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“Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Colonial and Post-Colonial Societies”
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Editorial

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The current thematic issue of UNESCO’s International Journal on Multicultural Societies (IJMS) addresses the governance of cultural diversity in post-colonial settings. Building directly on our debate of political integration in modern nation-states (see Vol. 5, No. 1), the contributions to this issue, which are based on a conference sponsored by the UK Economic and Social Research Council’s ‘Future Governance’ programme, attempt to broaden the agenda of policy-oriented and comparative social science research on cultural diversity by including postcolonial societies, notably South Africa, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan.

Taking into account post-colonial societies within an agenda of comparative research on diversity seems to be both challenging and promising. Challenging because, as guest editors Gurharpal Singh and John Rex argue in their thematic introduction, it requires the integration of two rather separate fields of research. Studies on ‘multiculturalism’, on the one hand, have mainly been concerned with public policies aimed at the inclusion of migrant populations into a culturally more or less homogeneous nation-state. Research on post-colonial societies has, on the other hand, predominantly addressed the conditions of social integration or cohesion in profoundly heterogeneous societies; it focused, in other words, on state-formation and nation-building in ‘plural societies’. In such contexts, contemporary discourses of multiculturalism have a rather different – and more ambiguous – meaning, as Steve Fenton demonstrates in his case study on ethnic difference in Malaysia. Harihar Bhattacharyya’s and Mohammad Waseem’s articles on constitutional politics in India and Pakistan, respectively, show that post-colonial identity politics cannot be reduced to politics of recognition but are closely linked with struggles over access to power and economic resources in post-colonial societies. Integrating these different strands of literature seems, at the same time, to be highly promising in terms of theoretical development and empirical analysis. Thus, Simon Bekker and Anne Leildé, in their analysis of the South African case, highlight the limitations of otherwise successful public policies of multiculturalism in overcoming class cleavages. Analysis of post-colonial settings, to follow Fenton’s argument, sheds some light on the limited applicability of Western discourses of ‘multiculturalism’ and on alternative modes of dealing with ethnic difference. The strongest argument in favour of cross-fertilisation between the literatures on multiculturalism and plural societies is provided by Darshan S. Tatla’s article on Sikhs in Canada, India, the United Kingdom and the United States. His analysis clearly demonstrates that contemporary migration...
constitutes a transnational social space in which the construction of collective identities is affected by post-colonial experiences and dominant discourses of ‘multiculturalism’ alike. It is obvious that the emergence of such transnational spaces supported by increasingly global flows of communication profoundly modifies the social contexts of public policies aimed at governing cultural diversity.

Taken together, the contributions to this issue invite us to revise our conceptual and methodological tools, in order to capture the cultural dynamics of transnational social spaces and to envisage appropriate public policies in this respect. Forthcoming issues will follow up these questions, first by presenting recent developments in social science research on multiculturalism in the Asia-Pacific region and, secondly, by critically investigating the interrelation of policy-making and social science research in the field of migration.
Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Colonial and Post-Colonial Society – Thematic Introduction

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The notion of “governance of multicultural societies” covers a wide range of geographical and historical situations. Moreover, it is often used interchangeably with the term “pluralism”. The object of this paper is to show that the notion of “pluralism” or the “plural society” has a quite specific usage in the study of colonial and post-colonial societies, and that, when attempting to develop an all-inclusive theory of governance in what are loosely called multicultural societies, this all-inclusive theory must take these societies into account. Equally it has to be recognised that migration from the colonial and other peripheries to the metropolitan centre creates new structural problems at that centre.

1. Plural Society Theory
The foundations of the theory of plural societies were laid by J. S. Furnivall writing primarily about Indonesia and M. G. Smith writing about the British West Indies. We begin therefore by referring to their basic formulations of the problem.

Furnivall builds upon the work of the Dutch economist J. H. Boeke (1884–1956), who had written about Indonesian society that:

There is a materialism, rationalism and individualism and a concentration on economic ends far more complete and absolute than in homogeneous Western lands: a total absorption in the Exchange and Market; a capitalist structure with business concern as subject: far more typical of Capitalism than one can imagine in the so-called capitalist societies which have grown slowly out of the past and are still bound to it by a hundred roots (quoted in Furnivall 1939, 452).

What is suggested here draws attention to an understanding of Western capitalism which had been offered by Durkheim in The Division of Labour in Society (1933).
As Durkheim saw it, the collapse of the “mechanical solidarity” of simpler societies in which everyone was the same was likely to produce a state of “anomie” or anarchy were it not for the fact that differences of interest could lead to an “organic solidarity” which was possible because fraud and force were outlawed. It is precisely this possibility which is seen by Boeke to be missing in the plural economy of colonial capitalism. There is, however, another side to this coin. The brutal world of the market place is coupled with the existence of separate communities. As Furnivall puts it:

In Burma, as in Java, probably the first thing that strikes the visitor is the medley of peoples – European, Chinese, Indian and native. It is the strict sense a medley for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet but only in the market place in buying and selling. There is a plural society with different sections of the community living side by side but in the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labour on racial lines (Furnivall [1948] 1956, 304).

Thus it would seem that there are two aspects to the social structure of colonial societies. On the one hand there is the brutal world of the market place subject to no moral law; on the other there is the world of the separate communities within each of which there is tight moral control and a sense of belonging together. It should be noted that the former of these worlds has two aspects, both the world of exchange and the world of the division of labour, and so far as the second is concerned there is a degree of differentiation and complementarity between individuals rather than the simple uniformity of Durkheim’s “mechanical solidarity”.

Smith (1965) addresses a somewhat different situation in the British West Indies where he argues for a theory of pluralism to be set against the general theory of a functionally integrated society, which had been developed by Malinowski in anthropology and Talcott Parsons in sociology. Smith’s theory emphasises the role of political institutions rather than economic ones as binding the society together.¹

Like Furnivall, Smith seeks to describe two structural aspects of colonial societies. On the one hand there is a set of institutions binding all individuals together in a single society; on the other there are those which bind together the members of each of the separate communities. But he deals with this topic in a rather different way from Furnivall. It is best clarified by reference to Malinowski’s functionalist theory. According to Malinowski (1939), a normal society has a basic set of institutional arrangements through which it meets its basic and derived needs. These include family systems, education, law, religion and economic organisation. Smith argues that in the case of the Caribbean there is no single society in this

¹ M. G. Smith was once asked whether the slave plantation was not an economic institution. His reply was that it was a political one.
sense at all. There would seem at first to be several different societies each with its own institutional set.

In fact, however, according to Smith the institutional set of the separate societies or communities is not complete. None of the separate societies has its own political institution and the business of political regulation (very important in Malinowski’s functionalist theory) falls to the dominant group. Nor can the state be seen as simply a steering mechanism concerned with goal attainment, as in the tradition of sociological functionalism of Parsons (1951) or Luhmann (1995). So far as the separate groups are concerned, according to Smith each has its own basic institutional system. This embraces “kinship education, religion, property and economy and certain sodalities. It does not normally include government in the full sense of the term”.

The surprising feature of this formulation is that it seems to ignore the role of the market place and the division of labour in binding the groups and their individual members together in a single society. The political is emphasised to the exclusion of the economic. This seems to put Smith at odds with Furnivall and with any form of Marxist theory which sees the social relations of production as central.

2. Further Exploration of Economic Exploitation and Stratification in Colonial Social Systems

Dissatisfaction with Smith’s position led to an attempt to give a more satisfactory account of colonial pluralism (Rex 1983). It was done under three headings: pre-colonial social forms; the basic forms of economic exploitation; and colonial systems of stratification.²

2.1 Pre-Colonial Social Forms

Pre-colonial social forms have some relevance in understanding the position of indigenous peoples. Those who adhere to them tend to be marginalised in some sort of reservations. This is not to say that the reservations do not become dependent on the main economy or that some people from the reservations do not migrate to work within it. It will still be the case, however, that there is a separate set of institutions which serves as a reference point for indigenous people.

2.2 Colonial Social Relations of Exploitation and Production

There are of course a variety of forms of colonial exploitation. In the colonies there was regular use of force and unfree labour, which although it might have occurred at the beginning of metropolitan forms of capitalism was not the main form there.

² The processes involved here are given in summary form. There is a more detailed discussion of some of the elements Rex 1983.
Marx distinguished between pre-capitalist social forms and capitalist exploitation through the labour market (Marx 1964) and Weber drew a distinction between capitalism peacefully oriented to market opportunity and adventurer or booty capitalism involving high risk and the use of force (Weber 1963).

The social relations of production using unfree labour may take a variety of forms. The simplest form is that based on the quest for booty and this was involved in most forms of colonialism. This, however, usually led to the establishment of longer-lasting forms such as the *encomienda* in Spanish America, or the creation of *latifundia*, landed estates where the owner received tribute from tenants. Peasants living on the edge of these *latifundia* would be forced into labour service or sharecropping.

Somewhat different relations of production occurred where there was intensive horticulture, which led to the establishment of plantations using unfree labour and in large-scale mining operations (see Weber 1963, Chs. 5 and 6 for the development of the manor and the plantation, and Ch. 13 for the historical development of mining). Elsewhere, Rex (1983) has discussed the question of the position of miners in South Africa, placing the position of gold and diamond miners in the wider context of migrant labour from dependent rural areas to cities.

Trade also played its part through unequal exchange and the speculative financing of voyages. Even more important were chartered companies such as the East India Company and the British South Africa Company, the first obtaining a monopoly of the lucrative spice trade and the latter a monopoly in gold mining. These companies, however, did not simply confine themselves to these activities. They had a directly political role. The East India Company did not simply trade in spices and other luxury goods. It eventually controlled the revenue directly. In southern Africa the British South Africa Company, working through Cecil Rhodes, came to control the government of the Cape. The common feature here is that government passed from parliament and the state directly to the companies.

2.3 Colonial Systems of Stratification

In all these cases, the basic relations were essentially economic and may be regarded as colonial modes of production. Somewhat different from such relations were those based on stratification, in which different groups enjoyed unequal esteem and power. Thus most colonial societies involved groups of different origin performing different functions. There would be the representatives of metropolitan government, entrepreneurs, farmers and workers from the metropolis; there would be religious missionaries from the metropolis; there would be secondary colonialists coming

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As defined in 1503, an *encomienda* was a grant by the Spanish Crown to a conquistador or other official of a specified number of Indians in a particular area. The receiver of the grant, the *encomendero*, could exact tribute from the Indians in gold or in kind and was required to protect them and instruct them in Christianity.
from other countries than the metropolis and engaging in those forms of trade which were unacceptable to or insufficiently profitable for metropolitan entrepreneurs; and there would be slaves and indentured labourers.

Various alliances could be formed between these groups or they might have conflicting interests. Thus the governing elite might work with and through the missionaries, but there are many cases in which these two groups were at odds with one another, with the missionaries sometimes defending native interests. Indentured labourers were often at odds with the descendants of slaves. The secondary colonialists had their own interests but would sometimes form alliances with other groups. Finally, and importantly, those from the metropolis had the status of settlers and collaborated with one another whether they were entrepreneurs, farmers or workers.

The fact that these different groups came from different geographical origins meant that in part the distinction between them was an ethnic one. At least this was true of those of metropolitan origin, the secondary colonialists, and the various types of unfree workers. But another way of looking at the stratification system is to see it as a system of estates. Medieval Europe had had such an estate system involving aristocratic landowners, serfs, the clergy, burghers and pariah traders. In the colonial system there were the governing elite, clergy, settlers, pariah traders, slaves and indentured labourers.

One factor which complicates matters still further, however, is the role of religion. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Roman Catholicism and a variety of forms of Protestant Christianity may serve to provide very important foci of identity which prevent identification with classes, estates, neighbourhoods and the status of citizenship. Religion may also unite individuals whom these other structures would divide.

3. Processes of Change and Post-Colonial Societies

The model which has been developed thus far concerns colonial societies in which there is metropolitan control. But such societies are subject to change and to the development of post-colonial social forms. This may be summarised under the headings of economic liberalisation, political independence, settler-governed post-colonial societies, incorporation into the world system, and new processes of class struggle and revolution.

3.1 Economic Liberalisation

The nature of colonialism underwent change from the beginning of the nineteenth century as the theory of capitalism in Europe shifted from mercantilism to free trade. Those forms of capitalism that Weber called booty or adventurer capitalism, which had formed the centrepiece of colonial economies during its constitutive
period, no longer received the backing of the metropolis and struggled to coexist with the new economic forms that belonged more naturally to the world of free trade.

The two major changes now witnessed by the colonial world were labour emancipation and land reform. Plantations and *latifundia*, if they were to survive, had to take on new and modified forms and a new order was produced based on free competition for jobs and land. The process which ensued was, however, a complex one. In the rural areas free peasants remained on the margins in agriculture while former plantation slaves were still subject to severe exploitation based on race rather than any legal status. On the other hand, those who sought work in industry in the cities found themselves competing with free migrants who had never been slaves (in the northern cities of the United States with European immigrants).

### 3.2 Political Independence

In formerly plural societies, on the withdrawal of the metropolitan ruler, power often passed to one of the ethnic segments who now controlled the state. Alternatively, while one group controlled political power, economic power might be in the control of one of the others, as was largely the case in Malaysia where Malays controlled the government, economic entrepreneurship was in the hands of the Chinese and agricultural labour in the hands of Indians. Moreover, companies from the former metropolises often continued to operate through collaboration with local people. This is something which Marxism sought to capture with the notion of comprador bourgeoisies, but such forms of collaboration have to be recognised in any sociology of post-colonial society.

Whoever inherits power in the newly independent formerly colonial territories will usually do so under the guise of nationalism. The liberators claim to speak for the nation. This they were able to do as the former colonialists were expelled, but the nationalist leaders commonly represented a particular class or ethnic group.

### 3.3 Settler-Governed Post-Colonial Societies

One of the contenders for power in colonial societies involves an alliance of farmers, entrepreneurs and workers from the metropolis. After independence is achieved this group may be the principal one which controls political power and the state. Indeed it may be the group which leads the struggle for independence. Clearly this was the case in the United States, where the Declaration of Independence was drawn up by the settlers. Equally it was this group which took over the government in the former British Empire in Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, although in Canada and South Africa the settler group was divided between French and British in the first case and Dutch and British in the second. Power was not shared with other ethnic groups.
There was, however some degree of mixing both physically, through intermarriage, and culturally. In some cases, as in Latin America and South Africa, there were mixed-race groups, mestizos or Coloureds, while on the cultural question the dominant groups’ culture was adopted in most matters by the groups they dominated. For this reason, Kuper and Smith (1969) see United States society as neither homogeneous nor plural but as heterogeneous. Black Americans speak English and adopt many white American customs even though they may remain structurally distinct. Similar phenomena may be found in the British Commonwealth countries. This does not, of course, exclude the possibility of a potentiality for political revolt by the groups involved.

3.4 Incorporation into the World System

In a simplified model such as that set out above, colonial societies were governed from a single metropolis and political independence simply involved the overthrow of this metropolitan rule. A different process may also be in train, however, in that the formerly colonial society relates itself at least economically to a new metropolis. This may result from the fact that colonial nationalists find other metropolitan powers helpful in their own struggle.

A more radical change is suggested by Wallerstein (1974): political rule is not the major issue. What matters for him is the emergence over several centuries of a new world economic system into which all post-colonial societies must somehow be fitted.

3.5 New Processes of Class Struggle and Revolution

Whatever the relations between post-colonial societies and the former metropolises there is likely to be a tension and a breach between the processes of change and revolution which go on in the metropolitan countries and that which goes on between the new nations and the metropolis. This was central to the writing of Frantz Fanon, for whom the national struggle had to take precedence over any class alliance between the colonial people and the working class in the metropolis (Fanon 1963). Colonial revolutionaries may be seen as having to make a choice between Marx and Fanon for their political inspiration. This is a central idea which Fanon derived from his Martinican teacher Aimee Cesaire (Cesaire 1956). In contrast, another political ideologist and teacher in formerly colonial Africa, Amilcar Cabral, envisaged a revolution which rejected such nationalism in favour of a class-based revolution, albeit one based on classes within the former colonial territories (Bienen 1977, Blackey 1974) while Leopold Senghor put forward the notion of Negritude in opposition to the notion that the people of French Africa were all French.4

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4 This issue has affected political argument throughout formerly French and Portuguese Africa. In Mozambique there was an insistence among Frelimo leaders that their revolution was neither black
Two other aspects of Fanon’s teachings should be noted. One is the question of culture, the other that of the use of violence. On the cultural question, following Césaire, Fanon saw that colonial people had been deprived of their culture and had to mask themselves in the culture of their colonial masters (Fanon 1967). On the question of violence his position was a complex one. On the one hand, he did see violence as an essential part of the process of decolonisation but, being himself a psychiatrist, he argued for this violence not simply as a political matter. He actually saw the acceptance of political oppression as involving a kind of mental illness, the cure for which lay in violent resistance.\(^5\)

### 4. Colonial Immigrants in the Metropolis

During the colonial period and after the achievement of political independence, some individuals from the colonies and former colonies migrate to the metropolis. There is therefore a further question of how they enter metropolitan society and how multicultural policies in these societies place them.

The metropolitan societies concerned will have themselves undergone a process of political change for a century or more, involving economic modernisation and a move towards democracy. In many cases they will have achieved some sort of welfare state in which, following the achievement of legal and political equality for their own citizens, they will now be offering in addition a degree of social equality or at least equality of opportunity for all. This problem has been clearly formulated by Marshall (1951). The question which then arises is how far immigrants from the colonial territories fit into this framework. Some societies may aspire to combining the recognition of the diverse origins of colonial immigrants with equal opportunity and mutual tolerance between all groups. There is, however, also the possibility that they may become an ethnically defined underclass.\(^6\) In any case the arrival of colonial and post-colonial immigrants in the metropolis involves the intersection of processes of class struggle and class compromise built into the structure of metropolitan societies and the position of these immigrants. Immigrants may choose to pursue their own special interests, may join in the class struggles of native workers, or attempt to do both. Similar processes go on between immigrant entrepreneurs and their metropolitan counterparts. All these processes, however,

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\(^5\) Fanon argued this case with an international group of pacifists in Ghana in 1960. These pacifists saw themselves as occupying the moral high ground which Fanon, with his account of mental illness and revolution, sought to recapture from them.

\(^6\) See Little (1947) and Rex and Tomlinson (1979) for the situation in the United Kingdom in the immediate post-war period. The situation in the United States is well discussed by Steinberg (2001).
are doubly contingent depending on what the immigrants do and how the various metropolitan classes see them and act towards them.\footnote{The question of the place of all ethnic minorities, including colonial and post-colonial immigrants, is discussed extensively in Rex (1996).}

In some European countries colonial immigrants may be accompanied by others who do not come from colonies but from dependent countries, as is the case with Turks and southern European immigrants in Germany. These other immigrants and those from the former colonies may be defined together in public policy and share the same fate.\footnote{While multiculturalism is one alternative, other alternatives are attempts to repatriate the immigrants, offering them economic and social rights but not political rights (the German alternative), and assimilation involving a refusal to recognise the separate culture and organisation of immigrants (the French alternative), see Rex and Tomlinson (1979).}

5. Examples of Post-Colonial Society

Many examples could be given of the playing out of multiculturalism in post-colonial societies. In this thematic issue, four cases of post-colonial societies are highlighted as well as the example of a community (Sikhs) in both post-colonial and non-colonial settings.

In the South African case, the African National Congress as governing party found itself split because of the position of the Inkhata in KwaZulu-Natal, whose leaders had to be included in the government. There was the question of what to do with the various groups of white settlers who had governed during the apartheid regime. Language and religion served as unifying but also as divisive factors. There were class differences between ruling elites and the mass of the urban and rural poor. Government had to deal with a civil society of non-governmental organisations. The population of Indian descent could in part be incorporated into African National Congress structures, but Indians also had their own economic position to defend and in Natal had their own conflicts with the Inkhata government. Religion, particularly Islam in the Western Cape, prevented the full assimilation into new neighbourhoods of part of the Coloured population, who were sometimes significantly called Cape Malays. There was a great deal of regional decentralisation so that policies at the centre had to be carried out in a number of new provinces. The rate of crime was enormous and crime was seen as another, perhaps better, way of pursuing goals than politics. The government had modernising goals and sought to promote a universal identity against other divisive trends. It also created a constitutional framework within which in principle problems could be resolved. As Bekker and Leildé demonstrate, since 1994 the construction of post-racial South Africa has been attempted constitutionally, as a “national project” and through the devolution of power to the provinces. These top-down changes arising from new institutions, rights, and official policies have profoundly affected the identities of South Africans by creating new spaces as well as rights. Recent
research on bottom-up identity construction among South Africans suggests that traditional racial and ethnic identities coexist with many new multiple identities. Forty per cent of South Africa’s population fall into the category of the underclass. However the authors caution that the management of diversity in South Africa is perhaps succeeding by default, for the mobilisations emerging from new agendas around diversity are likely to contest top-down policies. All in all, multiculturalism has its own significant South African meaning as an object of policy.

In the case of Malaysia, as Fenton demonstrates, while the theme of multiculturalism or multi-ethnicity was present it intersected with a number of other themes. One was the important question of class and of the relation between modernising elites on the one hand and the poor on the other. It was not the case that the Malays as such ruled the society. They were divided among themselves with a new middle class created through affirmative action playing a dominant role. Within this class there were divisions between modernisers and traditionalists and also important arguments about personal morality. Religion also played a role within the main constituent state of Malaya with much debate, as Fenton highlights, centred around increasing Islamisation. Yet, for Fenton, Malaysia offers an interesting case study because multiculturalism as a public policy is operating in extremely adverse circumstances, quite unlike Western democracies that have readily embraced the concept.

Bhattacharyya deals in his paper with India and the place of its linguistic and religious minorities. There is an important history here following the attempt of Hindus to build a temple on the site of a mosque which they had destroyed. Hinduism is seen as an inclusive religion within which other religious minorities have a part if they are Indian. Recent conflict in Gujarat, however, shows that Hindu–Muslim relations may take on a violent and murderous form with the projection of the conflict over Ayodhya into the politics of the state.

