilation, interethnicity bequeathes an additive person and process.

CONCLUSION

The task of everyone involved in interlingual, intercultural and interethnic encounters, therefore, is to prove the value of diversity, the rich-ness in difference which will pave the way for a « supra-ethnic sensitivity », for the empathy of the kind discovered by the celebrated anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1964) who pointed out that something more than linguistic perfection is required for successful crosslingual, crosscultural communi-cation :

> « I am not a good mimic and I have worked now in many different cultures. I am a very poor speaker of any language…. When I work in a native society, I know what people are talking about and I treat it seriously and I respect them, and this in itself establishes a great deal more rapport, very often, than the correct accent. I have worked with other field workers who were far, far better linguists that I, and the natives kept on saying *they* couldn't speak the language, although they said *I* could…. You see, we don't need to teach people to speak like natives, you need to make the other people believe they can, so they can talk to them, and then they learn ».

REFERENCES

Bhabha Homi, K., *The Location of Culture*, New York & London, Routledge, 1994.
Eriksen T.H., *Ethnicity and Nationalism : Anthropological Perspectives*, Pluto Press, U.K., 1993.
Eriksen T.H., *Small Places, Large Issues : An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Pluto Press, U.K., 1995.
Fishman J., *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective,* Clevedon & Philadelphia, Multilingual Matters, 1989.
Le Mauricien, 29 March 2000.
Mead Margaret, « Comment in discussion session », in T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Approaches to semiotics,* The Hague, Mouton, 1964.