Bhattacharyya gives a detailed account of the demography of religious and ethnic minorities. He also picks up themes exposed by Tiryakian (2003) about ideological and political multiculturalism and details the way in which these arguments have been debated with local reference by Indian scholars. He discusses the views on national unity and multiculturalism of Nehru as well as the relationship between the debate about federalism and that about multiculturalism. He produces careful case studies of the playing out of these issues in very local areas.

Waseem deals with Pakistan, where there is considerable internal diversity which has to be accommodated at a communal and a political level. This moreover is a country in which there are major regional differences reflected in the political parties and in which the democratic process is regularly interrupted by military rule. Between India and Pakistan also there remains the unresolved issue of Kashmir where there is a divided territory and much violence both within the separate parts and at the border between them. Waseem offers a careful historical discussion of the process of partition, the separation of East and West Pakistan as well as the
splits between regionally based political parties and the creation of new hierarchies based on original homelands of incoming migrants. He draws attention to the heritage of communal electorates and the attempt to redress inequalities through processes of affirmative action, which have a different significance to such policies in the United States. Overall he reviews various constitutional attempts to address these problems, usually in circumstances of military rule. He concludes that:

Various experiences with federal formulas and policies of accommodation of ethnic communities in political and administrative institutions have yet to accrue positive results. The continuing civil–military crisis has hampered the growth of democratic institutions as well as viable policy structures to create inter-ethnic and inter-communal harmony.

Tatla, in assessing the position of Sikhs in colonial, post-colonial and developed democracies, draws important lessons from multicultural governance for minority communities. Whereas after 1947 the post-colonial state in India, according to Tatla, has followed the cultural policy of integrating Sikhs within its broad conception of distributive justice and nation-building which has entailed the erosion of existing communal rights, the emergence of a sizeable Sikh diaspora in Western countries has arrested this process by enhancing community consolidation. In fact official policies of multiculturalism in developed democracies such as Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States have strengthened Sikh identity. Key legal judgments, especially in the United Kingdom which is home to 335,000 Sikhs, have provided significant landmarks in the reconstitution of Sikhs as an ethnic/national community. Thus for Tatla a paradox is emerging: while the post-colonial state is determined to forge a new national identity that will erase the vestiges of the colonial heritage, transnationalism rooted in colonial traditions in the Sikh diaspora has thrived under developed multiculturalism.

In conclusion, it is intended that this thematic issue should serve as an introduction to the complexities of multiculturalism which derive from the structure of colonial and post-colonial societies and the relations between colonial and post-colonial migrants to the changing structures of metropolis in an increasingly globalised world. No single theory exists of what multiculturalism is or how it should be applicable at all times and places. The papers, taken together, serve to show that when social scientists from different countries and different disciplines consider this problem they recognise that the very term has a variety of meanings. The concept of the governance of multiculturalism is an ideological one, although this is itself part of the reality of our social and political world.
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Is Multiculturalism a Workable Policy in South Africa?

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After pervasive political violence during the late apartheid years, has the South African Government developed a policy akin to multiculturalism and how effectively is this policy being implemented? Why does violence along ethnic and racial lines appear to have diminished in South Africa since its democratic transition in the early 1990s and is this related in any way to such a policy? These two questions are discussed in three steps – first, a short constitutional history of transition in South Africa over the past decade is given; second, as these constitutional provisions may be viewed as state attempts to construct new identities “from above”, the identities of South African citizens that appear to be emerging “from below” are discussed. Identity construction “from above” is a state strategy aimed at legitimising new state institutions. Simultaneously, citizens’ identities – influenced as they are by such strategies – are constructed “from below” within the full range of institutions in which citizens act. As a third step, a preliminary scan is made of institutions operating at local level within different groupings of citizens.

Modern societies are increasingly confronted with minority groups demanding recognition of their identity, and accommodation of their cultural differences (Kymlicka 1997, 10)

Multiculturalism as a term is used in three distinct senses: as a description of the state of cultural diversity in a society, as an ideology aimed at legitimising the incorporation of ethnic diversity in the general structure of society, or as public policy designed to create national unity in ethnic diversity (Kallen 1982). In this paper the focus is squarely upon the third sense – that of public policy.

ISSN 1817-4574, www.unesco.org/shs/ijms/vol5/issue2/art2 © UNESCO
The term multiculturalism is not used in South African policy-making circles (McAllister 1996). Where it is generally used and debated is in a set of predominantly anglophone countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States and more recently, in the United Kingdom. Although South Africa shares, as its dominant cultural ethos, this international anglophone (and largely urban-based) culture, it is neither majoritarian anglophone nor strictly the product of successful European settlement. The five societies above, in fact, as a consequence of British imperialism and its democratic aftermath, continue to receive large streams of immigrants who tend, once they settle in these societies, to be classified as minorities. In the aftermath of failed policy initiatives – the “melting pot” in the United States and cultural dualism in Canada as examples – multicultural policy is one way in which the governments of these societies seek to address this challenge (Kallen 1982). Underlying this policy is the ideal that personal dignity or honour – a fundamental value in a democracy – is closely bound up with the collective dignity of a person’s ethnic or cultural community (Taylor 1994). National and ethnic identities ought to complement one another.

The term more often used to capture the diversity of South Africa is “divided”, an idea derived from that of the plural society (Horowitz 1991; Rex 1971; VanDenBerghe 1990). This classification implies more than cultural diversity. It suggests coinciding cleavages along lines of inequality – a situation of “ranked ethnicity” (Horowitz 1985, 22) – and high potential for violence and continuing conflict in the society. Accordingly, this paper discusses two separate questions. In the first place, after pervasive political violence during the late apartheid years which were deeply marked by racial and ethnic cleavages, has the South African Government developed a policy akin to multiculturalism and how well is this policy being implemented? In the second, why does violence along ethnic and racial lines appear to have diminished, virtually disappeared, in South Africa since its democratic transition in the early 1990s and is this related in any way to such a policy?

These questions are discussed in three steps. First, a short political history of transition in South Africa, over the past decade, is given. This history concentrates on constitutional provisions pertinent to cultural diversity and their institutionalisation in society. Second, as these provisions may be viewed as state attempts to construct new identities “from above”, the identities of South African citizens that appear to be emerging “from below” are discussed. Identity construction “from above” is a fundamental state strategy aimed at legitimising new state institutions, particularly in the new democracies of divided societies (Du Toit 2001). Simultaneously, citizens’ identities – influenced as they are by such strategies – are constructed from below, within the full range of institutions in which citizens act (Bornmann 1999; Martin 1994). Indeed, according to Castells (1997, 7), “although […] identities can […] be originated from dominant institutions, they become identities only when and if social actors internalize them, and construct their meaning around this internalization”. As a third step, therefore, a preliminary scan of institutions operating at local level within different groupings of citizens is made.
1. Constitutional Provisions during Transition

South Africa’s historic moment, bringing apartheid to an end, was shaped through an extended process of domestic negotiations involving national political actors – the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party (NP), in particular – during the early 1990s. This moment was crystallised in an Interim Constitution, in subsequent general elections in 1994, and in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996. At this historic moment, the new South African Government inherited a number of interrelated and forbidding challenges, some primarily home-made, others of international fabrication. On the domestic front, these challenges comprised violence as the means to reach political goals, deep inequality and poverty rooted in the national economy, pervasive racism in the consciousness of South Africans, and minority ideologies claiming rights of self-determination which threatened to translate into separatist and irredentist movements. From abroad, the major challenges were less visible in the early 1990s. The first relates to re-entry into the global economy and its implications for international competition. The second major challenge – globalisation and the gradual loss of state sovereignty as well as the rise of the politics of identity, particularly regarding an increased recognition of minority rights in the arena of international law – was barely visible to South Africans during their period of negotiations and democratic celebration. Recognition of the nature of both these challenges has taken some time to surface.

During the process of domestic negotiations, however, these challenges were not only raised but in most cases were also addressed, albeit solely in constitutional terms. The 1996 Constitution was fashioned on the field of political battle, in cross-fires produced by forces of transformation and forces of preservation (Martin 1994, 15), by notions of constructing new identities and of safeguarding enduring identities. Accordingly, state–civil society issues relevant to cultural diversity were very much alive in the minds of the negotiators (Bekker 1997).

How is the new South African state tackling the challenge of reconciling democratic governance with cultural pluralism? In the first place, this state is required to operate within the limits laid down by the 1996 Constitution. A number of its key features are identified below.

Its first striking feature is that of constitutional sovereignty. Under the previous constitution, governance was guided by parliamentary sovereignty that accorded the national executive and legislature supremacy over the judiciary, a constitutional authority which was employed on numerous occasions (Abel 1995). Today, the Constitutional Court bears this authority. When the South African state, reflecting – as it inevitably will – certain cultural interests, is called upon to be even-handed in constitutional terms, as it surely will often be, it will be the judges of this Court rather than the government who will adjudicate.
The second feature is the particular territorial dispersion of political power which is constituted. Intergovernmental relations between central government, nine provincial governments and numerous local governments are required to be “distinctive, interdependent and interrelated”, thereby constituting “co-operative government” (SAC 1996, Section 40(1)). Provinces have substantial devolved powers, including authority to establish a provincial constitution, to raise certain taxes, and to legislate on local government affairs. Central government has a wide range of overriding powers which it can exercise when conflicts between national and provincial legislatures emerge. An advisory Fiscal and Finance Commission, comprising nominees of central, provincial and local government, is established to ensure equitable sharing of revenue between these governmental tiers. In short, this division of powers establishes multiple territorial domains of representation and participation without constituting a federal arrangement. The nature of this division of power moreover reflects the territorial cultural diversity in the country by, for example, allowing a provincial constitution to include the institution of a traditional monarch (SAC 1996, Section 143(1)b), and by enabling each provincial government to select at least two of the eleven official languages as their medium of communication (SAC 1996, Section 6(3)a). The demarcation of these new provinces (with the possible exception of KwaZulu-Natal) has moreover resulted in little coincidence of territory and ethnicity.

General and provincial elections to establish a national assembly and nine provincial parliaments take place under a simple list of proportional representation. Political parties, including a large number of new interest-based parties, competed openly with one another. Expressed by South African metaphor, the political playing field has been levelled. What has been proclaimed to be the South African miracle is due in no small part to the nature and outcome of this multi-party electoral system which clearly identified the winning party while facilitating the emergence of minority party rule in a number of provinces, and minority party representation in a number of “governments-of-unity”.

If a constitution is interpreted as establishing a mandate between a state and its civil society, then the 1996 Constitution defines South African civil society as constituted primarily by individuals. Non-racialism and non-sexism are two of its founding provisions. Citizenship and the franchise, equality and freedom, are rights of persons, not — as in the past — of groups, or of minorities, or of races. Accordingly, cultural, linguistic, gender and religious rights of individuals are protected from unfair discrimination by the state in the Bill of Rights. The 1996 Constitution is, in this sense, classically liberal democratic in form (Welsh 1994).

When it goes beyond protection and obliges or enables positive state action to recognise, establish or promote such rights, new cultural constituents of civil society appear within its definition. The state is obliged to take practical and positive measures to elevate the status of indigenous languages (SAC 1996, Section 6(2)); to constitute a state commission for the promotion and protection of the rights of cultural, religious and linguistic communities which will recommend
on the establishment or recognition of relevant cultural councils for South African communities (SAC 1996, Section 185); to recognise the institution of traditional leadership; and to ensure that the courts apply customary law when that law is applicable (SAC 1996, Sections 211(1), 211(3)). Active state intervention is enabled in two areas – affirmative action and the political role of traditional leaders. Thus, within the Bill of Rights, “legislative” and other measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken to promote the achievement of equality (SAC 1996, Section 9(2)) – strictly, an example of “categorial rights” (Kallen 1995) rather than group rights. In the second place, national legislation is authorised to provide a local government role for traditional leaders, and to establish provincial houses and a national council of traditional leaders (SAC 1996, Section 212). Finally, in a section reflecting most sharply the contested nature of its establishment, the 1996 Constitution – after confirming the right of self-determination of the South African people as a whole – recognises “the notion of the right of self-determination of any community sharing a common cultural and language heritage” within the nation (SAC 1996, Section 235). In a cultural sense, therefore, beyond the classically liberal rights of the individual (and of institutions such as political parties and trade unions in classical pluralist democratic theory), new constituents of civil society are identified – cultural, religious and linguistic communities, the institution of traditional leadership, and customary law. In addition, as an apparent anomaly, the notion of the right of self-determination specifically for communities sharing a common cultural and language heritage is recognised. Cultural constituents of civil society identified in earlier South African constitutions, such as racial groups and ethnic groups, or in international law, such as minorities and “groups” as such, are conspicuously absent. It is noteworthy that in terms of constitutional theory at least, the South African case appears to recognise cultural pluralism more comprehensively than in countries where multiculturalism is official policy, such as Australia and Canada (Kallen 1982; McAllister 1996).

What of the process of institutionalising these new constitutional provisions? We are able to offer no more than glimpses of the changing natures of both civil society and the state as the nation begins to address the domestic challenges set out above – political violence, inequality and poverty, racism and primordial minority movements.

A number of institutions – cooperative government, the National Council of Provinces, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities, the Pan South African Language Board and those defining local government roles for traditional leaders – have been established. Their track records may best be described as mixed (Henrard 2001). The large number of urban and rural local governments supposed to engage in cooperative government has recently been replaced by less than half this number. The commissions and boards designed to address minority concerns are struggling to establish procedures and ways of carrying out decisions. A Division of Traditional Affairs has been established within the central state Department of
Constitutional Affairs. Simultaneously, although fragile and sometimes perceived to be “toothless”, these institutions are generally viewed as legitimate, at least within elite groupings. The Constitutional Court, in particular, has taken a number of decisions within the cultural domain relating to religious freedom and language.

Although still present, political violence has decreased sharply. Afrikaner separatists have fallen silent, almost forgotten (particularly after their poor results in the 1999 general elections); Zulu traditionalists in KwaZulu-Natal appear to be more involved with consolidation in this province than with extra-constitutional threats. Violent crime, which takes on extraordinary proportions (Nedcor 1996; Nedbank ISS 1997–2001), captures the nation’s attention instead. Simultaneously, civil society appears much less coherent than it did during the exuberant days of resistance and negotiations when civics and the forum movement dominated the public consciousness, when, as elsewhere in Africa in earlier times, “with swelling voice, civil society demanded liberation, the dismantling of the oppressive colonial state” (Young 1994, 237).

The state is attacking poverty and inequality in two primary ways. The first is through affirmative action policies and the second through direct policy measures and a new macro-economic strategy. As the first is largely targeted on the job market, its track record so far is fair, particularly in the public sector. The main reason is that the state is in a position to directly influence job allocation in this sector and indirectly influence many positions in the private sector. The same cannot be said for its poverty-alleviation strategy in the unemployment and informal sectors. The Reconstruction and Development Policy of the mid-1990s did not fare well. Its failure was symbolised by the closure of its offices located in the Ministry of the Office of the President and the transfer of its Minister without Portfolio to another ministry. Subsequent growth strategies have been characterised by “jobless” growth and the number of jobs in the national economy has been diminishing, in absolute terms, over the past few years (Statistics South Africa 2000, 2001; Nattrass and Seekings 2001).

Affirmative action by the state appears to be having three consequences. White-collar employment in state and private sectors of black South Africans, although limited in magnitude, is rising. In the second place, such remedial action has led to a sense of deprivation and discrimination among communities that fall outside the boundaries of beneficiary groups. Third, many of the beneficiaries of affirmative action will continue to keep an ideological distance between themselves and the white middle class for they fully realise that a large part of the justification for the policies which promote their interests lies in the enduring condition of the poor who get left behind. The case for remedial action in contemporary South Africa is strong, the fact that its consequences are and will remain contentious is apparent.

A decade after South Africa’s historic moment, it would appear accordingly that cultural and economic accommodation of ethnic elites in the country is taking place through continuing institutionalisation of new constitutional and public policy
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initiatives. In the society, recognition of cultural rights (in the educational context for example) has taken place; corporatism – business–union–state relations – characterises critical economic institutions; affirmative action gives access to positions of influence and wealth; and proportional representation offers various political parties access to political power (Adam et al. 1997). Simultaneously, this accommodation is brittle (Du Toit 2001): current conflict over guaranteed private mineral rights in the economy, over affirmative action quotas in large businesses, and over accommodating traditional leaders in local authority bodies all point to the fragility of these new institutions and to the delicate balance they have established in the emergent democracy.

How have rank-and-file South Africans taken to these new institutional arrangements? We turn to this question in the next section.

2. New Identities of Rank-and-File South Africans

Historically, the identities of South Africans have generally been described in terms of race and ethnicity. Once the process of transition from apartheid towards a democratic state began, however, interest in identity studies grew significantly (Bekker 1999). The questions underlying this interest derive from the ghosts of South Africa’s past and the dreams of its future. Does race continue to carry deep meaning? Have the meanings attached to the ethnic and racial labels of the “old” South Africa persisted? Have South Africans developed a new national identity? The implication appears to be that South Africans are able to make one choice only – to belong together to a new nation, or to remain divided by offensive cleavages inherited from an unjust past. This perspective obstructs the examination of new subnational and supranational identities that may be emerging. Recent qualitative research on this question is relevant here, and reveal two major trends in identity construction “from below”: while one section of the population clearly takes pride in cultural, religious and linguistic affiliations and acknowledges recognition of such rights by the new South African state, the second section seems indifferent to such issues and appears to be drawing meaning from alternative institutions and sources of bonding.

This qualitative research was conducted over the past three years in the Western Cape, a predominantly urbanised province comprising three main cultural groupings. Focus group discussions conducted in the languages chosen by participants were organised with a wide range of rural and urban residents who were requested to discuss how they felt about living in their neighbourhoods, in their province and in South Africa. Thereafter, discussions took place without further researcher intervention (Bekker et al. 2000; Bekker and Leildé 2003).

Rank-and-file discussions on national, provincial and local matters reveal no meaningful provincial identity and weak national identity. Respondents are confused by distinctions between national, provincial and local bodies and their
knowledge of their separate activities is patchy at best. This impedes the development of a political identity at both provincial and national levels. What does appear as particularly meaningful at national level is citizenship and thereby the right to stigmatise alien Africans as unwanted and illegal. In effect, questions pertaining to the balance between provincial and national loyalties, and related party political differences, were considered to be of little relevance.

Race formed an integral part of rank-and-file respondents’ discussions of themselves and those around them. None the less, race is rarely the primary source of meaning and indeed only becomes primary in specific circumstances: in the presence of ignorance and extended radicalised socialisation, in the presence of marginalisation and lack of alternative sources of pride and self-esteem, and in the presence of enduring economic deprivation and of increased competition over jobs in the unskilled sector. Otherwise, it persists as one identity among many.

Cultural affiliation, on the other hand, emerged as particularly meaningful. A primary identity, “that is, an identity that frames the others” (Castells 1997), emerged through stated affiliation to a minority group, in the sample, to a religion and to a “first nation” (the Griqua). It is noticeable how readily participants in Muslim and Griqua groupings expressed pride in their fellowship, reflecting freedom to assert subnational (and supranational) loyalties in a way simply not possible in South Africa before the 1990s. Two quotes from these focus groups are appropriate:

We are Griquas ... a Southern African people ... but we are staying at home ... The Western Cape is our Cape ... [In] priority, we are Griqua. “Volks” boundedness is part of our family. Under the previous government we suffered severely ... Never did they even get so close as to give us acknowledgement. Here in this new set-up for the first time we were told we are being acknowledged as a “volk” in the country of our birth (Griqua middle-income neighbourhood, provincial town, Western Cape, 1999).

So we are in the Western Cape, coming from a Muslim identity, I see myself as a Muslim African, and a Muslim South African and I’m proud of my Muslim religion ... During the apartheid era, it was very difficult to be promoted as a Muslim. Now all the religions are equal ... In 1994, we were for the new government even if it doesn’t give us everything we want; it is much more than what we had in the past ... Muslims represent about two per cent of the population and their level of influence is disproportionate, even for the legislation, we are advantaged (Muslim middle-income neighbourhood, Cape Town, 1999).

In the second place, shared meaning drawn from language emerged as an important identity marker. In the Southern Cape, strong affiliation to the Afrikaans language was expressed, implying the existence of a potential community of interest transcending “racial” cleavages. Third, shared locality appears to provide meaning to Western Cape residents. Neighbourhoods in particular provide a strong sense of community, “a close-knit ‘feel’”, in the words of one of the respondents (Cape Town, 2001).
Another good thing about our area is the schools that are here because the Christian element is very much alive and that is very important for us. There’s a lot of Christian element. There is more than in lots of other places and for us it is very important. So that is very good (former white middle-income neighbourhood, Cape Town, 2001).

Another reason [not to move] is that … the people in Rondebosch will have attitudes towards me and I will also have attitudes towards them because our cultures are not the same and I won’t be able to do what I do here in Khayelitsha. For an example, Christmas time or New Year’s time, I slaughter a sheep, now coming to Rondebosch, people would start looking at me (former black middle-income neighbourhood, Cape Town, 1999).

We have people who really even though they can afford to go and stay between people who are not [Muslim] … they prefer to stay where they stay … this preference is not because they are anti-white or anti-black, it is simply because they feel that the environment in which they are living is conducive to religious culture. They prefer to stay where there is a mosque nearby and they will look for that. That is how I would see it (Muslim middle-income neighbourhood, Cape Town, 2001).

Accordingly, the main conclusion to be drawn from this research is the importance of the local to South Africans. Politicians and opinion-makers appear mesmerised by grand images – the nation, the province, the continent. South Africans draw meaning from humbler sources – village, suburb, language, minority group. Government action in these spheres is of far greater importance than is generally realised. Simultaneously, as the development of pride in such humble sources is difficult to sustain, South Africans sometimes fall back on older sources of meaning found in their racial and ethnic past.

At this point in our analysis, an optimistic judgement of the South African state’s policy and practice regarding ethnic and race relations would appear credible – fragile though they surely are in both word and implementation, new state–civil society institutions established by the 1996 Constitution enable expression of diverse cultural identities among the citizenry while starting to build a national identity, weak though it is at present. Such a judgement however would be premature. The institutions and identities identified thus far are situated within that part of South African society we can describe as commercial agricultural and urban-industrial. This section of society comprises the state and a vibrant civil society, economic relations characterised by corporatism, and a dominant cultural ethos we have labelled as international anglophone. The country as a whole, however, is semi-industrialised and those addressed here comprise barely more than half of its inhabitants. The other half – the “underclass” – live out their lives largely outside this institutional framework. These are South Africans who speak little or no English and who live in dense informal settlements on the peripheries of South African cities as well as in rural areas (particularly within former homelands where dense settlements far from urban places are common). Most importantly, these are people who hold down no fixed employment in the economy (Statistics South Africa 2000, 2001; Nattrass and Seekings 2001). Unemployment rates in South Africa are extremely high (in the region of 40 per cent) and recent trends
point to continuing absolute job losses in the formal as well as the informal sectors of the economy (Statistics South Africa 2000, 2001). Although this distinction between those living and acting within the new emergent South African civil society and those without is simplistic if understood in a rigorous sense – as kin ties, redistribution of income among relatives, and remittances within extended families all tend to blur such strict boundaries – evidence of the separation of populations and of the diminishing of such ties is available (Cross 2001; Cross and Bekker 1999). We need therefore to turn our attention to those “without”, to the South African underclass.

3. Analysing the South African Underclass

3.1 Identities

The qualitative identity research referred to above revealed significant differences between underclass respondent groupings and other groupings (Bekker et al. 2000; Bekker and Leildé 2003). Among the former groupings, reference to cultural issues is rarely made and pride in cultural affiliation seems to be absent. Other than a few references to the Xhosa language, which is experienced as a disadvantage in the job market, no meaning appears to have been drawn from Xhosa ethnic identity. Similarly, though Coloured identity was mentioned a number of times, these references were made simply in order to distinguish between White, Black and Coloured and were stated without pride. No reference was made to the Afrikaans language.

Members of this underclass also express strong local identities but these are defined by exclusion rather than with pride. Identification with their residential area, which is typically an informal settlement, is narrow and does not include the town within which they live. This settlement is almost universally compared negatively with the surrounding town. These local identities are defined in both race (African and Coloured) and class terms, rather than in cultural terms. Exclusion is directly linked to local leadership as expectations regarding local municipal performance are enormous. Such disillusionment is not explicitly linked to political parties, but to perceived elites in general – all “leaders” are distrusted. Unemployment is experienced as more pressing than the quality of municipal service delivery. The municipality is perceived accordingly as a potential source of work as well as a potential job creation institution. It is severely criticised on both counts.

Members of the underclass appear to draw minimal meaning from public participation in the local sphere. Their social exclusion individualises and marginalises them. Their ability to complain is of little influence. Their ability to withhold payment for state services is ruled out for these services are essential to their survival strategies and they have no means of buying more expensive private services. The underclass accordingly find themselves in a double bind, because to
menace with voice (through petitions, marches or civil disobedience, for example) or to threaten exit (through accessing essential services from elsewhere, for example) carries little weight with local councillors and officials. These local people very rarely belong to an organised opposition movement and are not able to withhold substantial payments. Though the NGO sector is well-developed in South Africa’s urban areas (Swilling and Russell 2002), it is very rarely referred to in the narratives of members of the underclass. Their strategy, typically expressed in individual terms, is one of opting out of civil society.

Faced with such comprehensive perceived social exclusion in their towns, members of the underclass do appear to develop strategies of coping and of survival. The first is an instrumental view of criminal activity. Two quotes from recent fieldwork (provincial towns, Western Cape, 2000) illustrate this view: “when we are hungry, we think about crime because there is nothing else to do.” “If we are a group of men and we know that every Friday the people get paid, we are going to rob the people and this leads to gangsterism.” A related strategy motivated by perceptions of police inefficiency and racial bias and aimed at defence against local criminal activity is vigilantism. “When I find the people who are doing this [stealing from the local informal shop], I’ll take the law into my hands because I am tired of the police.” In the third place, scapegoating and xenophobic attitudes emerged within these narratives. “The problem here in South Africa, there are a lot of foreigners. Foreigners take the jobs but they don’t give any votes.”

Exit strategies are not always anti-social in nature, however. In a small West Coast town, underclass respondents discussed organised community initiatives to address “problems that the council neglects”. This project was described in the following terms: “We as a community have now decided to do our own things, we established organisations which are anti-political to reach our goals”. Accordingly, exit of the underclass may lead to using voice-from-without, to working for change outside the confines of the local authority. “Anti-political” points to the intention of seeking mobilisation beyond the municipal sphere, beyond developmental local government.

3.2 Institutions

We are unable here to comprehensively cover the literature on what we call underclass institutions, a literature which is large (Bank 2001; Burnett 1999; Dixon 2001; Kinnes 2000; Scharf and Nina 2001; Sekhonyane and Louw 2002; Smets 1996; Steinberg 2001). People operating within these institutions appear able to develop and sustain strategies of coping and survival in an otherwise hostile and exclusionary environment. They are also often able to gain personal dignity in organisations established within these institutions and accordingly are able to construct identities that counter the loss of self-esteem in the wider society. As was the case with underclass identities, these underclass organisations are local – typically micro in scale and small in membership.
To simplify our argument, we identify a number of such underclass institutions by listing their associated organisations and indicating equivalent civil society organisations. As was the case earlier, the polarisation within this table is simplistic if understood in a rigorous sense, as many members of the underclass experience dissonance, being drawn towards ways of bonding under both the civil society and the underclass labels. In addition, religious organisations and traditional authorities do not fit neatly into this proposed dichotomy for they may well be located within or outside civil society, depending on their particular circumstances. None the less, underclass organisations do appear to offer substantial numbers of marginalised South Africans both a haven of survival and a badge of honour.

Table 1. Civil and Class Organisations in South Africa

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<tr>
<th>Civil society organisations</th>
<th>Underclass organisations</th>
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<td>School organisations</td>
<td>Gangs</td>
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<td>Youth and sport associations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small, medium and micro-enterprises</td>
<td>Spazas (informal shops) and shebeens</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Syndicates, drug trafficking, poaching</td>
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<td>Community police forums</td>
<td>Vigilante groups</td>
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<td>Anti-gang organisations</td>
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<td>Local authorities</td>
<td>Burial societies and stokvels (informal savings clubs)</td>
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<td>NGOs, community-based organisations,</td>
<td>Warlords and “strong men”</td>
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<td>civic organisations, housing forums</td>
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Two conclusions may be drawn from this rudimentary analysis. The first is that identities constructed within underclass organisations of this type remain local, and accordingly are neither racial nor ethnic – in South Africa at least, racial and ethnic identities represent identification with leaders and groups at a much wider scale of society, at the macro level. In the second place, it would be simple to categorise civil society organisations as reflecting “positive” social capital – trust among the citizenry in an emergent democracy – and underclass organisations as being “anti-social”, reflecting “negative” social capital – trust in small groups the activities of which are detrimental to the wider good of society. This however is too simple and possibly disingenuous a categorisation, for most members of the underclass appear to have little or no choice regarding their quest for a haven of survival and a badge of honour. Rather, this analysis implies that the identities members of the South African underclass are able to construct remain parochial and that the institutions within which they act remain particularistic. Such constraints diminish the
society’s capacity to develop a democratic political culture and a vigorous civil society. Moreover, given minimal choices to obtain sustainable resources to survive in their society, many opt for activities defined as criminal and often find themselves involved in violent behaviour in pursuit of these resources.

Accordingly, although violence along ethnic and racial lines has virtually disappeared in South Africa, this does not mean that the society has become less violent. Criminal activity (including “white-collar” crime) is widespread and remains extremely violent, particularly when analysed in comparative terms (Nedcor 1996; Nedbank ISS 1997–2001). Much, though not all, of this violence originates in a range of underclass institutions.

4. Conclusion

It would appear that multiculturalism both as a policy and as an outcome has had a measure of success in the new South Africa. Minority groups demanding recognition of their identity and accommodation of their cultural differences continue to use civil society institutions to challenge the state in search of such identities and of accommodation. In urban-industrial South Africa and much of commercial agriculture, the new institutions of state and of corporatism have provided policies the implementation of which have accommodated both the new and the old elite, particularly in terms of cultural differences. Neither need to mobilise rank-and-file on ethnic or racial terms. Although race and ethnicity continue to act as significant markers for South Africans, they are rarely dominant identities.

For the South African underclass, multiculturalism appears to be an issue of no consequence. The large numbers of chronically poor and unemployed act within institutions and mobilise within organisations in which identity is local rather than racial or ethnic. The minute scale of such organisations rules out mobilisation on the basis of mass ethnic, linguistic or racial markers. Moreover, these local institutions and organisations offer psychological and material rewards which are experienced as independent of racial or ethnic origins. The new state and corporatist institutions that have succeeded in establishing elite accommodation fade away before they reach the arenas of these organisations.

Violence in South Africa today is widely defined as criminal – in conflict with the values and norms laid down by the state and by civil society. Violent incidents take place in a bewildering number of different local settings. These incidents very rarely appear to be related to one another. They flow from deep-seated sentiments of local exclusion: economic exclusion from the material rewards of the urban-industrial economy and socio-cultural exclusion from the dominant anglophone urban culture. Accordingly, violence – for perpetrator and victim alike – is rarely experienced as either racial or ethnic because the institutions competing with one another in order to offer personal dignity and material rewards are infra-racial and infra-ethnic (Castells 1997), typically localised in underclass neighbourhoods and
marginalised from state–civil society relations. The limited number of incidents involving the elite which are widely broadcast are the exception rather than the rule. South Africa accordingly remains deeply divided even though coincidence of class and culture has diminished significantly (Nattrass and Seekings 2001).

This analysis points to a more fundamental challenge facing the deeply divided society that persists in the country. The nature of elite accommodation in the society appears to exclude the underclass who, in reaction, are developing strategies of survival beyond civil society, strategies based upon sources of local sociality as well as upon anti-social behaviour. In this sense, criminal violence is a symptom of division rather than the challenge itself. The scope of multiculturalism as policy accordingly needs to embrace underclass institutions by offering them both material havens of survival and cultural badges of honour within, rather than without, emergent civil society.

References


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Malaysia and Capitalist Modernisation: Plural and Multicultural Models

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Malaysia has often been described as a plural society composed of three large ethnic groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians. The discourse of “multiculturalism”, so evident in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, is considerably less prominent in Malaysia. The Malaysian Government has pursued what may be termed “pro-Malay” policies, and there is little doubt that ethnic categories remain significant in daily life and institutional life. But at the same time Malaysia has produced its own plan of the resolution of problems of inequality and ethnic difference, without recourse to a discourse of “multiculturalism”. We conclude by suggesting that this case study produces some critical questions for “Western” multiculturalism, and suggests a critique of a multiculturalism which is, in effect, dominated by Euro-American models.

Multiculturality has a series of quite different foundations according to the historical trajectory within which it is situated. Ethnicity acquires a different meaning corresponding to the social and historical complex within which ethnic identities are found (Eriksen 1993; Fenton 1999). Ethnic groups are identified as “urban minorities” emanating from migrations into metropolitan areas; indigenous peoples, typically displaced by colonial settlers or rulers and frequently becoming minorities in “their own land”; ethno-national groups who seek to establish political space within (autonomy) or outside (secession) their current polity; post-slavery ethno-racial identities; and finally, groups or societies described as multi-ethnic, “plural” and post-colonial. Clearly it is this last formation that best describes Malaysia.

The central arguments about “plural societies” have been comprehensively reviewed and developed by Rex (1973, 1983, 1996, 2004). Some of the key issues are the degree to which different communities are or remain institutionally separate; whether this separateness is primarily cultural, political or economic or all three; whether the plural social order necessarily presents a serious problem of integration; the role of an external power in securing “order”; and the question of what kind of political arrangements are most suitable in plural societies. In terms of the current debate, plural societies present particular “versions” of the applicability of a
multicultural model either as description or as political prescription. Indeed in Malaysia, in Indonesia, in political discourse in India, and also in Sri Lanka and Trinidad (Ratnam 1965; Horowitz 1985; Fenton and May 2002), the politics of ethnic and religious groups are frequently described by the specific term “communalism”. This is usually a pejorative term, meaning that politics is “reduced to” the politics of group identities and the search for advantage, simply for a religious or ethnic community.

1. Plural, Multicultural?

In one respect at least the term “plural” is not simply a “version” of the multicultural society. In much of the discussion surrounding the term “multicultural”, cultural difference is the central problematic. The problem of governance in multicultural societies is then one of how cultural difference is to be accommodated in a single political order. But the much more historically informed term “plural” has raised and raises directly the questions of power, integration and governability. Rex and Gurharpal – in their thematic introduction to the present IJMS issue – discuss the antecedents of “plural” (in for example the writings of Furnivall and M. G. Smith) and suggest that one important question is how the transition to post-colonial independence is effected. Although Furnivall and Smith differed in emphasis and diagnosis, they both began by observing colonial societies in which ethno-cultural groups lived side by side but remained institutionally and culturally separate. Post-independence there were a number of possible outcomes, one of which is where power is transferred to a “particular ethnic group, usually the majority” (Rex 1983, 185), which then exercises coercive power over the rest. A variation on this would be where power is inherited by a multi-ethnic local bourgeoisie.

Where a large majority “inherits power”, as in Sri Lanka, the problems associated with minorities may turn out to be quite intractable. Such a case might be said to compare unfavourably with Malaysia where the Chinese majority was and is, so to speak, “big enough to look after itself”. Certainly Malaysia, despite its multi-ethnicity, never quite faced the spectre of ungovernability, although the crisis of 1969 was undoubtedly a sharp one. A single group, the Malays, who were also just about a majority, have constitutionally assumed a dominant place in politics, but the demography of Malaysia and the existence of a multi-ethnic bourgeoisie (and indeed a multi-ethnic poor) has moderated this, as discussed below. The emphasis on class, power and political authority in plural societies, as well as on multi-ethnicity and cultural difference, may be what gives the concepts of plural society and the post-colonial order a cutting edge which “multicultural” lacks. In Malaysia the problem of political authority is “solved” by the symbolic dominance of the Malays, partnered by Chinese and Indian elites. In what follows the Malaysian case is examined more closely.
2. Malaysia, a Plural Society, a Multicultural Society and Independence Politics

One of the main debates in the creation of a constitution for newly independent Malaya (subsequently Malaysia) was that of equal citizenship rights for non-Malays, principally those settled in Malaya and of Indian and Chinese origin (Roff 1994; Harper 1999; Ratnam 1965). The Malays resisted an ethnically neutral “universalist” citizenship partly because they feared that in “open competition” with non-Malays they would fare badly. Non-Malays were more urbanised and in a better position to take advantage of independence and modernisation. Furthermore Malays continued to regard peninsular Malaya as their home, of which they were the “original” and indigenous people, and, equally, still regarded the Indians and Chinese as immigrants. Malay nationalism had grown since the 1930s (Roff 1994) but was certainly further stimulated by the prospect of a neutral constitution (Harper 1999). The compromise solution was to grant full citizenship to non-Malays but to build into the constitution a certain primacy of Malay culture and recognition of the special position and privileges of the Malay population. The effect is to give primacy to Islam in official public culture while permitting freedom of religious faith among non-Malays. The sense in which Malaysia could or should be called an Islamic state (Martinez 2001) remains a contested question. The shape of pre- and post-independence politics was to bring ethnic identity into the foreground of politics, reflecting the fact that the British as colonial rulers had, as many have argued, created colonial Malaya as an ethnicised state (Hirschmann 1986), that is a state in which ethnic difference was mapped on to civic and socio-economic relations. The 1950s emergency and its suppression constituted another element in the formation of ethnic political consciousness; the emergency was a response to a communist uprising, mostly supported by the Chinese.

3. Ethnic Politics

The ethnic conformation of politics was reinforced by the formation of political parties along communal lines, the three main ones being the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). (This brief account does not cover the complications of East Malaysia, Sarawak and Sabah.) Although these three parties continue to press the case for their communal constituents, outright communalism is blunted by the fact that these three form the most important elements in the National Alliance now re-formed as the National Front or Barisan Nasional (BN). UMNO has been and remains the dominant partner in the BN and thus in the government, since the BN has formed the government and won electoral victories throughout its lifetime, up to the most recent in 1999. Ethnically relevant issues – i.e. issues which appear to have the potential to affect the prospects of people by community attachment – may be part of a national political debate between the BN and its opponents or they may be conducted as politics within the BN itself. Thus, for example, the MCA’s appeal to Chinese voters would typically be that, within the governing alliance (BN), they have real prospects for influencing policies and
decisions; they risk being seen to be too cautious in the pressing of Chinese interests. Similarly, parties outside the BN may press ethnic interests, or indeed argue for non-ethnic or “universalist” politics; they may appear more “pure” in their commitment but risk being seen as powerless to influence affairs. In the 1990s and the new century the shape of ethnic politics in Malaysia has begun to change.

4. The Compromise

The post-independence compromise was founded on two roughly matching thoughts. Non-Malays were in no doubt that they must have equal citizenship in the new state, but had yielded something by tacitly recognising the special position of the Malays. The Malays were in no doubt about their special position as the indigenous and “first” people of Malaya and Malaysia, but had yielded something in agreeing to full citizenship to the “immigrants” and descendants. But, in 1969, parties supported by Chinese voters made electoral gains and appeared to have enhanced the political prospects of Chinese Malaysians, and some Malays felt significantly threatened. This unease lay behind the outbreak of rioting, violence and fatalities which at that time and ever since has presented an image of the possibilities of ethnic conflict in Malaysia. The country’s multi-ethnic elite, with Malays playing the leading role, diagnosed the problem as “political-economic”, that is that Malay political fears were underpinned by their own forebodings about their lack of economic power compared with the more “modernising” Chinese. A political problem was to have an economic solution.

5. The New Economic Policy (NEP) and the Rise of a Malay Middle Class

In the aftermath of the Kuala Lumpur riots, the Malaysian Government set out to redress what they regarded as the cause of Malay unease – their fear of being left behind in the rush to modernisation. The NEP was legitimated by the constitutional support for preserving the interests of the Malays but was also translated into a series of specific measures. These were designed to favour Malays in housing, education, employment and share-ownership until such time as their relative economic disadvantage was overcome. (It should be noted that the idea of Malays as the indigenous population has been extended by the term bumiputera – sons of the soil – which also draws in non-Malay, and mostly non-Muslim, indigenous peoples, most of them in Sabah and Sarawak. Malays, however, are by far the majority of all people defined as bumiputera. None the less, the “affirmative action” programmes should be seen as benefitting bumiputera rather than simply “Malays”.) From that time to the present, when ending affirmative action for the indigenous population is ever more readily debated, politics has returned again and again to the argument over persistence of the measures for Malays and other indigenous groups, as against support for the view that they are no longer needed. For the most part, looked at over a period of thirty years, this policy has to be pronounced a success, the success being registered in three ways. First, the policy
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1 has genuinely succeeded in creating a new Malay middle class; second, it has largely succeeded in its political aim of restraining Malay resentments; and third, despite some periodic interruptions, there has been no large recurrence of the violence of 1969, and certainly nothing on the scale of violence seen in Malaysia’s huge neighbour, Indonesia.

6. Inequality and Modernity

There are however some serious qualifications to this picture of success. And the qualifications that must be made can be related directly to key dimensions of capitalist modernity – the problem of equality in principle and inequality in fact and the problem of community, morality and identity. The first is that, notwithstanding the success of the NEP, many Malays remain poor. Economic deprivation and large and visible inequalities persist in Malaysia even if the acute association of economic disadvantage and ethnic group has been muted (Malaysian Federal Government 2001). The second is that modernisation itself, the growth of a Malay middle class, movement from rural areas to cities, and of generations of students to universities, have all contributed to the widespread sense of unease – of a moral and “cultural” kind – with the least-admired aspects of modernising Malaysia. These two contradictions in contemporary Malaysia are linked. For example, those who remain among the most disadvantaged Malays are all the more disenchanted by the apparent materialism and “immorality” of some of the Malay rich and super-rich.

7. Inequalities and Relative Deprivation

The middle class has grown and transformed the occupational profile of Malays in thirty years so that there is now a very substantial Malay professional and business class, much bolstered by the help provided to them for acquiring university qualifications, advances which are illustrated in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (Malaysian Federal Government 2001) At the same time, there remains in Malaysia a peasant producer class and a class of fishermen, hawkers and others, who remain economically poor and insecure (Zawawi 1989). These lower-class groupings contain all ethnic groups, but Malays continue to be over-represented among the rural and fishing-village poor. Furthermore, Kuala Lumpur and other large conurbations have seen the growth of fringe areas of deprivation populated by a new urban poor, many of them in-migrants from depressed rural economies. Such is Kampung Medan, Kuala Lumpur, in March 2001 the site of gang fighting between young Malay and Indian men. This outbreak covered four days of vicious street battles in the squalid townships on the western fringe of Kuala Lumpur (which) brought Malaysia its closest brush with serious ethnic strife in thirty years (leaving) six dead and seventy-five charged with possession of weapons and related offences (BBC News Asia-Pacific 2001).
This involvement of urban Indians in violent conflict drew national attention to the question of economic and social dislocation among Malaysia’s Indians at a time when rubber plantations no longer offered them employment security. The plantations had formerly been the bedrock of Indian economic incorporation in Malaysia. Infant mortality rates, a sure sign of advantage or deprivation, are highest among Malays and Indians, reflecting the persistence of rural poverty, and the emergence of new urban poverty which now sits “alongside” the class gains of a successful segment of both Indians and Malays.

8. Modernity, Enrichment and Moral Unease

There is no doubt that the new economic policy helped to promote a Malay middle class and some of those who benefited have joined the ranks of successful government employees, businessmen and professionals, with enthusiasm and with appreciation of a new lifestyle. But there is also considerable evidence to suggest that among the new Malay middle classes are those who are disturbed by the many imperfections of the Malaysian political system, by the materialism of some of their fellows, and by the departure from an Islamic vision of the good and virtuous life. Since before independence, Islamic interests have been voiced by the Parti Islam Semalaysia, referred to as PAS, which has competed with UMNO for the Malay and the Islamic vote. Many commentators agree that PAS draws its support both from the poorer Malays and from among sections of the new middle-class Malays. By 2002, after an election in 1999, it controls two state governments, Kelantan and Terengannu, and has some hopes of improving its position in three other states of Malay concentration, Pahang, Perlis and Kedah.

Although former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim had been an UMNO politician since the early 1980s, he had a record of both radical support for the Malay poor and as an Islamist. His successful period as President of UMNO youth had built up a network of groups and individuals who looked upon him as a leader. This grass-roots support constituted a power base within UMNO but he also depended on the support of the long-standing Prime Minister Mahathir. Although Mahathir had groomed Anwar as his successor, by 1998 tensions between them were apparent and on 2 September Mahathir summarily dismissed Anwar, first from the government and then from UMNO. Milne and Mauzy (1999) cite as possible reasons economic policy differences, the zealous enthusiasm of some of Anwar’s supporters, and the allegations of immoral behaviour, the last of which led to Anwar’s long prison sentence. Anwar’s supporters regard his dismissal as unwarranted and the charges against him as trumped up. From September 1998 onwards, the support for Anwar and Anwar’s arrest as a symbol of injustice in Malaysia have become one of the principal points around which opposition to Mahathir and the BN government has been organised.

We have no means of commenting on the Anwar case. But it is certain that the unflattering portrayal of key elements in the government regime, if not the whole political establishment itself, has gained ground in the last four or five years. This
establishment is seen as embodying greed, materialism, corruption and nepotism. Or, if it does not “embody” these evils, the political elite turns the other way and/or fails to eradicate what many Malays call “money politics”. The three recurrent themes of this opposition to the government are “poverty” – the continued desperation of the rural and some urban poor; “immorality” – the greed and corruption of the rich and powerful; and “justice” – the appearance of arbitrariness especially in the Anwar case, and the use of the Internal Security Act to suppress debate and controversy. Some of these themes are taken up by the important Democratic Action Party (DAP), a reform-oriented welfare-socialist party which favours non-ethnic politics; in practice it is largely supported by the Chinese.

But although the Chinese–Malay conflict is often seen as key to Malaysian politics, signified by memories of the 13 May 1969 incident, in several respects the intra-Malay politics are now at least as important. These take several forms, but chief among them are the debate about the centrality of Islam, the view taken of the Anwar dismissal, divisions within UMNO itself, the creation of an alternative Front, the Barisan Alternatif (BA) and, more diffusely, the spread of the spirit of “Reformasi” a term which carried over from the slogan adopted by Indonesians at the time of the fall of Suharto. For a period the DAP joined the Barisan Alternatif along with PAS, the Islamic party, the Malaysian Peoples’ Party, and Keadilan, the Justice Party formed by supporters of Anwar and led by Anwar’s wife, Wan Azizah Wan. The Chinese also contributed to the spirit of opposition and not just through DAP. In the run-up to the 1999 election, a group of Chinese voluntary organisations calling itself Suqiu (Appeal) presented a document with a long list of “demands” for reforms. Prominent among these were the shifting of “affirmative action” from an ethnic basis (the bumiputera) to a need basis (the poor), a move even supported by some Malays; and the reform of the Internal Security Act’s powers.

9. Reformasi and Barisan Alternatif

The source of support for each of the elements of Barisan Alternatif is not the same, and to many people the DAP and PAS seemed strange allies. The first is a secular left-oriented party largely supported by Chinese, the second is primarily committed to working towards an Islamic state in Malaysia. But even these two could find more common ground than might appear likely, with PAS seeking to broaden its appeal beyond its religious and ethnic base, and DAP being willing for a time to accommodate moderated Islamist aspirations by PAS. But the idea of reform united them all and made it possible for disparate groups to come together. However the most important thing about Reformasi was the indication of a further breaking of the ethnic mould of politics in Malaysia, in particular the strengthening of the competition for the Malay vote. UMNO today cannot, if it ever could, take the Malay vote for granted. In this sense at least it is right to claim, as Asiaweek did, that we are witnessing the end of ethnic politics in Malaysia (Asiaweek 2001).
10. Links of Oppositional Sentiments to Contradictions of Capitalist Modernity

Examination of what observers have said about this urban and rural Malay support for reform underpins the argument that “capitalist modernity” carries within it contradictions about both “equality” and about “community, morality, identity” in the way that has been suggested here. In Malaysia there is a particular formulation of the problem of “equality”. At the point of independence, many Malays were clearly anxious about the circumstances in which they would be thrown into competition with Indian and Chinese Malaysians. With both non-Malay groups appearing to have a stronger foothold in the modernising sector, “equality” for Malays had to mean at least social and economic parity with non-Malay groups, a position which could only be achieved by protecting Malay interests. Equality also had to mean the recovery of self-respect after a long period of being subject to British colonial rule. Mahathir’s periodic waspish statements about the British are a real manifestation of this spirit, a sentiment to be found in all “post-colonial” societies.

But these problems of equality, both in the sense of equality of socio-economic position and equality of regard, can only be partially solved. There are many poor Malays who have reason to think that the rewards and gains of independence and the NEP have passed them by. The myth of the “lazy native” (Zawawi 2001) reappears in new forms, with suggestions that Malays continue to perform less well in education, show less dedication and do not “deserve” the educational benefits of the NEP. Among the rural and urban Malay poor, and among those socially mobile Malays who remain unsure about their confidence and position, there is ample social space for anger and oppositional sentiments. At the same time, it seems certain that these sentiments are shared by some middle-class Malays where they are mixed with anger and disgust at the worst excesses of a country in which wealth – for some – is increasing at an astonishing rate. These sentiments are directed at material excess, political intrigue (money politics) and moral decline. These are some of the grounds for wanting to see a restoration of Islamic justice and equality and Islamic moral values. These concerns united DAP, PAS and Keadilan, who formed the Barisan Alternatif along with the Malaysian People’s Party with their goal of a “non-ethnic Malaysia, anti-corruption, and reversing the gap between urban rich and poor” (BBC News Asia-Pacific 1999b).

In the election later in November the BN retained control and won 148 out of 193 seats. But the BN lost 18 parliamentary seats and the Malay opposition led by PAS made significant gains. In the Malay heartlands of Kelantan, Terengannu, Kedah and Perlis, PAS retained control of Kelantan, gained control of Terengannu, and made big gains in the other two. It more than tripled the number of seats it won among the state seats. Anwar’s wife, Wan Azizah, won in her husband’s previous seat. As reported in BBC News Asia-Pacific (1999a) the spirit of Reformasi, which had brought down Suharto in Indonesia, was now making an appearance in Malaysia. Not long after the election, one commentator was observing that the BA
now represented Reformasi, and that there was, through voluntary organisations, networks and the Internet, “an informal opposition to Mahatir” (Weiss 1999).

Support came from among the poor and the middle classes:

Perhaps most significant has been the impact of the NEP ... since 1972 [which] can be seen in the existence of a large, well-educated, urban Malay middle class. It was among this group – spanning university students, professionals, dakwah activists, academics and others, male and female. ... that Reformasi began. However Mahatir’s treatment of Anwar and other Reformasi issues struck a chord elsewhere. Through ceramah [debates], Internet discussions, economic discontents, rural Malays and rural and urban non-Malays also sympathized with Reformasi (Weiss 1999, 432).

This assessment is supported by Patricia Martinez, who writes that PAS support included religious teachers, fishermen and farmers and other Malays who do not feel that their plight has been alleviated by the NEP. PAS support also includes many urban middle-class Malays, large numbers of professionals educated abroad, university lecturers, university students and disgruntled UMNO members (Martinez 2001, 479).

Martinez suggests that PAS supporters were not necessarily seeking an Islamic state:

A majority of Muslims interviewed in Terengannu said they did not vote for PAS because they wished to live in an Islamic state [but because] PAS leaders lived exemplary lives, free of corruption (Martinez 2001, 479).

But the very fact that PAS is perceived as gaining votes because of its appeal to Muslims had led UMNO to “up the stakes on Islamisation” so that in UMNO-dominated states there have been initiatives supporting harsh punishments, increased support for the protection of prayer times, and stricter dress codes for women, including non-Muslims. When PAS did subsequently strengthen its support for the concept of an Islamic state, the DAP left the Barisan Alternatif. But Martinez argues that non-Islamic issues were priorities for PAS voters, issues surrounding “Anwar, corruption, cronyism and nepotism”.

This combination of the economic, the moral and the political can be found in accounts of the whole resurgence of interest in Islam dating from the 1970s:

The resurgence was particularly attractive to the young, and originated among students at the University of Malaya in the late 1970s, who had been affected by the events of 1969 and its aftermath. There was a connection between the reactions of such people towards the problems of the time – such as Malay poverty, Malay language and education, and corruption – and a search for what the teachings of Islam could suggest for solving these problems (Milne and Mauzy 1999, 81).

Milne and Mauzy also hint that the unease of the socially mobile may have contributed to the search for new values:
It has been argued that the NEP with the increased opportunities it afforded to Malays, was a potent factor. These greater opportunities increased the confidence of Malays who were able to take advantage of the new policy. However, socially, the “beneficiaries” were often placed in situations where they felt ill at ease, and they sought the security and solidarity that a supportive religious group could provide (81).

11. Culture, Ethnicity and Politics

There remain instances where items that might be broadly called “cultural questions” become important politically, and this usually means questions of language or of Islam. Some of these surround the use of Mandarin in primary and secondary education. The appointment of non-Mandarin-speaking headmasters to Chinese schools was a focal point of protest in the late 1980s (Milne and Mauzy 1999, 96). When the nipah virus outbreak threatened the livelihood of Chinese pig-farmers, many believed that the government was slow to respond. Disputes about burial grounds are long-standing in Malaysia, as Milne and Mauzy (1999) report from the 1960s and Martinez (2001) notes from the most recent period. Similarly, disputes about religious buildings provoke, from time to time, quite bitter feelings about respect for different cultures. Martinez reports arson attacks on churches in peninsular Malaysia’s west coast in 2001 and the earlier disturbance in Penang (1998) is relatively well known. A Hindu temple in the Sungai Penang district had co-existed side by side with a mosque for a long period of time. Mosque supporters claimed that the Hindu community had built extensions to the temple without permission and in close proximity to the mosque. There were reports of fighting between Malay and Indian youths, some of whom travelled to Penang for the purpose. The temple was pulled down, amid much anxiety and anger among the Indian community.

The Kampung Medan conflict (see above) was also along ethnic lines, but most observers in Malaysia would agree that it was symptomatic of urban decay and the dislocation of Indian communities formerly much confined to rural villages and small towns. Ethnic affiliation and cultural difference can and do become implicated in social conflict and in political representations. But there is increasing recognition of post-ethnic politics in Malaysia. Thus, a post-election workshop at Universiti Sains Malaysia (Khoo Boo Teik 2000) referred to the “end of the era of NEP politics”. Rather more controversially, an issue of Asiaweek (26 January 2001) alleged that Dr Mahathir had failed to recognise that “the old politics of race and religion no longer work in the new Malaysia”. And the Aliran Monthly (2000) the mouthpiece of Aliran, a political lobby for “Justice, Freedom and Solidarity” pleaded for a “NO to racial politics” in Malaysia.

12. Multiculturalism as Problem, as Solution, or as Subsidiary Issue

The foregoing shows that, increasingly, the underlying issues in Malaysian society and politics are non-ethnic. The question of preference for bumiputera continues to
be highly contested and some of the cultural questions described above continue to have a resonance in political discourse and private discontents. But the framing of political loyalties as merely a matter of communal identities, indexed by culture, is losing ground. Similarly, political contest is only periodically about a hierarchy of cultures in a Malay-dominated polity. Islamic resurgence and the recourse to Islam as a solution to problems of justice and morality provide the principal form of oppositional sentiments in contemporary Malaysia. These are coupled with both Malay and non-Malay concerns for social justice, for the eradication of poverty and gross inequalities, and with growing anger about “cronyism”, “money politics” and restraints on political debate. Many of these crystallised around the figure of Anwar and what many view as his arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Since many of these concerns centre upon both material and moral discontents among the majority community, Malays, it seems most unlikely that a “multiculturalist” politics has much to offer. At least this is so if it means an unremitting equal regard for many cultures and the installation of this “equal regard” into the political and constitutional framework of the country.

This is partly because, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, discontents are only “cultural” in a limited sense or to a limited degree. It is also because the primary focus of a great deal of political activity in Malaysia is upon how the dominant Barisan Nasional party and government will deal with the Islamist opposition when a majority of its own support is Malay and Muslim. As Martinez observed, this can give rise to a kind of Islamic contest between PAS and UMNO, with UMNO mistakenly assuming that the way to outflank PAS is to equal or overtake it on Islamic “orthodoxy”. Of course the term “multicultural” does appear in some discourses in Malaysia, particularly where influenced by Western social science (see Hefner 2001). And the amount of social space granted to Chinese and Indian language and religious affiliations – and buildings – will continue to be fought over. The solution will not be to dislodge the cultural hegemony of Malays and implant a doctrine of cultural equality, rather to sustain the series of compromises that has characterised Malaysian handling of these questions for at least forty-five years.

13. Conclusion

Multiculturalism has quite a different resonance in more recently “diverse” rich societies than it has in long-time diverse new industrial countries. In first-world countries, multiculturalism may retain a critical edge in some contexts, but it has also become, along with “diversity”, an establishment concept. In societies which have long been ethnically diverse, and which became more ethnically diverse in their colonial periods, diversity is understood but not “embraced” in quite the same way. In Malaysia since independence there has been a constant threat of communalism and a tendency towards ethnic politics. This is not because ethnic loyalties are “primordial” or finally binding; in Malaysia and other fast-developing societies, the importance of ethnicity is variable and context-related. But “communal identities” are not sentiments or attachments to be played with and fostered even if parties and governments are frequently tempted to do so.
Thus while the governments, academic commentators and policy-makers of many Western countries are embracing multiculturalism as a challenge to a backward-looking nationalism, in other countries its appeal is muted. If, for example, multicultural governance implies equal respect for all cultures, in Malaysia this might be seen to disturb the “primacy” of Malay culture. For this “primacy” could be said to be the context within which Malaysian multiculturalism succeeds, and succeeds to a degree to rival Western societies and under much more pressing circumstances. Furthermore, as argued through the core of this paper, there are economic demands and tensions to be managed, and there are cultural tensions of a different kind. These latter cluster around the pre-eminence of Islam in a society with a population which is 40 per cent non-Islamic, and the political divisions within the largest cultural community, the Malays.

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Multicultural concerns have long informed India’s history and traditions, constitution and political arrangements. Much of the writings on Indian history, culture and politics are marked by some kind of multicultural concern. The central question addressed in this paper is how a vast multi-ethnic country – in terms of religion, language, community, caste and tribe – has survived as a state in conditions of underdevelopment, mass poverty, illiteracy and extreme regional disparities. Placed in relation to the failures of many less diverse and plural post-colonial and “socialist” states, India’s record of relative political unity and stability seems remarkable indeed. It is argued that at the heart of the resolution of many ethnic conflicts in India lies a set of multicultural state policies. The Indian Constitution as the source of these policies can be said to be a basic multicultural document, in the sense of providing for political and institutional measures for the recognition and accommodation of the country’s diversity. In the post-independence period, the major form of political recognition of territorially based ethnic identity of the people has remained statehood within the Indian federation, although other forms, most notably, sub-statehood, in the form of Regional or Tribal District Councils, have often served similar purposes for small ethnic communities. The paper also points out that the recent Indian debate on multiculturalism has yet to take cognisance of the rationale behind the institutional measures for the political accommodation of identity, difference and community, which has been responsible for India’s survival as a state. The three recent cases of statehood in India are cited in support of this argument.
sense of providing for political and institutional measures for the recognition and accommodation of the country’s diversity. But multiculturalism as a term of scholarly discourse of society and politics in India is of very recent vintage, originating in the 1990s when some scholars felt the need to respond with Indian experience to the global debate on the subject.

The central question in any discussion of multiculturalism in contemporary India is how a vast, multi-ethnic country – in terms of religion, language, community, caste and tribe – has survived as a state in conditions of underdevelopment, mass poverty, illiteracy and extreme regional disparities. Given that many less diverse and plural post-colonial states have failed, what is the secret of India’s success (Kohli 2001)? The question assumed added significance after the disintegration of the multi-ethnic former Soviet Union and its European empire in the early 1990s. And related to it is the second puzzle: what is India’s “national identity”? As this issue is largely unsettled, even today, it is not unreasonable to assume that the two concerns are intimately connected.

1. Demographic Multiculturalism

Drawing on Tiryakian’s distinction between demographic multiculturalism and ideological multiculturalism (Tiryakian 2003), I first outline the nature of India’s diversity. This is followed by an analysis of the academic debate on the subject in India. Finally, I review how state policy has been very much influenced by the Nehruvian constitutional design, especially, though not exclusively, in structuring Indian federalism.

India is the second most populous country (population now over a billion) after China, and socially and culturally the most diverse in the world. Formed over many thousands of years as a country of immigrants who brought their own cultures and traditions, India’s diversity is proverbial. Although predominantly inhabited by “Hindus” (over 82 per cent) who are regionally rooted, plural in beliefs and practices, and divided by castes and languages, India’s population also includes a large proportion of Muslims (about 12 per cent), Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians and Jains.

Linguistically too, India is very diverse. It is the home of some hundred languages and dialects and, so far, eighteen languages have been “officially” recognised and placed under the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. There are, however, sizeable sections of the population, most notably in the North-East, who are a majority in their locality but whose first language is not yet “officially” recognised.

Most of the states have some dominant ethno-linguistic and ethno-religious groups (Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, North-East), although within each of them there are religious and linguistic minorities. The fact that today most of the states of India correspond, by and large, to ethno-linguistic or ethno-religious groups has been achieved through major reorganisation of territories in the 1950s and 1960s. Given
that some kind of ethno-linguistic factor is the prime criterion in according statehood, scholars have tended to see the reorganisation as part of a multicultural state-building process in India. This of course does not mean that each of the reorganised states is unilingual. On the contrary, states are multilingual and diverse. The process of reorganisation only simplifies the reality, to a great extent. But even today, throughout India, linguistic minorities live under a state dominated, demographically but in other ways too, by a majority linguistic group. For example, Tamil Nadu, one of the early major successes of linguistic (Tamil) sub-nationalism in independent India, had in 1991 3,975,561 Telegu speakers (7.1 per cent) and 1,208,296 Kannada speakers (2.2 per cent) (Pandharipande 2002).

Occasionally, minorities speaking “unrecognized” languages have demanded statehood with different degrees of success (Weiner 1989, 45). Such demands have often been made by those linguistic groups mainly concentrated in a particular region of a state where the group has a strong sense of its distinctive identity. The success of such movements has depended on the strength of the political formulation of their demands by the elites and a host of other factors (Mitra and Lewis 1998).

2. The Multiculturalism Debate in the 1990s

The recent Indian debate on multiculturalism has taken two distinct forms. First, multiculturalism as a state policy has been operative in the growing federalisation of its political system, a process that politically accommodates ethnic identities. In this form, multiculturalism is conjoined with federalism. Second, multiculturalism itself, its definition, meaning and implications, has been the subject of discussion among scholars centring around the issues of rights (individual versus group), culture, community and communalism, secularism, religion and so on. Both forms of debate are current today in India. In what follows I sum up the second debate first as it directly addresses the various issues of multiculturalism and their underpinnings for state policy.

Only since the late 1990s have Indian scholars joined the global debate on multiculturalism, and the intellectual output so far is still meagre (Bhargava et al. 1999; Seminar (India) 1999). For Bhargava, the theme of multiculturalism “underscores the need to have a stable identity” and the role of cultural communities to fulfil this need. He believes that it “stresses the importance of cultural belonging and legitimises the desire to maintain difference” (1999, 1). For him, multiculturalism helps in a complex way since it involves a set of issues “relating to the need for community, a sense of belonging to it, the importance of a secure identity, of status and recognition, of particularity, and the need to recognise and maintain difference with others” (1999, 18).

1 The case studies in Mitra and Lewis (1998) are testimony to how a political rationale built into such movements variously determines their outcomes.
In the Indian context, Bhargava has identified three problems with multiculturalism in so far as identity is concerned. First, overemphasis on identity may be exclusive in the sense of excluding people or “others” from an essential identity. Second, encouragement of cultural particularity deepens divisions and undermines the “common foundation for a viable society”. Third, it may result in curbing individual freedom by advocating “aggressive community power over individual freedom”, and thus corroding the values of liberal democracy.

Bhargava ultimately sees the solution of the problem of identity in India in “democratic multiculturalism” which combines cultural and political communitarianism. On the one hand, it recognises the importance of cultural identity, and on the other hand is committed to bringing the issue into the political domain. The conflicts that result from the differences of identity are to be resolved through dialogue, discussion and negotiation. Democratic multiculturalism entails the role of an effective democratic state, which “intervenes in religious and cultural practices to get rid of oppressive practices” so that the possible subordination of the individual to the authority of the collectivity is curbed, if not abolished. The Indian experience of “secularism” since independence, he believes, is replete with examples of when an effective state intervention has been able to maintain secularism. But this requires two preconditions. In the absence of an effective state, peaceful coexistence is not reproduced automatically. Second, there is a need for essential democratic politics. A minimally democratic state may not be good enough but what it may manage to prevent may be much worse (Bhargava et al. 1999, 48–9).

In seeking to understand contemporary religious conflicts, Bilgrami has drawn out the significance of the distinction between state and community, especially the Muslim community in India (Bilgrami 1999). Against the backdrop of the constitutional protection for the “personal laws” of the Muslims in India, those which relate directly to the issue of the rights of communities, he questions the efficacy of liberalism as conceding such rights may mean conceding to illiberalism because many practices following from such “laws” curb individual rights and autonomy. He argues that the right to exit that liberal theory may offer may not be a realistic and powerful enough tool. He does not believe that traditional Muslim women can simply exit their community in order to be free of the oppressive practices of the Muslim personal laws. Communitarian reform is unlikely to realise Muslim women’s rights and state-led reform is thus necessary.

Chatterjee, the leading post-colonial theorist of South Asia, offers a contrary reading. He is sceptical of the legitimacy of the state rationale, and its external reasons to interfere in the affairs of communities. Chatterjee points out that in multicommunual India, which has constitutionally recognised the rights of minorities to maintain their culture and traditions, including religious traditions, secular liberalism is powerless to cope with personal law reform. The basis of Chatterjee’s critique is the indifference of reason to specific communities and
communitarian identities as embodied in the state – the homogenising drives of the secularisation ideology of “nationalists” and “progressives” (Chatterjee 1994).

3. Multiculturalism Against the Nation-State

The debate on multiculturalism has also considered the relation between multiculturalism and the Indian nation-state. Many scholars have tended to use the concept as a point of departure for re-examining and reassessing the relations between minorities and the Indian state.

Multiculturalism that seeks to “manage cultural diversity” within the nation-state is termed “liberal” by Sangari. Post-modernist multiculturalism, she argues, positions itself outside or across national boundaries. For her, critical multiculturalism raises questions about the structures of power as well as the very need to add multiculturalism to the democratic project. But none of the above models of multiculturalism applies to the Indian case because none “can come to grips with the diversity of the Indian subcontinent, which does not quite conform to a multi-ethnic state” (Sangari 1999, 24).

In contrast, Chandhoke takes an extreme position on this subject in that she believes that the rise of multiculturalism has meant the end of the “grand vision” of the culturally homogeneous nation-state, of national integration (Chandhoke 1999, 35). While it is true that multiculturalism has posed a challenge to the uncritical and arrogant ideas of homogenisation and national integration around the world, it is doubtful whether the problem can be seen in such absolutely binary terms. In many countries, multiculturalism has been taken as a corrective to the excesses of the one-sided nation-building process that has tended to privilege the majority and to marginalise the minorities. Chandhoke, none the less, acknowledges that the Indian nation-state project has been heavily influenced by a “Brahmanical and uncomfortable oppressive” content. Referring to the rise of the Dalit (backward caste) movements in India since the 1970s, she argues that despite decades of so-called economic development and progress, the social status of the Dalits has not changed for the better. The elite vision of “national culture”, she concludes, has increasingly marginalised minority groups (Chandhoke 1999, 36).

So far the Indian debate around multiculturalism has remained sociological and normative. It has raised questions about the place of minorities in the nation-state, and the vexed issue of community identities. In so doing, it has highlighted the structural limitations of the nation-state project in India and its implicit “ethnic bias” – what Singh calls the “ethnic” content of democracy (Singh 2000). But the debate has generally failed to address the key question identified at the beginning: what is the secret of India’s unity and integrity, its diversity and complexity notwithstanding? Even though the exact nature of India’s “national” identity may be suspect, the boundaries of the political community blurred – and often empirically untenable – but what is beyond dispute is that India has been relatively successful in resisting disintegration. This is largely a political question, which
essentially involves a political recognition of identity. Ultimately this calls for an examination of the political institutional arrangements for the protection and maintenance of identity.

4. Multiculturalism: Ideological and Political

Ultimately, ideological and political multiculturalism provides the most effective answers to questions of India’s unity and integrity. As indicated above, the federal debate, particularly since the late 1980s, has emphasised the multicultural underpinnings of political institutional arrangements (Bhattacharyya 2001b).

India’s anti-colonial nationalist leaders, by and large, swore by the country’s multicultural reality, but it was Jawaharlal Nehru, the country’s first prime minister, whose thoughts on the issue proved decisive in giving it a constitutional legitimacy and determining the policy framework in post-independence governance. Nehru was respectful of the traditional values and institutions of Indian society and of its contemporary diversity. He simultaneously recognised India’s diversity and emphasised “unity in diversity”. In his words:

The diversity of India is tremendous; it is obvious. It lies on the surface and anybody can see it. It concerns itself with physical appearances as well as with certain mental habits and traits. … Yet, with all these differences, there is no mistaking the impress of India (Nehru 1946, 61–2).

Nehru’s profound concern for the cultural plurality and the specificity of the situation, and his respect for the values involved, were reflected in his practical approach to governance. Commenting on the problems of integration in his state- and nation-building efforts with regard to various territorial units of the country, most notably in the north-east (characterised by the complex diversity of tribes, religions and non-tribal groups), he advised the chief ministers in his Letters to Chief Ministers in the early 1950s not “to treat them by some single formula because they differ greatly among themselves. It seems obviously undesirable to deny them some kind of self-government or autonomy” (Nehru 1986, 364). He simultaneously cautioned against any attempt at homogenisation of different culturally specific people. He forewarned the Chief Ministers:

There is a tendency in Assam for what is called integration of these tribes and for establishment of a homogenous state. This really means merging in a cultural and the like sense the tribal people into the Assamese. I think that this is not a desirable movement and instead of achieving its objectives will lead to conflicts and difficulties (Nehru 1986, 185, 150).

Nehru was not, however, opposed to assimilation because without it a nation could never be built, particularly in a society like India. But his idea of assimilation was not a forced or externally imposed one. He said that such an assimilation process would develop of its own accord through education and contacts, without any special effort. In such a process, he emphasised, every care should be taken to
retain the individuality of cultures, much of which was, for him, retainable. Further
clarifying his ideas on this issue, he said that people living in these areas should
feel that they have perfect freedom to live their own lives according to their wishes
and genius, and that India should signify for them a protecting as well as a
liberating force. He pointed out that the policy of the state was not to interfere with
tribal affairs but to offer the largest measure of autonomy (Nehru 1985, 151–2). He
also attached great importance to the valuable customs of ethnic groups. The Naga
ethnic groups posed perhaps the most powerful challenge to the nascent state in
India, which after protracted struggles and negotiations ended in 1960 with the
establishment of the state of Nagaland as a federal constituent unit of India.
Nagaland, i.e. the land of the Nagas, was carved out of Assam. But Nehru took
cognisance of the democratic custom of the Nagas. He wrote:

Last month (August 1957), a big Convention was held in Kohima in the Naga
Hills District with the permission of the Assam government. At this Convention
every tribe sent its representative which totalled about 1,760 apart from about
2,000 Naga visitors. For several days, they argued heatedly. Ultimately, it was
clear that the majority wanted to pass a certain type of resolution. There is a
custom among the Nagas that once the majority is known then the particular
resolution is passed unanimously and becomes binding on all the tribes. A good
custom, which, incidentally, shows the discipline of these peoples (Nehru 1988,
558).

Nehru’s approach to the problem of the management of ethnic conflicts, and to the
issue of nation- and state-building, thus was at once democratic and multicultural.
His was an attempt to find the common ground between the general and the
specific. This was not obviously a cultural formulation, but a political one, which
incorporated the essentials of Indian culture both traditional and modern.

To give another example, Nehru in his Foreword to Verrier Elwin’s well-known
work A Philosophy for NEFA (1957/1959), enunciated five fundamental principles
regarding state policy towards different communities and groups in India’s north-
east and – probably – for others in other parts of India:

1. People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid
imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their
traditional arts and culture.

2. Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected.

3. We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work
of administration and development.

4. We should not over-administer these areas or overwhelm them with a
multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through and not in rivalry to their
social and cultural institutions.

5. We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by
the quality of human character that is evolved (Elwin 1957).
Nehru’s approach, as a whole, thus showed the acute sense of realism, accommodation and adjustment in the state approach to communities, and was an instance of how “modernity relativized” (Bhattacharyya 2001b) in a non-Western context. This relativisation of modernity, theoretically speaking, was to remain central to India’s efforts at state- and nation-building.

5. Multiculturalism: Federal

Since independence, federalism – and an ongoing federalising process which politically accommodates ethnic identity – has remained the most effective method of management and resolution of conflicts. Related to this method is democracy, which stipulates that the political association or institution (whether statehood, sub-statehood, or Tribal and Regional Councils) that ethnic groups may demand as the fulfilment of their identity needs (the constitution provides for such institutional measures) must be democratically based, and formed by the consent of the “ethnic” electorate, and not to be something “naturally” given. The story of statehood within the Indian federation since 1950 is the story of acceding to ethnic identity demands for political recognition, for autonomous powers within the federation, and for a more secure environment for the protection and maintenance of identity. Little wonder that some scholars have tended to see Indian federalism and Indian multiculturalism as corollaries (Pant 1998, 17). Carl Friedrich was one of the first scholars who recognised the growing strength of Indian federalism, and its capacity to increasingly differentiate itself:

India is clearly undergoing a federalizing process in the course of which federal diversity is increasing. It is … a recurrent feature of this process that in the course of democratizing of a society, regional and linguistic-cultural communities become more articulate and demand recognition in the form of a set of political institutions, including safeguards for the identity of the particular community (Friedrich 1968, 135–6).

As the ethno-linguistic communities are, by and large, mostly territorially rooted, territorial solutions in the form of different degrees of statehood have worked. Statehood and other such demands are predicated on collective or group rights of ethnic communities. The Indian Constitution makes the conservation and cultivation of such rights the fundamental rights of every citizen of India. Article 29 (1) says that any section of the citizens of India having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the fundamental right to conserve the same. This means that if a cultural minority wants to preserve its own language and culture, the state cannot by law impose on it any other culture belonging to the local majority. Both religious and linguistic minorities are protected by this provision. The constitution also defines a positive, directional role for the state in this respect. It directs every state (federal unit) to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education of children belonging to linguistic minority groups, and empowers the President to issue proper direction to any state (Article 350 A) (Basu 1997, 380).
The above provisions are not merely constitutional. The executive has also established elaborate enforcement mechanisms. The National Commission for Minorities Act (1992) was passed by parliament in 1992 to monitor the working of the constitutional safeguards in union and state laws (Basu 1997, 380). The alertness of the constitution to this question is beyond doubt. It not only provides for the protection of minority interests, but seeks to ensure that individuals belonging to minorities do not suffer from discrimination. Article 29 (2) forbids any discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion, race, caste or language in the matter of admission into educational institutions maintained or aided by the state. Basu, one of the leading constitutional experts in India, believes that this was a very wide-ranging provision concerning the protection not only of religious but also of local or linguistic minorities (Basu 1997, 380). As far as the institutional means of protection and cultivation of minority culture is concerned, Articles 29 (1) and 30 (1) stipulate that minorities can establish and administer educational institutions of their own choice, and the state cannot compel them to attend institutions not to their liking. The Supreme Court, in a series of judgments over the years, has expanded the scope of those provisions (Basu 1997, 381). When the aggrieved but territorially rooted minorities have found the existing provisions of the constitution to be ineffective in protecting their identity within the existing state, they have had recourse to demands for statehood.

6. Multiculturalism, Statehood and Recent Cases

The strength and viability of the Indian federation in accommodating diversity is illustrated by the recent (2000) creation of three new states – Chhattisgarh (carved out of Madhya Pradesh), Jharkhand (carved out of Bihar), and Uttaranchal (carved out of Uttar Pradesh). The formation of states on the basis of language was a pledge and a demand of the anti-colonial nationalist movements. This was how the federal idea took shape. The Indian National Congress (INC), as the main party of independence, from the beginning of the 1900s began to encourage the idea of linguistic states to obtain a better deal for ethnic groups, and officially endorsed the demand as early as 1920 when it reorganised its units on the basis of linguistic regional boundaries. The INC’s cultivation of support for ethnic groups also strengthened its bases. The essence of the nationalist pledge in this respect was to reorganise the Indian State after independence on the basis of linguistic reorganisation of the country’s territory. This encouragement led to an awakening among various nationalities and ethnic groups of the desire for self-rule and identity prior to independence. Many of the post-independence movements for statehood had their origins in this pre-independence phase. The statehood movements thus enjoy some kind of prior legitimacy.

Constitutional provisions for the creation of new states in India are rather flexible. The Indian federation, constitutionally speaking, is an indestructible union of destructible states. Articles 3–4 of the constitution empower the Union Parliament (Lok Sabha, the elected Lower House, and Rajya Sabha, the Council of States) to reorganise the states for territorial adjustment. Parliament may legally: (1) form a
new state by separation of territory from any state, or by uniting two or more states, or parts of states, or by uniting any territory to a part of any state; (2) increase the area of any state; (3) diminish the area of any state; (4) alter the boundaries of any state; and (5) alter the name of any state, etc. The legislative requirement on the part of parliament to do so is by a simple majority, and by the ordinary legislative process. However, presidential recommendation for introducing such a Bill is required, and the president is required, before he recommends, to refer the Bill within a specified period to the legislature of the state to be affected by the proposed changes. The president is not bound to accept the view of the state legislature. So far, more than twenty Acts have been passed to give effect to state reorganisation. In the case of the three new states, the constitutional procedures have been followed and the Legislative Assemblies of the three affected states debated the proposed changes and the Bill for years before agreeing. The democratic method has informed the legislative process.

Since the inception of the Republic of India in 1950, statehood has remained alive, predicated on India’s manifold diversity (most notably language), and its appropriate use and utilisation by the political elites. In the beginning (1950) there were twenty-seven states of differential status and powers, which were reduced by the first major territorial reorganisation in 1956 to fourteen with equal powers and functions. The first state created in recognition of the linguistic principle in the post-independence period was Andhra Pradesh (Telegu language, 1953), and that after its legendary leader Sri Ramalu’s fast unto death. This prompted the Government of India to form the States Reorganization Commission in 1953 and, on the basis of its recommendations, to pass the famous States Reorganization Act of 1956. The basis in the first major reorganisation of states in 1956 was strongly linguistic: federal units were created to corresponded largely with linguistic boundaries. Since 1956, the formation of new federal units in India has remained more or less a continuous process. The basis for state creation has been ethno-regional or linguistic. In the 1950s and 1960s, the linguistic factor played the most determining role with the sole exception of the creation of Punjab (1966) in which it was combined with religion. In the 1970s, India’s north-east (now comprising seven federal units) became the area of major state reorganisation, giving birth to three new states as political recognition of tribal identity. In the 1980s, another three states were created (two in the north-east provinces, and Goa in the south-west). The essence of the statehood demand has always been the congruence between federal political boundaries and the ethno-linguistic boundaries of the people. At the heart of such demands remains the urge for decentralisation and autonomy for the protection of identity and for development. The political processes which have accompanied the legal-constitutional ones are often protracted negotiations between the governments (Union and state), and the ethnic movements, and the resultant bipartite or tripartite “Ethnic Peace Accords” are signed, and honoured by subsequent legislation, for institutionalising peace in the shape of democratic local governing bodies.
In the formation of the three states – Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttaranchal – language as a symbol of identity has however played a very minor role. This is where such a reorganisation of states deviates somewhat from the criterion followed in the country in the 1950s and the 1960s. But then, given that ethno-regional factors have been active in state creation in India before, there is perhaps little surprise here. As far as the new states are concerned, one finds none the less differential bases and contexts of their rise. Compared with Uttaranchal and Jharkhand, the creation of Chhattisgarh out of the state of Madhya Pradesh has been peaceful, although a movement existed for such a state from about the 1960s. When the parent state of Madhya Pradesh itself was created in 1956, there was very little agitation for the state of Chhattisgarh although the cultural distinctiveness of the people of the region was well known. The community which has spearheaded the movement for Chhattisgarh are the ex-Malgujas (the rich peasants who collected land revenues on behalf of the Marathas and the British), and who seek to become numerically powerful in a new state. The most significant political aspect of the creation of Chhattisgarh was that the issue was made an electoral pledge by the two leading political parties, Congress (I) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the leading partner of the National Democratic Alliance government in India since 1998. The immediate political beneficiary of the new state has, however, been the Congress (I), the party in power in the parent state, which played a very active role in the creation of the new state since the 1990s.

In the formation of Uttaranchal in the northernmost hilly regions of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state (some 140 million in 1991), ecology as the defining factor of ethnic identity played the most active role for the first time ever. This small state by Indian standards (population around 7 million – the population of Switzerland) covers all eleven districts of the Kumaon and Garhwal hills of Uttar Pradesh. The state of Uttaranchal is the culmination of a ten-year movement by the hill people demanding statehood for autonomy to address the problems of economic development and to protect their culture, born of the ecological distinctiveness of the region. Essentially, the lack of development in the hills defined the tenor of the statehood movement. The rise of Uttaranchal has provided the minority hill people of Uttar Pradesh with the political institutions to transform themselves into a majority in a state of their own in which they play the major role in governance.

The state of Jharkhand, by contrast, is the culmination of over a century of struggle by the Bihar tribes for their identity, development in their region and a state of their own. Jharkhand will comprise eighteen districts (out of fifty-five) in south Bihar, rich in mineral resources, and cover an area of 79,638 square km out of Bihar’s total area of 174,083 square km, and its population will be more than 30 million (on the basis of the 1991 Census of India). The ethnic basis of the new state is complex. Although the tribes began to assert their identity some decades ago, they are no longer in the majority in this state, although they constitute a significant

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2 I for Indira (Gandhi). The Congress (I) is now the opposition party in the government.
element. In the creation of Jharkhand state, however, regional underdevelopment and a sense of deprivation have combined with tribal affiliations. But, as in the other two cases, the language factor has played a minor role in carving out the state.

7. Conclusion

India’s social and cultural landscape is dotted with various movements towards statehood rooted in identity searches for communities. There are such movements as Harit Pradesh in western Uttar Pradesh, Vindhyachal in Madhya Pradesh, Telengana in Andhra Pradesh, Vindhyachal in Madhya Pradesh, Vidarbha in Maharashtra, Kodagu in Karnataka, Gorkhaland and Kamtapuri in West Bengal, and Bodoland in Assam. The political history of India since decolonisation has shown flexibility in accommodating the political needs of diversity. Prior to statehood, various institutional measures such as Tribal or Regional Councils, Union Territory, and Associate State or Sub-State have been the state’s responses to ethnic grievances. In many cases, the statehood movements have grown out of dissatisfaction with the existing institutional measures as described above. Given the complex diversity of this vast country, coupled with regional imbalances, social and economic inequalities and mass poverty, statehood provides an institutional framework of autonomy and decentralisation which may respond better to the need for development and identity.

Statehood for territorially based ethnic identities thus remains the most comprehensive and effective method of political recognition of ethnic identity in India, and the key to India’s multicultural federalisation (Bhattacharyya 2001b). Following R. Rorty, Das Gupta argues that the so-called “crisis” in Indian federalism that some Western scholars tend to highlight may actually be associated with the way India has sought to combine multicultural federalism with nationalism, which has consisted in the “democratic responsiveness to cultural differences with a federal conciliation of regional community, identity, and autonomy” (Das Gupta 2001, 49). The political structures that have resulted from the political accommodation of ethnic identity in India are very complex. In other words, the so-called “nation-state” in India is thus vastly different from those in the West. Even as a federation, India has evolved complex federal institutions to respond to diversity. As Parekh has rightly argued (2000, 193): “Every multicultural society needs to devise its own appropriate political structure to suit its history, cultural traditions, and range and depth of diversity”. The Indian multicultural debate, as we have seen above, has remained sociological, normative, and consequently a little wooden. It has yet to take cognisance of the political argument born of the rationale that lies behind several institutional resolutions of identity issues in India since 1950.
References


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Pluralism and Democracy in Pakistan

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The problems of dealing with ethnic, religious and sectarian divisions in Pakistan were compounded by structural discontinuity of the state system after partition in 1947. The migration of 8 million refugees from India further contributed to the prevalent tensions and problems in inter-ethnic relations. Post-1971 constitutional thinking tried to grapple with pluralism by establishing parliamentarianism, federalism and bicameralism. Successive governments introduced affirmative action policies in order to provide underprivileged communities with access to institutions of higher learning and with employment. The system of separate electorates which had discriminated against religious minorities for three decades was finally removed in 2002. It is argued that viable democratic institutions and policy structures can ensure equanimity among different sections of society.

Pakistan is a plural society in terms of both ethnicity and religion. Its record of political management of pluralism has been at best mixed and in general far from satisfactory. The efforts of the ruling elite to bring about a consensus on the rules of the game have collapsed several times. It is true that India represents pluralism on a much larger scale and has been able to keep a modicum of democracy in place for half a century. On the other hand, Pakistan has suffered through a lingering crisis of civil–military relations, which has adversely affected the agenda of national integration. The military’s overt and covert role in the business of the state has cultivated a spirit of intolerance for subnational identities.

The pluralist character of society in Pakistan draws upon the existence of four historical ethno-linguistic communities: Punjabi, Sindhi, Pakhtun and Baluch. Urdu- and Gujarati-speaking migrants from India who came to Pakistan after partition and settled largely in the province of Sindh emerged as a distinct community more than a quarter of a century after the bulk of migration took place in the late 1940s and early 1950s. All these communities have their distinct linguistic, historical and geographical identities which have become an essential part of their political expression in an organisational, electoral or agitational context. Within the larger ethno-regional communities, subregional groups have struggled to project their separate identities, such as the Siraiki-speaking...
community in southern Punjab and adjoining areas of Sindh, the Hindko-speaking people in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Brahui of Baluchistan, along with a sprinkling of smaller groups across the country.

At the same time, religious pluralism is characterised by the presence of two major minority groups, Christians and Hindus, followed by Ahmadis, and several miniscule groups such as Parsis, Buddhists and Sikhs together accounting for 3.54 per cent of the population. 96.46 per cent of the population are Muslims. Before 1971, there was a considerable presence of Hindus in the eastern wing of Pakistan which, however, declined from 22 per cent to 12 per cent in the two decades after partition owing to migration to India. Muslims in contemporary Pakistan are estimated to be 85 per cent Sunni, with Brelvis the majority community followed by Deobandis and Wahhabis/Salafis. Shias, estimated at 15 per cent, are mainly Athna-Ashaari (Twelvers), followed by Ismailis, Sulemanis and Daudi Bohras. Sectarian militancy characterised the Shia-Sunni conflict from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s.

This paper looks at four major issues. First, we focus on the emergence of a new pattern of ethnic hierarchy in Pakistan as a direct consequence of the process of migration of millions of Indian Muslims to Pakistan after partition. Next, we discuss the problems of federalism in Pakistan in the context of the efforts of the state elite to find a workable formula for a federal constitution according to its own preferences and priorities. Third, we analyse the affirmative action policies adopted by successive governments to compensate for lack of access to higher education and the civil service. Finally, we focus on religious pluralism with reference to the controversy over separate electorates for the national and provincial assemblies. Overall, the paper seeks to put into perspective various public issues, official policies and currents of public opinion about ethnic and religious pluralism.

1. Partition, Migration and Ethnic Mobility

A crucial aspect of the phenomenon of pluralism in Pakistan is the role of partition in 1947 and the subsequent cataclysmic changes in the demographic composition and ideological framework of the society. While Indian transition to independent statehood was relatively smooth, inasmuch as it functioned as a successor state of British India, Pakistan’s emergence as a seceding state reflected several layers of structural discontinuity. We need to analyse these layers as contributory factors in the context of establishment of a praetorian polity in Pakistan, characterised by the weakness of civil society and the state’s lack of institutional potential for conflict management. In this context, it is argued that the radical change in the post-independence ethno-religious scenario exercised a deterministic influence over the emerging patterns of authority as well as over public policy.

The establishment of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland in 1947 transformed a religious minority into a majority community overnight. Far from the position of an insecure minority in British India, constantly looking for constitutional
mechanisms to safeguard its interests within the framework of what was generally perceived as the emerging Hindu-dominated federation, Muslims now controlled the levers of power in a state of their own. The new ruling elite saw itself as a proud heir to the legacy of Indo-Muslim civilisation and, almost as a corollary, perceived its eastern neighbour as a Hindu state despite its secular credentials. The insecurity syndrome which operated in Pakistan with the backdrop of the war in Kashmir (1947–49) created a political context at home which was increasingly and often deliberately oriented to the cause of unity among the ranks of the nation (Jalal 1991, 49). In other words, the ethnically pluralist character of Pakistan society was destined to face grave challenges from the very beginning, in so far as it was not reflected in the emergent patterns of unitary – as opposed to federalist – currents of thought and practice. The increasingly exclusivist modes of representation of the Muslim majority in elected assemblies constantly kept the minority communities of Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, Buddhists, Parsis and others on their toes. In 2002, the government of President Musharraf faced serious challenges to the prevalent patterns of authority in terms of demand for opening up the state system to the rule of public representatives at the federal and provincial levels, on the one hand, and the elimination of obstacles to proper representation of religious minorities in the elected legislatures, on the other.

As Pakistan began operating as an independent state in 1947, its ruling elite displayed a relatively insular character. The major part of this elite had come from non-Pakistan areas while the popular leaderships from various provinces were relegated to a secondary level. An obvious casualty in the way the establishment in Karachi developed a self-sustaining machinery of government in the immediate post-partition years was the political representation of various ethnic communities from East Bengal and the smaller provinces of the western wing. The leadership of these communities was either not the visible and significant part of the Pakistan movement, such as the political leadership in the Baluchistan states of Kalat, Mekran and Lasbela, or was on the other side of the political divide such as the NWFP’s Congressite leadership and the leadership of the Hindu community in general. The minority syndrome that had characterised Muslim politics in British India, in both theory and practice, continued to cast its shadow on the politics of Pakistan. The erstwhile fear of a brute Hindu majority was transformed into feelings of insecurity vis-à-vis the perceived bellicosity of India, which was several times bigger than Pakistan in population, territory and military power. The state-forming character of Muslim nationalism in British India was transformed into a nation-forming agenda in post-independence Pakistan. Islamic ideology in the form of the Two-Nation Theory was geared essentially to an exit option, and far less to social and political reform. The fact that the Pakistan movement was lacking in policy content only meant that the state elite increasingly pressed Islamic ideology into serving the need for national integration at the cost of addressing the pluralist character of the society.

The post-independence political process suffered through a gross challenge to the continuing patterns of social, economic and political life of various ethnic
communities, which became the constituent parts of the new state either wholly or partially. For example, the partition of Bengal meant that the new province of East Bengal in Pakistan lost its political and cultural centre in Calcutta to India. The reverse process took place in Punjab where partition caused the loss of the vast hinterland of East Punjab to the provincial capital of Lahore. Similarly, the migration of Hindus from Pakistan to India specifically hit the two provinces of East Bengal and Sindh in the form of the loss of their cultural, intellectual and professional elites. Especially in Sindh, it involved the additional loss of major cities including Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukhar to the non-Sindhi immigrants from India, in a cultural, linguistic and increasingly political sense. Finally, popular ethnic leaders including G. M. Syed of Sindh, Ghaffar Khan of NWFP and A. K. Fazlul Haq, Maulana Bhashani and Mujiburrehman of East Bengal were incarcerated and, in some cases, delegitimised by the federal government at Karachi and later Islamabad. Discontinuity in patterns of intellectual and political imagination and behaviour of people characterised civic life in the new state.

Migration brought about change in the pattern of geographical – and therefore cultural and political – mobility. For hundreds of years, people from the periphery of the Indian subcontinent, now represented by Pakistani areas in the east and west of India, had travelled to the centre, located in the imperial seat of power in and around Delhi in north India, in search of intellectual, political and economic patronage. The partition led to a reverse movement from the centre to the periphery, in as much as Muslim elite and sub-elite groups and the masses in general migrated from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and regional centres of power such as Bombay to the north-western and north-eastern parts of India now comprising Pakistan. Migration created new patterns of ethnic hierarchy whereby migrants from India enjoyed a superior position vis-à-vis the native population of areas of Pakistan. Within the migrant community, refugees from UP enjoyed power and privilege, followed by west Indians, south Indians, east Punjabis and west Bengalis in descending order. Several factors contributed to the new hierarchy. The people from UP enjoyed a clear edge over other migrants from India as well as over “locals”. This could be traced back to the claims of many of them to be descendants of Arab, Turk and Afghan conquerors of India in the late medieval period and thus to belong to Ashrafia per se (Qureshi 1962). The UP Muslim elite surpassed its counterparts from all other regions of India in terms of higher education and representation in government services (Mahmood [1893] 1981). Urdu, the first language of the UP Muslims, became the symbol of Muslim nationalism in British India. Later, Urdu became the national language of Pakistan even though it was the first language of only 3 per cent of the people in the new state. Among the ninety-five Muslim Indian Civil Service officers who opted for Pakistan, two-thirds came from Urdu-speaking migrants (Sayeed 1967, 132).

In the aftermath of partition, migrants dominated several cities, especially in Sindh but also in Punjab. The new phenomenon materialised on the basis of a sectoral dichotomy between migrant-dominated cities and local-dominated countryside. In
Sindh, this phenomenon overlapped with ethnic polarisation as the Urdu-speaking Muslim immigrants (mohajirs) gravitated towards cities while the countryside remained predominantly Sindhi. Mohajirs constituted 63.9 per cent of the population in urban Sindh and 86.16 per cent in the urban areas of one district, Hyderabad, followed by Karachi at around 60 per cent (Census of Pakistan 1951). This dichotomy created a permanent source of alienation among Sindhis. They represented a community that was cut off from the urban infrastructure of modern social and economic life, including schools, colleges and universities, hospitals and dispensaries, banks and businesses, bar and bench, the cultural establishment, arts and music centres, as well as the various tools of modern communications systems such as the telephone, telefax, computer and Internet. Karachi, as the only cosmopolitan centre of Pakistan, was carved out of Sindh province as the federal capital in 1948. This created a deep level of alienation among Sindhis who felt cheated by the federal leadership. Subsequently, the de-Sindhisation of Karachi was followed by the domination of mohajir culture over the city in cultural and linguistic terms. Sindhi nationalists struggled throughout the 1950s and 1960s against the separation of Karachi from Sindh, until the city was merged back into that province in 1970.

While the ethnic communities of Pakistan tried to grapple with the issue of developing a national consensus on the way their proper representation in the political and administrative fields could be secured, the 1970s saw the emergence of a new ethnic community of mohajirs. The sense of alienation among the mohajirs, who belonged to an erstwhile privileged group of immigrants from India, added to the ethnic mosaic of Pakistan. The country experienced the phenomenon of ethnicity-in-making as the mohajirs developed a separate ethno-linguistic identity, a distinct political party (Mohajir Qaumi Movement, MQM) and an all-encompassing political strategy for safeguarding their economic and political interests.

During the 1970s, the mohajirs felt increasingly alienated because the new set-up, which was dominated by the Sindhi-led Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) governments in Islamabad and Karachi, largely represented an indigenous revival. While Punjab represented the majority, the mohajirs constituted merely 8–9 per cent of the population in post-Bangladesh Pakistan, and merely one-fourth of that in Sindh. Fleeing from the grim prospects of turning into a permanent religious minority in UP in post-independence India, the mohajirs landed in the situation of a permanent ethnic minority in Sindh in post-independence Pakistan. Mohajir nationalism is the movement of a privileged community on the decline. Both Sindhi and mohajir nationalisms are rooted in the phenomenon of post-partition migration. The former reacted against the onslaught of millions of refugees from India, who dominated politics, administration, economy, culture, education and jobs in Sindh. The latter was born out of the perceived ascendancy of Sindhis under

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Z. A. Bhutto (1971–77), which led to various openings for “locals” in terms of government employment, higher education and business opportunities. 

Punjabis emerged as the second-largest group among the bureaucrats, most of whom had migrated from East Punjab in India. Punjab was ideally suited to occupy a second position in the emergent hierarchy. It enjoyed geographical proximity to the erstwhile seat of imperial power in Delhi, and UP in general. Urdu had been the predominant language of literacy, education and culture in Punjab ever since the British annexed the province in 1849. Muslim Punjab produced the greatest Urdu poet of the twentieth century, Iqbal, and led the literary and artistic trends and the Indo-Iranian tradition of art. The two communities were destined to shape the new state’s political and cultural profile. Over time, Bengalis, Sindhis, Pathans and Baluchs came to understand Pakistan as a mohajir-Punjabi state. Not surprisingly, East Bengal, Sindh, NWFP and Baluchistan produced ethnic movements in pursuance of demands for provincial autonomy, effective representation in the federal government and an equitable share in government services.

2. Quasi-unitarian Federalism

Migration-induced social and political changes following the redrawing of provincial and national boundaries in the subcontinent shaped the constitutional thinking of the ruling elite in Pakistan according to its own priorities, in the context of putting together a workable formula to rule the country. The new country was born with various demographic anomalies, which cast their shadow on the emergent political scene. First, one province, East Bengal, held the majority (55 per cent) of the country’s population, while the other 45 per cent was spread throughout the other provinces, states and federally administered areas of West Pakistan. This situation created a grave problem for the political elite from the western wing, which sought ways and means of countering the numerically dominant position of East Bengal in the new federation. Subsequently, this led to extremely unpopular constitutional measures such as merging all the provinces and areas of West Pakistan into ‘One Unit’ in 1955, and thus creating parity between East Pakistan and West Pakistan in terms of equal representation in parliament. A direct result of the 1956 Constitution, which was based on One Unit and the principle of inter-wing parity, was the resurgence of nationalist movements in Sindh, NWFP and Baluchistan. The core communities of these provinces felt alienated over the loss of their respective governments. The fact that these provinces were now ruled from Lahore, the erstwhile capital of Punjab, could only damage the cause of inter-provincial harmony. This entailed the virtual end of federalism and the establishment of a unitary form of government at the level of West Pakistan. In 1957, the new West Pakistan Assembly voted for the dismemberment of One Unit and restoration of the original four provinces in the western wing. However, the military-bureaucratic establishment did not approve a change in the reverse direction. Ayub’s military coup in 1958 froze the popular movement for reverting back to four provinces for another decade. Only in 1970 did the new military ruler Yahya Khan split One Unit into its constituent parts and
put an end to an ugly episode in Pakistan’s history. By that time, the Sindhi, Baluch and Pakhtun nationalist movements had spread across large sections of their respective communities.

The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 created another situation of one-province-dominates-all. Now Punjab emerged as the new majority province in West Pakistan, commanding nearly 58 per cent of the population in the country. In the process of constitution-making in the post-Bangladesh state of Pakistan, this created the problem of giving proper representation to smaller provinces and thus constraining the brute majority of one province in the federal legislature. The political elite, led by the PPP, found the answer in a bicameral legislature. Three factors contributed to the new federalist thinking in Islamabad, which introduced an upper house for the first time in the history of the new country. First, the 1970 elections had brought new social forces on to the political scene. Being the first party-based exercise in mass voting in a quarter of a century, held at the national level on the basis of adult franchise, these elections released the energy and pent-up emotions of various underprivileged groups and communities. Earlier, the 1956 and 1962 Constitutions had aimed at containing and co-opting various ethnic, leftist and Islamic forces. In the absence of any effective political platforms for the long years of martial law (1958–62) and post-martial law (1962–69) of the Ayub government, these political forces bounced back and reshaped the political landscape through the ballot box in the 1970 elections. The results of these elections amply reflected the ethnic forces moving into centre stage from the platforms of the Awami League (East Pakistan), PPP (Sindh) and the National Awami Party (NWFP and Baluchistan). Similarly, the PPP’s victory as a leftist party in the province of Punjab on the basis of its class-based rhetoric and radical policy structure opened up the doors of the state to accommodate subaltern classes and thus expand the democratic framework of the political system.

Second, the elite learnt the grim lesson from the emergence of Bangladesh that all ethnic communities should be duly and meaningfully accommodated in the system of government. It was realised that the continuing alienation of an ethnic community in the rest of the country could lead to a further breakdown of the political system in the face of the “permanent” majority of one community, i.e. Punjab. The emergence of new thinking was also facilitated by the fact that Bhutto, the new strongman of Pakistan, belonged to Sindh, one of the smaller and aggrieved provinces, which had expressed a great sense of alienation from what was increasingly perceived as Punjabisation of the state in the 1970 elections. It was therefore in the nature of things that a relatively high level of sensitivity about the need to accommodate federating units in the new constitution would characterise the current patterns of legal thinking. The 1973 Constitution fully represented this trend by providing for an upper house of the parliament. It was maintained that Punjab’s populist majority in the National Assembly needed to be balanced by providing for increased representation of the smaller provinces in the upper house. During the following decades, the Senate emerged as a territorial chamber of the Federation of Pakistan, which gave equal representation to the four
provinces at nineteen seats each, including Baluchistan at one extreme with 3.5 per cent of the population and Punjab at the other with 58 per cent. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) elected eight senators and the federal capital Islamabad elected three, bringing the total to eighty-seven. Punjab, with 58 per cent of the country’s population, obtained 22 per cent of the seats in the Senate whereas all the other provinces and FATA together, with 42 per cent of the population, obtained 78 per cent.

However, the majority-constraining approach to federalism provided only part of the answer to the demand for provincial autonomy. First, the asymmetrical policy scope of the two houses of parliament practically nullified the positive impact of over-representation of smaller provinces in the Senate (Linz 1997). For example, finance bills, especially the national budget, could be introduced only in the National Assembly, the popularly elected chamber. Indeed, the Budget Bill could become law after presidential assent even without being transmitted to the Senate. Second, the centre continued to control the Federal Legislative List as well as the Concurrent Legislative List of subjects, while no provincial list was provided in the 1973 Constitution. Demands to transform the concurrent list into a provincial list continued to emerge from various quarters for nearly three decades after the promulgation of the constitution. Additionally, the Senate was indirectly elected by provincial assemblies, and not directly voted in on the basis of adult franchise. This meant that the Senators would not be the choice of the original voters for provincial assemblies. Similarly, while elections for the Senate took place under the proportional representation/single transferable vote rather than the first-past-the-post system, this mode of election made the Senate relatively less representative of the nation at large than the National Assembly, inasmuch as Senators were “selected” essentially in the respective party offices without undergoing any public campaign. In this way, ethnic pluralism in Pakistan was represented in the corridors of power neither genuinely nor proportionately.

The centre’s domination over the provinces has all along reflected the absence of federal comity in the country due to the lack of a member-friendly attitude. Patterns of ethnic hierarchy were generally defined in terms of political attitudes that transcended the contemporary public activity geared to economic and political strategies. These included proximity to the Urdu language, either by learning or by birth; patriotism, measured by being an early convert or late convert or no convert to the Pakistan cause on the eve of partition; and representation in the state apparatus, which was dominated by Punjabis and mohajirs, distantly followed by Pathans. The more the “bureaucratic” centre controlled the economy and politics at provincial and district levels, the more the tribal, caste and sectional identities were reworked by the political elites as security mechanisms against an intrusive state. In this way, the “negative externalities” based on primordial loyalties were

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3 Ibid., Article 142.
institutionalised and transformed into determining variables of the emerging shape of the polity in Pakistan.

3. Affirmative Action Policies

As noted above, the major communities of Pakistan represented a grossly unequal level of development in terms of Western education, urbanisation and share in middle-class professions, as well as recruitment in the army and bureaucracy. As the government remained the largest employer and government service enjoyed a level of power and privilege far in excess of comparable careers in the private sector, intense competition for jobs characterised the inter-ethnic rivalries. Indeed, the levers of power in the hands of various governments were often used to provide patronage to their respective constituencies by recruitment of their kith and kin in various positions in the public sector. Political parties from the underdeveloped regions and communities in turn lobbied for an increased share of jobs. In this way, jobs became a hot political issue from time to time, especially when a new government was installed with support from political leaders of underprivileged communities.

On the one hand, these leaders demanded protection for their respective communities against rude competition from the better-educated sections of the population, especially among the migrant communities of both mohajir and Punjabi extraction. On the other hand, the latter stressed the principle of open merit as the way to ascendency in administrative careers. As long as mohajirs dominated the bureaucracy and the Punjabi-dominated army held sway over all strategic decision-making, the merit-based system continued to operate without any serious challenge. In fact, the quota for government services was initially intended to protect the interests of migrants from India, including intending migrants, i.e. even before they had set foot on the soil of Pakistan. In the following decades, the majority community of East Bengal had only 13 per cent representation in the bureaucracy (Anisurrehman 1968, 15). The 1970 elections later led to the formation of a PPP government in Islamabad, with its centre of gravity in Sindh. The new government faced a grim situation after the separation of East Pakistan, whereby the quota system was given serious consideration as a policy of ethnic preference to compensate for the underdevelopment of regions and communities. The new strategy focused on stopping the currents of frustration and alienation among underprivileged communities from rising to unmanageable levels.

From 1973 onwards, policies of ethnic preference emerged as a major instrument of official thinking, in order to ameliorate the grievances of people from underdeveloped areas through the introduction of a quota system for admission into education institutions and recruitment into work. Pursuit of an affirmative action policy in favour of underdeveloped communities such as Sindhis was bound to affect the interests of the mohajirs, who condemned it as discriminatory in nature. Mohajirs were over-represented in the civil service and higher education in general, while Sindhis were grossly under-represented in these fields. Comprising 3 per cent
of the population of united Pakistan, the *mohajirs* enjoyed representation in the
 civil service that was seven times greater than their numbers (Waseem 2001, 248).
 On the other hand, the Sindhi representation was negligible, reportedly 250 out of
 10,000 bank employees and 1 out of 5,000 federal government employees in Sindh
 (Ahmed 1984). Successive governments had followed affirmative action policies
 from 1948 onwards, when the first quota system was introduced. After Bangladesh,
 the 1973 Constitution redefined the quota for various communities. It provided
 10 per cent for NWFP, 3.5 per cent for Baluchistan, 4 per cent for Northern Areas
 and FATA and 2 per cent for Azad Kashmir. The share of Sindh, 19 per cent, was
 subdivided, reserving 11.4 per cent for the rural sector and 7.6 per cent for urban
 Sindhi (Waseem 1997). Considering that the ratio of Sindhis in higher education
 institutions and jobs was very low, this move was expected to compensate for their
 lack of participation in the decision-making channels of the state. On the other
 hand, it was destined to damage the interests of the most educated community of
 Pakistan, the *mohajirs*, whose access to education and jobs would thus be restricted.
 Indeed, it was doubly harmful because Punjab’s representation in the civil service
 was steadily rising. From 53.5 per cent Punjabis employed in bureaucracy in 1973,
 there were 57.7 per cent in 1986 and 62.4 per cent in 1993, while *mohajirs* declined
 from 33.5 per cent in 1973 to 18.3 per cent in 1986 (Kennedy 1993).

 The latter perceived their decline as a direct result of the quota system, which had
 damaged the prospects of *mohajir* youth of being admitted to institutions of higher
 learning and careers in public service. The intensely felt *mohajir* grievance on the
 quota issue contributed a great deal to the emergence of the MQM (renamed
 Muttahida Qaumi Movement) in 1984. The fact that the new party was led by ex-
 leaders of a student organisation, the All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organisation
 (APMSO) founded in 1978, reflected the importance of the issue for *mohajir* youth.
 In various ways Sindhi students represented a mirror image of *mohajir* students.
 The former provided the core constituency of the leading Sindhi nationalist group,
 *Jiye Sindh Mohaz*, and later formed a breakaway faction of their own under a
 student leader, Qadir Magsi.

 The quota system was challenged not only in political terms but also in legal and
 Islamic terms. The period of ten years initially stipulated for implementation of the
 quota system after promulgation of the 1973 Constitution was extended for another
 ten years by Zia-ul-Haq in 1983. In 1993, various interested groups and individuals
 challenged the system in the Federal Shariat Court. The court ruled that the system
 was without any lawful authority after the lapse of twenty years and was indeed
 repugnant to Islam. However, the popular opinion in rural Sindh and among other
 underprivileged communities continued to favour the quota system. In order to
 appease his allies among Sindhi political leaders, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif
 (1990–93) duly extended the quota system for another decade. This appeased
 Sindhis but dismayed *mohajirs*. It remains to be seen how ethnic bipolarity in

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5 Writ Petition, Mohammad Kamran Khan vs Secretary Establishment and Federal Public Service
Commission Islamabad, Lahore High Court Bench, Rawalpindi, No. 21109/94, lit 3, paras J, K, N.
Sindh finds a way out of the present deadlock in terms of affirmative action policies.

It is obvious from these observations that ethnic pluralism in Pakistan was rooted in the mobility of large sections of the population across national and provincial boundaries. Inequality in terms of economic, educational and political development created a situation of ethnic tension, which emerged as a major political issue over the years. As long as the political initiative remained in the hands of extra-parliamentary forces, especially the bureaucracy with its institutional ethos rooted in merit, mohajirs continued to be over-represented in the civil service. However, after the first popularly elected government in Pakistan’s history took power in 1971 under Bhutto’s leadership, protection of underdeveloped communities against competition from the relatively developed sections of the population played a pivotal role in the new education and employment policies. Not surprisingly, the quota system has remained at the heart of controversy for the last three decades.

4. Separate Electorates for Religious Minorities

The issue of the mode of participation of religious minorities in the business of the state emerged as part of the national agenda very early after partition. It was always easier at the constitutional level to express the commitment of the new state to shun discrimination on the basis of the religious beliefs of any person or group. However, the minority vote could make a difference through the electoral process in the winning potential of candidates from certain parties on the right of the political spectrum. Therefore, the minority vote was essentially an issue that concerned the Muslim majority, rather than the minorities themselves, in terms of the support of the latter for one or the other mainstream party. A democratic government clearly represents the priorities of the majority, while the policy preferences of the minorities are typically rendered irrelevant. The open-ended character of a pluralist society such as Pakistan, comprising numerical entities of an Islamic majority and non-Muslim minorities, can change into a hierarchy of wills straight after the election. Thus, the will of the majority acquires a deterministic hold over that of the minorities through its assumption of public office, and thus redefines relations of power between communities, subjugating the minorities to the majority sovereign will.

The pluralist character of Pakistan has been generally appreciated in terms of ethnic variety and various formulas have been developed to bring the ethnic communities into mainstream politics. None the less, religious plurality has not been accommodated in the same way, neither socially nor politically. A controversy erupted soon after partition concerning the need to retain the system of separate electorates for religious communities, once Muslims had emerged as a majority in the new state. Islamic and conservative elements within and outside the Muslim League tradition stressed the need to preserve the separate electorate system, while liberal and modernist elements of the political leadership generally focused on the need for national integration and for merging all denominational
categories into one broad-based national identity for electoral purposes. In the immediate aftermath of partition and cross-migration, the two wings of Pakistan developed different approaches to the issue of proper representation of religious minorities in the business of the state. West Pakistan experienced an exodus of Hindus and Sikhs. Here, the issue acquired an ideological orientation. Leading politicians from within the Muslim League continued to adhere to the legacy of separate electorates as the proper way to represent minorities in the legislature. The idea was that Muslim nationalism in British India essentially drew upon separate electorates to distinguish itself from the larger current of Indian nationalism. A distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim voters therefore had to be made in order to retain the Islamic character of legislation in the future. The liberal section of the political elite argued that such a provision would militate against the policy of national integration and alienate the minorities.

For East Pakistan, where one-fifth of the population was Hindu, the issue was far more important in terms of realpolitik. The demand to keep separate electorates intact, emanating from politicians of West Pakistan, was largely understood to be a ploy to undermine the support base of the Awami League in East Bengal, which included a large number of Hindus (Haq 1966, 66–9). In that sense, the issue of separate electorates for minorities operated at the level of political calculation by the majority parties, which stood to gain or lose voters according to whether non-Muslims were allowed to vote for them or not. In other words, the conservative elements within the Muslim League and Islamic parties in general wanted to keep the minority vote separate from mainstream politics because it would tip the balance in favour of liberal and leftist parties. Religious minorities generally shunned Islamic parties, which struggled to establish sharia law in the country against the wishes of non-Muslims.

However, none of the three constitutions of 1956, 1962 and 1973 provided for separate electorates. The 1956 Constitution gave the right to the elected parliamentary representatives of the two wings to decide the issue by approaching their respective provinces. This would have created an anomaly if in one part of the country elections were held under one electoral system and in another part under a different system altogether. In the event, no election was held under that constitution at the national level. The 1962 and 1973 Constitutions clearly provided for a joint electorate comprising all religious communities. The latter also provided reserved seats for minorities in both the national and provincial assemblies because the joint electorate would typically undermine the chances of minorities of election to the legislatures. Later, Zia-ul-Haq arbitrarily changed the electoral system for minorities to separate electorates, first for local elections in 1979 and later for national and provincial elections. All elections from 1985 to 1997 were held on that basis, despite criticism from the liberal intelligentsia, religious minorities, human rights activists and the world media at large.

A major criticism related to the fact that minority voters were barred from electing representatives belonging to religious denominations other than their own. This
was often condemned as religious apartheid. Elections for minorities under separate electorates turned into a farce as whole districts or provinces, or sometimes the whole country, was considered as one constituency for a specific religious community. The candidates were obliged to travel hundreds of kilometres to reach their voters, who were spread out in a thin layer over vast areas. Some minorities, such as the Ahmadis, continued to show their displeasure by boycotting these elections for a decade, from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. However, the local elections held by the Musharraf Government in 2001–02 were generally boycotted by all minorities. Thus, 869 out of 957 minority seats in local and district councils remained vacant (National Commission for Justice and Peace 2001, 78). Moreover, minorities were unwilling even to register themselves as voters. Finally, the Musharraf Government reintroduced the joint electorate system in 2002. A great obstacle to the integration of religious minorities in the general public was thus removed. However, the battle to eliminate the sources of frustration in establishing consensus on the rules of the game in public life across the religious divide is still in the early stages. The pluralist character of the society demands a neat and well-defined set of rules to govern the electoral, administrative, cultural and educational fields of social activity.

5. Conclusion

We have outlined certain leading issues of pluralism in the politics of Pakistan in terms of the state’s policy structure and the way in which the ruling elites have sought to meet these challenges. The country inherited a set of circumstances that was largely the making of the political leadership of the Congress and the Muslim League in British India. A major process of demographic and attitudinal changes set in after partition, which pushed national policy towards the integration of various ethnic communities at the cost of the articulation of their interests. Initially, migration more than any other single factor led to the emergence of a new ethnic hierarchy, which defined asymmetrical relations between the federation and various federating units. A tradition of central domination over the provinces set in, which led to a lingering crisis of federalism in Pakistan.

Successive governments sought to deal with the problem of under-representation of certain communities in higher education and government jobs. Affirmative action policies provided the answer. In contrast to the United States, where such policies provide for positive discrimination in favour of the black community irrespective of their physical location, in Pakistan these policies are region-specific and, at least in Sindh, even sector-specific. Often, their full impact was not realised because people belonging to groups other than the core communities of these areas were able to benefit from the share of these provinces. But, generally, these policies helped some and alienated others according to whether they belonged to the relatively privileged or underprivileged communities in terms of higher education and exposure to civic life.
Finally, the issue of separate electorates was provisionally settled in favour of a joint electorate in 2002, after the boycott of local elections by religious minorities. The Musharraf Government found itself in a quandary after 9 September 2001, because the separate electorates system was considered worldwide to be in violation of the principle of equal citizenship rights of adherents to all religious faiths. Religious minorities claimed that separate electorates had only increased violence against them during the last two decades, essentially because, for electoral purposes, Muslims and non-Muslims operated exclusively along denominational lines, each voting for candidates belonging to their own faith only.

We can conclude by observing that the pluralist character of Pakistan society has not found a satisfactory reflection in the political system or in its policy structure. Various experiences with federal formulas and policies of accommodation of ethnic communities in political and administrative institutions have yet to accrue positive results. The continuing civil–military crisis has hampered the growth of democratic institutions as well as viable policy structures to create inter-ethnic and inter-communal harmony.

References


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This paper evaluates the Sikh experience in multicultural societies, both in India and within the Sikh diaspora in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. In India there are interesting contrasts between the colonial and post-colonial regimes, with the latter’s policies being overtly assimilationist. In the developed liberal democracies, on the other hand, there are some important differences and similarities relating primarily to different state traditions of dealing with minorities and the common concerns of Sikhs with issues of religious identity. Recent history suggests that in these liberal societies the fortunes of the Sikh diaspora are likely to continue to be influenced by “homeland” concerns rather than primarily by host country issues.

Although one of the smallest religious communities in the world, numbering about 20 million, the Sikhs have presented dramatic challenges to various polities. In the Indian state of Punjab, in which Sikhs form a precarious majority, they were depicted as posing a substantial threat to the survival of India as a geographical entity during the 1980s and early 1990s (Singh 2000). In this campaign, which began by seeking a certain degree of autonomy for Punjab, the Sikh diaspora was also embroiled and played a significant role, first, in internationalising the conflict; second, through material and moral support for the campaign; third, by providing financial aid to rehabilitate many victims of state oppression. As a diaspora, the Indian state has viewed overseas Sikhs, or at least some of the community leaders, with suspicion and apprehension and signed extradition treaties with three major states while asking them for stringent measures against “Sikh terrorists” based abroad (Tatla 1999). Apart from the 1984 event, which had immense implications for the community in Punjab as well as in the diaspora, Sikhs in several overseas countries have been making demands of various kinds, which at first glance seem quite unreasonable, above the normal requirements of a liberal society aiming at equality of opportunity and natural justice for all its people regardless of colour and ethnicity. In countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, where Sikhs form a substantial portion of the local population, these demands have centred around the right to wear the turban and the kirpan (a small sheathed sword carried by baptised Sikhs). Such campaigns have led to considerable tensions at local and, in some cases, at national
level, and for some of the individuals involved a stark choice between job and faith, or in cases of perceived discrimination a loss of dignity tied to their religious convictions.

This paper situates the Sikh experience in multicultural societies, both in their home state of Punjab in India and also in the diaspora in the countries where Sikh communities are now well established. Examining the status of Sikhs in India’s multicultural mosaic is especially useful as it allows a comparison of the colonial and post-colonial regimes in their treatment of minorities. The paper also analyses the nature of Sikh ethnic demands in some Western multicultural societies, studying the implications for the governance of multicultural society.

1. Colonial and Post-Colonial Regimes Compared

The British regime brought European ideas and ideology of the state-building process to the colonial setting of India. The state which so emerged was essentially paternalistic, proud to be close to ordinary people with an efficient and virtually incorruptible administration of competent British people, many Oxbridge-educated officers; a regime which respected the social customs and mores of indigenous peoples and tribes through a complex set of legal practices, including a diversity of personal laws. After the formal takeover of India by the British Government in 1858, the process of incorporation of Indians into governmental bodies was undertaken. The limited involvement of Indians was discussed extensively and eventually a “group principle” evolved. Starting with landowners, university bodies and municipalities, minorities of various categories were eventually brought into the state apparatus at various levels, up to the provincial legislative assemblies.

The Morley-Minto constitutional reforms of 1909 deliberated on this theme, further refined in the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919, and finally reservations based on religious categories were incorporated in the Government of India Act of 1935. In recognising religious groups, the British unwittingly also initiated a complex process of shaping diverse religious traditions into high religions. The Indian National Congress and other Hindu nationalists condemned “safeguards” which included both reservations of seats and weightage – extra seats for minorities – as a “divide and rule” policy. During the negotiations preceding the 1935 Act, untouchables were also accepted as a category for reserved seats, but this was retracted due to Gandhi’s threat to fast unto death on this issue (Jalal 1995).

The state’s defence of the group principle was that such recognition, far from contributing to communal strife, recognised existing realities. The imperial authority took pains to ensure the representation of various religious and cultural communities, its administrators harbouring some natural sympathy for minorities and indigenous peoples and tribes. Moreover, for British rulers, a balance between different communities’ claims was an important ethical issue. Of course such policy was seen and condemned by Indian nationalists (mostly Hindus) as divide and rule tactics.
Indian nationalists argued that the religious and caste categories were “promoted” by British censuses and official discourse and law, and that these were products of the Raj’s “fertile imagination”. Nationalists pointed to the partition of India as the ultimate price for such imperial policies. As for the partition, the view of many British administrators was that primary responsibility for it rested on the Congress leadership who were unwilling to accommodate the reasonable demands of the Muslim community. The controversy regarding the partition will continue as long as two states exist, but what is significant is its legacy which partly shaped the kind of state which emerged in post-1947 India.

The colonial state’s “group principle” style of governance can be construed as “cultural rights” in today’s parlance, whereby safeguards to minority religious communities were provided through separate electorates and reserved seats. British India was a loose federal type of state, quite unlike the centralised state adopted by Indian nationalist leaders since 1947. For the Sikhs, the imperial rule proved to be a mixed blessing; far from disintegrating as some English observers had predicted a century earlier they emerged as a community whose population had substantially increased through natural increase and conversion from Punjab’s lower classes. They had clearly demarcated themselves as a separate community with rituals and ceremonies sharply distinguished; their historic shrines were controlled by an elected body (Oberoi 1993).

The post-colonial state was a radical transformation of the colonial state. India adopted an elaborate written Constitution in 1950, after two years of deliberations by a constituent assembly which had two proto-models before them; it could either continue with the group principle or adopt universal individualism. The constituent assembly dominated by Congress and under close supervision by Nehru rejected the group principle of separate electorates, reserved seats and weightage of British India in the Reform Acts of 1909, 1919 and 1935 as divisive and responsible for the partition of the subcontinent. Reserved seats and separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and other minorities were set aside under a unitary constitutional structure with universal franchise. Only for scheduled tribes and castes was a system of weightage of representation and reservation of seats retained. This reservation for scheduled castes and tribes was further augmented by the Mandal Commission in 1980, which recognised some 3,743 Other Backward Castes (OBCs) forming 52 per cent of the total population. The Commission recommended 27 per cent reservations for them, adding to the previous 22.5 per cent, thus such reservations would cover almost half of the population. Legal pluralism in the form of reservations for particular lower castes remains entrenched in India, leading to vigorous and sometimes acrimonious debate about its desirability and its impact on social cohesion.

Despite recommending a uniform civil code embodying general laws applicable to all individuals regardless of religion, the constituent assembly deferred it as a concession towards non-Hindu minorities. The ideal was that Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsees, Jains and others were not only citizens but also members of
religious communities whose different cultures and identities would be secure and honoured through continued existence and viability of their personal law. These minorities could run educational institutions without inviting any discrimination for state funding. India was to build its nation-state through (a) secularism, with freedom of worship and state non-interference in religions; (b) economic welfare – providing substantive citizenship rights; and (c) democratic centralism, providing a structure of power-sharing between subnational regions and the union state. The constitution ruled out the principle of self-determination for regions and nationalities. Instead, it provided for the reorganisation of linguistic regions and recognised fourteen languages as state languages. Hindi was adopted as the official language of India, along with English. As the Telegu-speakers forced a demand to reorganise their state, a States Reorganisation Commission was established in 1953. By the 1980s, the Indian union consisted of twenty-two states, with fifteen official languages.

However, by the 1980s, the Nehruvian secular vision was almost abandoned with the rise of Hindu nationalism as a potent force. The latter’s arrival was forcefully announced to minorities, especially to Muslims, when on 6 December 1992 the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led mobs to demolish the sixteenth-century mosque built by the Mughal Emperor Babur, known as Babri Masjid. With the disintegration of the Congress and the rise of provincial parties on the one hand, and the rise of the BJP from the Hindi belt on the other, the central government became a coalition of several constituents with the BJP as its leading partner. Electoral considerations have caused the BJP to dampen down the flames of Hindu nationalism and temporarily disown its aggressive agenda of “Indianisation” and its earlier anti-minority plank, seeming to embrace difference (Corbridge and Harris 2000). However, attacks on Christian missionaries and Muslims in Gujarat under the BJP provincial government point towards India’s precarious balance of majority–minority relations.

From earlier models of Indian democracy, political scientists have shifted their investigation into how a democratic franchise effectively legitimises the majority’s hegemony, and how minorities are subject to “hegemonic control” including spells of “violent control”. In a democratic set up, especially in post-colonial societies, an ethnic group can effectively “dominate another through its political, economic, and ideological resources and can extract what it requires from the subordinated” (Singh 2000, 47).

The most innovative model of the Indian democratic regime points to its ethnocratic characteristics. The state has privileged the dominant Hindu communities by recruiting state elite in civil and military life, by government disproportionately from the majority ethnic group and by employing cultural attributes and values of the dominant ethnic community for defining its national ideology, history, language, religion and moral values. Thus the Indian national identity is neither ethnically neutral nor multi-ethnic, but derived from the Hindu world serving the language of universalism. Indeed, India’s messy record of ethnic
strife and appalling human rights violations since 1947 raises the question, as a concerned political scientist has put it, how such “disorder” has been managed by the state in several provinces of mixed ethnic populations. Analysts need to go beyond its deceptive “democratic” framework, with the assumption that for some minorities India’s multicultural governance has been a failure (Singh 2000).

Indeed, India’s nation-building project needs to be examined from three vantage points: its historical context, its ideology and consequent differential impact upon various communities, and the rise of Hindu nationalism. This will build a realistic picture of state policies towards Punjab, Kashmir and the North-East provinces. Why, for example, has the minority nationalism of Kashmiris, Punjabis and the peoples of the North-East been subject to hegemonic and later to violent control, using state terror as a strategic weapon? How can Hindu nationalism sit comfortably with Indian nationalism? Wars or aggressive postures towards its neighbours, especially Pakistan, along with certain images of Christians, Muslims and in the post-1984 period, Sikhs, are being projected to sacralise its borders and “territorial integrity” with an appeal to the dominant Hindu population.

Thus the Indian national identity is neither ethnically neutral nor multi-ethnic, but derived from the Hindu world serving the language of universalism. The Sikh popular image fluctuates widely. Among the Rashtriya Sewak Sangh (RSS), Sikhs are being propagated as keshdhari (turbaned) Hindus, as the “sword arm of Hinduism” and as staunch Indian nationalists. The other image is of a prosperous but disloyal community bent on destroying India’s unity with the ultimate ambition of an independent Sikh state in Punjab.

The predicament and dilemma of Sikhs in the post-colonial state of India was brought out by the tragedy of 1984 with the Indian army’s assault on their holiest shrine in Amritsar. This unprecedented “sacrilege” was construed as a slur on a nation’s dignity – almost an act of genocide. The military action, leading to the storming of the Golden Temple and the destruction of the Akal Takht and several sacred buildings, dramatically affected the community’s duality – attachment towards the Indian state on the one hand and membership of an ethno-political community on the other. This critical event has generated a sharp sense of “collective fate”. The subsequent Sikh uprising and the battle between militants and the security forces led to over 15,000 deaths. Punjab was placed under the direct rule of central government, a farcical “democracy” was brought back after elections in February 1992 which were boycotted by all main parties. From 1992 to 1997, a Congress ministry was headed by Beant Singh, who was assassinated in a bomb blast. During this regime, the security forces continued to hunt Sikh militants, pocketing many awards by “successfully” killing them and establishing the “calm of a graveyard” by 1995. Punjab assumed its “normality”, with another provincial assembly election in February 1997, when a coalition of Akali Dal and the BJP was voted to power. In the 2002 elections, a Congress ministry was returned to power, headed by Amrinder Singh – a descendant of a Sikh from the princely state of Patiala.
Overall, the experience of Sikhs in post-colonial India has turned a contented community to disaffection, although the Indian state does not discriminate against any individual or social group on the basis of colour, caste or social class and individual Sikhs have gained prominent positions in the Indian administration. Nevertheless, as a precarious majority in Punjab and a minority community in many other Indian provinces, the community’s power to reproduce its cultural heritage has been severely circumvented by the state. Progressive diminution of powers of provincial assemblies, control of financial resources in New Delhi, the central government’s patronage and interference in educational, linguistic and cultural affairs, has affected minorities’ initiative and control over their cultural, linguistic and religious heritage. The Sikh claim over Punjab as their homeland and their self-definition as a nation-in-the-making has met a hostile reaction, ranging from repudiation through academic exercises to legal battles.

India shows strong similarities with developing countries in Africa and Asia, where territorial statehood and ethnic cultures differ radically. However, the zeal of new nationalists, who are predominantly from the majority community, in creating a “national community” has led to many battles for “homeland” by different nationalities. While some minorities have waged struggles for statehood, others have been forced into submission and integrated. In India’s case, the net result of the state’s institutions, its constitution, its laws and monopolisation of power, has been an empowerment of the dominant ethnic community, the Hindus, in line with the general characteristics of most post-colonial states of Africa and Asia.

Sharing none of their predecessors’ benign tolerance towards ethnic minorities, post-colonial nationalists in the Far East, South Asia and Africa have tried to integrate them, using forceful measures ranging from assimilation to genocide. So it was not surprising when in response to the Akalis’ demand for India to be acknowledged as a multi-national state, the Indian Government’s stand, besides an implicit threat, is quite revealing:

The Indian people do not accept the proposition that India is a multi-national society. The Indian people constitute one nation. India has expressed through her civilization over the ages, her strong underlying unity in the midst of diversity of language, religion, etc. The affirmation of India’s nationhood after a long and historic confrontation with imperialism does not brook any challenge (Government of India 1984, 17).

2. The Sikh Diaspora Experience

Uniquely, the Sikh diaspora is also a product of colonial rule and especially of a “special bond” of Anglo-Sikh relations. The Sikh emigration was characteristically different from that of other Indians. In many southern and eastern provinces of India, agencies were recruiting labourers and shipping them as bonded or indentured labour to overseas British colonies and domains. Punjab was excluded from such agencies’ reach; later the government itself stepped in for some emigration, mainly for security personnel, and finally towards the end of the nineteenth
century a few agencies were allowed Punjab labour, mainly for the construction of East African Railways. The government-assisted emigration consisted of sepoys, who were taken to the Far East, especially to Malaya. After serving their terms, many Sikh soldiers found new pastures by emigrating to Australia or the Pacific states. These immigrants were under the comfortable impression that as British subjects they were free to land anywhere under Her Majesty’s domain. This misunderstanding was partly responsible for the *Komagata Maru* voyage, when some 376 Punjabis were forcibly returned from Vancouver by the Canadian Government.

This voyage coincided with the exodus of a bitter community of men stranded in Pacific states in the second decade of the twentieth century. They returned to overthrow the British Government in India as the only solution to their woes in foreign lands. Known as the Ghadar uprising, at its peak in 1914 its geographical spread was amazingly wide, from California and British Columbia to Manila, Siam, Singapore, Hong Kong and many other places with Sikh immigrant populations. However, the Ghadar movement was brutally crushed by the British Raj in India and harshly dealt with by other states at the insistence of British diplomats. The colonial state’s policies led to curbing the human rights of Indian immigrants in several states.

Prior to 1947, overseas Sikh communities were isolated and small in number. The Sikh diaspora is mainly the product of the post-1947 period, as a result of the more liberal policies of Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. Sikh emigration to the United Kingdom, which became the largest Sikh community of the diaspora, started in the 1950s as a response to British policies of allowing immigration from two of its ex-colonies, the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, one in every ten Sikhs lives away from Punjab, half of them in other Indian provinces and the other half in overseas countries. A majority of overseas Sikhs are concentrated in just three countries: Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. The largest of these populations, over half a million, is in the United Kingdom.

How have the Sikhs adapted to their new homes? The evidence suggests a positive profile in most countries. Coming from a rural background with the recurring uncertainty of their fluctuating farming fortunes at home, coupled with their normative obligations to the family and kinship network, most overseas Sikhs have gained both in economic and social terms. Collectively, they have also secured some space for the reproduction of their cultural and religious heritage in the diaspora; the steadily increasing number of gurdwaras (places of worship) around the globe, the rise of the Bhangra (traditional dance) industry, the flourishing Punjabi literary tradition, all attest to such a cultural landscape. They have also gained some political clout; in Malaysia a few Sikhs were elected to parliament, including a supreme court judge; a Sikh was elected mayor in New Zealand. In British Columbia, a Sikh, Ujjal Dosanjh, was elected premier, with two ministers in the federal government, Gurbax Malhi and Harbance Dhaliwal. In the United
Kingdom, three members of parliament were elected at the last general election in 2002. At local-government level, several Sikhs have become representatives.

3. Ethnic Demands and State Responses

Since their settlement, Sikhs as individuals and as a collective culture-bearing community have sought certain rights from the state and its institutions. Such demands are mainly cultural and religious; some are purely symbolic, such as holding a religious celebration at a council banqueting hall, seeking acknowledgement of a cultural or religious festival such as Baisakhi in the school calendar, or signposting gurdwaras at street corners, etc. Other demands, such as the inclusion of Sikhism in religious education, do mean a possible reallocation of resources and priorities with staffing implications. However, in view of the changing school curriculum in a more globalised world, this is not seen as confrontational by most authorities. A rather unusual demand by overseas Sikhs has been to recognise the right to carry the kirpan and men’s right to wear a turban as part of their dress in professions which require a specific type of clothing. Although these issues have arisen in various contexts in different countries among Sikh bus drivers, soldiers, school pupils, taxi drivers, factory workers, rail guards and others, they have a commonality in terms of the Sikh self-definition of a community with specific religious practices. Another factor that complicated the relationship of diaspora Sikhs with their host societies was the Punjab crisis of 1984. Overseas Sikhs were deeply implicated in providing support to the political autonomy claim launched by the Akali Dal which led to the tragedy of Amritsar. A vigorous campaign for an independent Punjab was sustained by the Sikh diaspora for several years. It also led to a new issue, that of Sikh refugees. As India tried to break Sikh support for the Punjab cause, India’s bilateral relations with different countries were strained.

How have different states or its institutions responded to such demands? In general, most states have made provision for recognition of “difference”, although their actual practices have varied considerably, from easy acceptance to tough resistance and, in some cases, denial.

4. The British Experience

Probably the first Sikh in the United Kingdom was a prince – the heir to the Punjab throne as the British replaced Sikh rule in 1849. Duleep Singh mixed with royalty but turned into a rebel in his later years and died frustrated in Paris. His demands, which were denied by the British authorities, consisted of the enhancement of his pension and his return to Punjab as a ruler. Later Sikh settlers, mainly since the 1960s, had more moderate demands. The earliest such request was by a Sikh in Manchester, G. S. Sagar – a turbaned bus garage worker who applied for the post of conductor in 1959. His request was turned down as a turban violated the service rules regarding headgear. Sagar’s offer to wear a blue turban with a badge was considered by the Transport Committee, who after “considerable research and discus-
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In 1960, Sagar’s campaign took seven years, involving the local gurdwara and Manchester Sikhs, to reverse this decision. This did not help another Sikh not far from Manchester, T. S. Sandhu – a Wolverhampton bus driver who started wearing a turban after a period of sick leave in July 1965. He was sacked for violating the dress code. This led to protest marches, including a threat by a Sikh to immolate himself. This threat embroiled the Indian ambassador, Shanti Sarup Dhawan, who met the Transport Committee on 29 January 1968 and appealed to the Department of Transport, warning of the serious effects of a suicide. Punjab’s Akali leaders were also backing the issue. The Public Transport Authority finally agreed to change the rule – with the chairman saying that the authority had been “forced to have regard to wider implications” (Beetham 1970).

In 1982–83, the case arose of a Sikh student whose application was turned down by a head teacher in Birmingham, knowing that the student would be wearing the turban. This case attracted a legal battle which went as far as the House of Lords and was supported by the Commission for Racial Equality. The task before the Lords was to decide whether the Sikhs constitute an ethnic group under the Race Relations Act of 1976. This led to examining and deliberating upon the Sikh status as a “nationality”. The Lords gave a favourable decision on appeal (1983).

The recognition of Sikhs as an ethnic group entitled them to protection under the 1976 Act, the judgment clearing the way for recognition of the turban as one of the main characteristics of Sikh cultural and religious identity. In 1976, an exemption from the crash helmet rule for Sikh motorcyclists was enacted at the initiative of Sidney Bidwell, member of parliament for Ealing Southall. During the debate, many references were made to Sikh bravery during the two world wars – with no crash helmet rules in the army at the time.

In building and allied industries, protective headgear was made compulsory. However the Employment Act 1989 recognised Sikh construction workers’ right to wear turbans. This was a generous concession to some 40,000 Sikhs employed in the construction industry, most of whom were Ramgarhia Sikhs from East Africa. However, in other places of employment, concern for hygiene and public health has meant that different rules have continued to prevail. Thus in the cases of Kuldip Singh vs British Rail and then of S. S. Dhanjal vs British Steel, the Industrial Tribunal held that a Sikh worker was not entitled to wear a turban as of right if an employer refused to allow this on the ground of public safety and health. In the 1990s, a European Commission directive on the use of Personal Protective Equipment at Work was resisted by turban-wearing Sikhs. Paradoxically, the British Government is unwilling to support the exemption it has given under its own laws (Poulter 1998).

In the late 1980s, Sikhs presented another issue. The involvement of diaspora Sikhs in Punjab affairs earned the displeasure of the Indian Government. Besides some Sikhs fleeing India and seeking asylum, India blamed British Sikhs for supporting terrorism in Punjab. While the British Government recognised the right to peaceful
campaigns by the Sikhs towards humanitarian causes in Punjab, it was under constant pressure from India to stem the tide of “Sikh terrorism” – with Britain and Canada identified as its major centres. An Indo-British extradition treaty was reluctantly passed by parliament and over the period several Sikhs were interned, suspected of “terrorist acts”. One particular case was ultimately resolved by the European Court of Justice in November 1996. Karamjit Singh Chahal, suspected of terrorism, was ordered to be deported by the British Government but was granted stay as the Court of Justice decided that to return a Sikh militant to India would involve the United Kingdom in a breach of the Convention.

This case law was incorporated into British domestic law on 2 October 2000. However, in the aftermath of 11 September, this progressive legislation was buried. Two Sikh organisations, the International Sikh Youth Federation and the Babbar Khalsa, were included by the British Home Secretary David Blunkett in his banned list of twenty-two organisations, the others being Muslim. The new Emergency Terrorism Act introduced in October 2001, along with what Blunkett called the need for a separate extradition measure to ensure “robust and streamlined procedures to remove suspected terrorists from our country”. Despite some objections to the bill from the Lords, especially its religious clauses, it became law. The Home Secretary, almost as a parallel to Tebbitt’s infamous “cricket test”, suggested an English language test as part of British nationality procedures, stressing the integration of what he construed as ethnic minorities leading parallel lives. In December 2001, the Home Office issued guidelines for detecting cases of forced marriage which, it believes, are increasingly taking place in Asian families. It cited the case of a Sikh girl in Chandigarh rescued by the British consular’s timely action two years ago. The media took up the cause quite vigorously.

The historic ties between Sikhs and the British State, together with its current perception, play a considerable part in an ethnic minority’s dealings with the host state and vice versa. The British imperial past has enabled a somewhat more sympathetic resolution of Sikh ethnic demands than has been the case in North America. The imperial past has also been of assistance in another area, which has attracted no comment, that of provision for community languages. Indic languages had a long history in the United Kingdom, going back to nineteenth-century oriental scholarship when a Chair of Sanskrit was established at Oxford University. Thus, without much struggle, syllabuses for Punjabi and Urdu were issued by various boards while Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali and Bengali were already catered for from the era of Indian Civil Service examinations. Contrast this with Canada where multiculturalism as an official policy and the specific acknowledgement of bilingualism (although to be fair, officially this is restricted to English and French) are still making little headway in the adequate provision of examinations in Asian languages.
5. The Canadian Experience

The Canadian state has long experience of dealing with Sikhs, who have been settled in British Columbia since 1900. The Sikhs had a persistent negative image in Canada, and this image still remains despite the elevation of two Sikhs into the federal government in Ottawa and a Sikh becoming premier of British Columbia, with several others elected to local and provincial government assemblies. A particular damaging episode in Canadian–Sikh relations was that of the ship Komagata Maru. Faced with a progressively discriminatory immigration policy, many ex-soldier Sikhs stationed in the Far East, who felt that travel and work in any part of the British empire was a just reward for their unflinching loyalty, dramatically challenged Canadian policy. Gurdit Singh chartered the Komagata Maru in Hong Kong and took 376 passengers on board, sailing to Vancouver in May 1914. In a long-drawn-out battle with the Canadian authorities, the ship was forcibly turned away without allowing the passengers into Canada, leading to anti-British feeling as well many violent incidents within the Sikh community. As a result, until 1947 British Columbia had a small and isolated Sikh community (Johnston, 1979).

Only in the late 1960s did Canada open its gates to immigration from the Indian subcontinent. As the community increased in number, so demands came for the recognition of its cultural and religious symbols, among them the turban, kirpan and provision for Punjabi language teaching. Like the British Sikh bus driver, a Canadian Sikh, Gian Singh Aujala, won a case against Pincurtan Security when he was sacked for changing his appearance. In 1986, an Edmonton boy, Suneel Singh Tuli, was allowed to wear the kirpan at school after a ruling by the Human Rights Commission. Another pupil at Peel School was also involved in a kirpan case that dragged on for two years before he was allowed to wear it. Similarly, Ranjit Singh was discharged from Canada’s armed forces over the helmet issue.

The most controversial case occurred in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). In 1987 a Sikh of Malaysian origin, Baltej Singh Dhillon, joined the RCMP and qualified in 1991. When in March 1990 the Canadian Solicitor General decided that Sikhs could serve in the RCMP wearing turbans, the popular press turned the affair into an emotional “Canadian versus Sikh” issue, with headlines such as “Who Rules Here”? This led to a national debate which became highly emotional, with petitions and several court rulings. Barbara Sparrow, a member of parliament from Calgary, presented a petition signed by 68,582 people to the Canadian Parliament in October 1989, demanding that the RCMP should remain a “Canadian institution” by retaining its uniform. Sikhs were further snubbed by the Royal Canadian Legion, which barred Ram Raghbir Singh of the Liberal Party unless he removed his turban. Further humiliation came as the Legion refused to allow veteran Sikhs to participate in the remembrance parade. The issue was referred to the Human Rights Commission and ex-Mounties challenged the commission’s ruling in court. The controversy raged from January to June 1994. Assembly members and some Jewish organisations rallied round the isolated Sikhs. The Sikh member of parliament, G. S. Malhi, raised the issue in June 1994, calling
the Sikhs’ exclusion “a sad day for Canada”. However, Sikh veterans’ feelings were assuaged by the Queen, who invited them to her “tea party”. After almost five years of struggle, the court ruled in favour of Sikh Mounties’ right to wear the turban. In July 1994 another Sikh, Kuldip Singh, won the right to wear the turban in the Winnipeg Legion.

The RCMP case was quite differently seen by ordinary Canadians, in terms of their perception of a national institution. The concession given to a minority compromised the host society’s institutional identity. A political scientist, Professor Fred Bennett, thought the decision wrong, arguing that ordinary people will perceive a turbaned Sikh as compromising the neutrality of the RCMP (Bennett 1999). He argued that such a change in a state’s national institution needs to be resisted, even at the cost of equal opportunity for a small minority. Moreover, a more serious objection raised by Bennett was that, by recognising the turban, the state is signalling to an ethnic community that a particular brand of its ethnic baggage is the only acceptable one. This seems an obvious point, as any action by the state in such a situation will have consequences for its members’ social and personal identity. By the time this case appeared, the political turmoil of Punjab had also embroiled Canadian Sikhs. They were seen as nuisances who were unwilling to compromise, hence no concessions from the Canadian side should be made to their religious demands.

With this persistent negative image, many genuine Sikh refugees were also harshly dealt with by the Canadian authorities. The tragedy of the 1985 bombing of an Air-India flight from Toronto to New Delhi, which killed everyone on board, was alleged to be the work of certain Sikh terrorists and is still winding its way through the Supreme Court. In the aftermath of 1984, even academic study of Sikhism was involved in controversy as a Chair at British Columbia was delayed due to Indian displeasure. However, with the strength of the Sikh community in Vancouver and metropolitan Toronto, and their generally high concentration in British Columbia and Ontario provinces, the Sikhs are poised to play a significant role in the future of Canada.

6. The American Experience

The Sikh presence on the Pacific Coast parallels that of Canada, stretching back to the early decades of the twentieth century. Pioneer Sikhs faced strict immigration policies, much racial abuse and discrimination from white workers, through such associations as the Asian Exclusion League. However a small community of about 4,000 Sikhs, mainly from the Far East, settled in California between 1900 and 1910. Employed on farms, lumber factories and the Pacific Railways, these men were unable to bring their families owing to the harsh immigration laws. Their deep sense of humiliation transformed their grievances into a revolutionary movement. The Ghadar Party, led by Hindu and Bengali intellectual exiles, was set up in 1913. With headquarters in San Francisco, they brought out the weekly paper Ghadar, calling for rebellion. Within a year they had decided to return en masse to wage
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war on British rule in India. The remaining community of Sikhs was diminished and many men married Mexican women, leading to a Sikh–Catholic culture (Leonard 1994).

With the liberalisation of immigration policies in the 1960s, the strength of Sikhs grew, both in traditional farming in California as well as fresh settlements in metropolitan areas. Most new Sikh immigrants were of a different class; educated and resourceful; doctors and engineers jostled with farmers. During the crisis of 1984 many Sikhs in the United States offered support to the Khalistan (Sikh homeland) campaign and a lobby was established in Washington, D.C. led by G. S. Aulakh. By the 1990s, Chairs in Sikh Studies were established at Michigan, Colombia, Santa Barbara and Wisconsin universities. In a separate development, Yogi Harbhajan was able to establish a Sikh Yoga Centre, converting a few thousand Americans to Sikhism. However, the same issues of turbans and *kirpans* arose and led individual Sikhs into confrontation with employers or state institutions. A case of a Sikh in the US army and another as a court official was resolved through the courts. A much discussed case arose in Livingston, California, where there were about a hundred Sikh children in state schools. As ten of these children were baptised they started wearing the *kirpan* to their classes. The school authorities excluded one family’s children, Rajinder Singh Chima, Sukhjinder Kaur Chima and Jaspreet Singh Chima, from the school in January 1994 for wearing the *kirpan*. The case led to the California Senate amending the law to allow Sikh students to wear a *kirpan* of appropriate size. As the state governor vetoed the bill, the Livingston Union School District Trustees sought advice to reconsider its ban in line with other school districts in the Bay Area and parts of California, allowing *kirpans* with blunted blades to be worn underneath clothing.

The 11th of September has had serious repercussions for Sikhs in the United States. Soon afterwards a Sikh was killed in Texas, obviously mistaken for an Afghani. Despite the appeals of Amnesty International and some Congress senators, Sikhs were routinely attacked. Turbaned Sikhs, especially those wearing a *kirpan*, were harassed at airports – subjected to the humiliating and time-consuming experience of taking off a turban in full view of other passengers. According to one sympathetic observer, it was in the Sikhs’ own interest not to display their *kirpans* and turbans as Americans are now in a “different” mood. In reaction, a Sikh Media Group was formed to educate the American public about Sikhism, suggesting guidance to authorities regarding the *kirpan* and the turban.

To sum up, Sikhs in overseas situations generally find themselves much more comfortable than in the homes they left behind. Older migrants, who witnessed the partition of Punjab, the carnage and the unsettled conditions, are unlikely to see those conditions repeated in Vancouver, London or Sacramento and have pragmatically tolerated racial abuse as nothing more than avoidable skirmishes. They have fought more serious cases of racial discrimination at the workplace through various campaigns and representation to legal institutions. The younger generation, who have only seen their homeland through visits or just read about it,
find the diaspora situation congenial in its material security, its space for their skills and ambitions, including the freedom to examine their roots and, if they wish, to carve out their own brand of identity, pure, hybridised or otherwise.

Thanks to some spectacular resolutions of Sikh ethnic demands, various classes of Sikh, from *Khalsa* (orthodox) to ordinary clean-shaven types, enjoy more or less equal access to public services. Cases of discrimination on the basis of dress of course keep surfacing in new industries or institutions and need to go before employment tribunals, human rights boards and other state institutions. With the Sikh community having considerable strength in three countries, their presence is bound to have more political weight. We have already seen a Sikh premier of British Columbia and a Sikh minister in the Canadian Federal Government. Similar developments are probable in several other countries.

Host states are not entirely free in dealing with ethnic minorities, especially those engaged in intra-state diplomacy or those in conflict with the host state. Matters of trade and political ideals or associations take priority. For overseas Sikhs, events in Punjab and India will continue to affect them as much, if not more than, events in their midst. For Sikhs, as one of the smaller ethnic groups, developments affecting other ethnic groups and wider developments among host states are also important factors. An ethnic group such as the Sikhs does not have an increasing list of demands for a liberal multicultural society that is already committed to equal opportunity in public places: it has quite a limited agenda in terms of cultural demands, seeking public respect and recognition of its difference, that also in a very restricted sense.

7. Conclusion

State policies have played a crucial role in transforming the fortunes of the Sikhs. While the colonial state affected many aspects of Sikh identity and succeeded in concentrating them in a compact area of the Indian Punjab, the post-colonial state, by ordering an army assault on the community’s most sacred shrine in 1984, placed it in a tragic dilemma about its future with an anguished cry for independence.

While India’s ethnic configuration has given the Sikhs some respite, one has to question how long this will endure. The opportunistic electoral alliance of the Akalis with the BJP may hold. But the crunch will come when the BJP emerges as the single largest party capable of governing the country. Although southern states are still impenetrable to BJP ideology, various Hinduisms are likely to merge into one grand pan-Hindu identity. The cultural space offered for the Sikhs to act as “militant Hindus with turbans” then might prove to be one way out of the Sikh dilemma in India.

In the meantime, given the community’s prosperity, it is possible, indeed desirable, to cultivate an elite capable of judging, protecting and advocating the community’s common interests in more sombre terms and through less emotional appeals. With
any luck, Punjab might develop a new type of Sikh leadership that could engage the community in more constructive projects, build community institutions, and draw a fine line between community interests and the reckless pursuit of political power. As the community modernises, its mobilisation along “religious” issues will also become far less attractive, and wild accusations of discrimination by the Indian state will be fully discussed, verified and available means fully employed before they lead to confrontation. Indeed there is much more at stake in terms of forging friendship and unity with Punjabis across the border (in Pakistan) and organising voices against nuclear armament by the two states, with the real danger of Punjab becoming the battleground.

The Sikh diaspora is also integrally tied to the question of homeland. It is difficult to foresee if overseas Sikhs can remain aloof from the situation of Sikhs in India. This factor will keep affecting them whether they like it or not. Ultimately it seems fair to observe, if the lessons of the Sikhs’ short history are any guide, it is interstate manoeuvres and decisions from above that will determine the community’s status and the fate of its members more than any development within the community. Perhaps an agreement to wear a flexible hard hat over the turban could eventually be made with employers in a range of industries. The orthodox Sikhs at Amritsar should also acknowledge that the clean-shaven Sikhs of the diaspora are going to be a permanent, if not increasing, segment of the community. Although it is prudent to rank them somewhat lower than baptised Sikhs at this stage, to condemn them as “fallen” or “apostates” would harm the future interests of the community.

The transformation of Sikh cultural or customary practices into religious symbols in the Western context is one outcome. The space provided by states in terms of religious freedom and the sensitivity shown to religious groups smack of tokenism, but have nevertheless provided a comfortable arena for the Sikh religious heritage and acknowledgement of their corporate identity. As the Sikh diaspora builds new economic, social and political linkages with Punjab and India, this exchange is likely to become more sophisticated. The recently established Chairs of Sikh Studies in North American universities have already contributed to Sikh theology and further helped to open up its current introspective, “rigid” and ritualistic outlook towards more inclusive and corporate models. At the dawn of the new millennium, the Sikhs in Punjab, as in the diaspora, are better equipped to safeguard and reproduce what they value in their cultural and religious heritage. As a minority both in India and abroad, however, the Sikhs will continue to live with their uncertain status and fear the occasional tremor from various states’ policies and intentions.
References


About the Author