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Counting, and India's fortuitous multiculturalism**

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ABSTRACT

Following independence, the Indian state, with fresh memories of the communal violence that marked the partition of the subcontinent, committed itself to an unprecedented experiment of actualising the ideal of multiculturalism as a cornerstone of the nation and the most important basis of its legitimacy. The legitimacy of the state structure was based on the twin principle of individual rights and protection of minorities. This entailed a constitutional design committed to denying hegemony to any religion. Subsequently, as the message of democracy spread, this gave rise to many new problematic issues. Ethnic and national minorities challenged the state and its capacity to accommodate conflicting identities by demanding neutrality as well as genuine recognition and active support for their culture and religion. The essay examines this contested character of India's constitutionally guaranteed multiculturalism on the basis of the history of state formation, the freedom movement, the uncertainty of the ultimate nature of divinity in Hinduism, and thereby, illustrates how post-colonial India was able to devise a series of concrete institutions and policies in order to work her way towards new conceptions of the rights and status of minorities. Thus, the specific case of India's theoretically *fuzzy* multiculturalism and the abstract issue of accommodation are juxtaposed to some existing measures of the Constitution of India as well as some survey data of about ten thousand men and women shortly after the parliamentary elections of 1996. Drawing on aspects of India's political culture and the debate on Hindu theology, the essay suggests that contrary to the spectre of the rise of Hindu 'fundamentalism', India presents a relatively successful case of the growth of a multicultural nation, ensconced within of a post-colonial, democratic state.

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INTRODUCTION

In *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, the prescient and paradigmatic study of the role of politics in the articulation and encapsulation of identity within the framework of the post-colonial state, Paul Brass (1974) traced the origin of ethnic movements to elite entrepreneurship. This argument, subsequently developed as the instrumental approach in his *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (1991), distinguished itself from the primordial view with the assertion that in the world of ethnic politics there are no givens: ethnic politics is made, not born. While Brass assiduously distinguishes himself from the rational choice approach (1991:16), and argues instead in favour of the superiority of an instrumental approach¹ that recognises the role of culture as a constraint on utility maximisation, the issue still remains why in some situations people consider it worth their while to kill or die for what many others in similar situations see as merely symbolic. While on the whole transactional politics has held the ground and the Indian state has gone from strength to strength in terms of its ability to accommodate the cultural demands of challenging regional, local and 'minority' leaders, every now and then, an Amritsar in 1984 or an Ayodhya in 1992, alert us to the theoretical puzzle that underpins instrumental theory.

Instead of concentrating on the theoretical underpinnings of the politics of ethnicity² this essay aims at presenting an empirical case for India as a multicultural state, one where the fortuitous presence of pre-independent liberal institutions and their post-independence broadening and deepening as a consequence of assertive political transaction have produced a thriving multicultural society. However, as the essay argues on the basis of evidence from Indological sources, some idiosyncratic features specific to Hinduism have facilitated the establishment of a multicultural society in India. It concludes with a restatement of the critical role of the perception of empowerment on the part of competing communities as a key to multiculturalism.

¹ Brass (1991:10) says that his arguments 'fall short of the most extreme instrumentalist views associated with some proponents of rational choice theory, who transform all choices, including cultural ones, into economic choices. My aim is in no way to disregard or discard the cultural forms, values and practices of distinctive ethnic groups as unimportant. On the contrary, my purpose is to show that political and economic elites who make use of ethnic group attributes are constrained by the beliefs and values which exist within the group and which limit the kinds of appeals which can be made'. While the reasoning that underpins rational choice theory suggests expected utility maximisation as the main decision making norm, there is no attempt to reduce all utility to the economic. Rationality consists of the ordering of preferences and not preferences per se. As such, there is no contradiction between the position that Brass attributes to himself and that of RCT. For further clarification of the application of rational choice theory with regard to the cultural and historical context in which the individual is placed, see Subrata K. Mitra, *Culture and Rationality* (1999).

² Interested readers may wish to refer to Subrata K. Mitra, 'The Rational Politics of Cultural Nationalism' (1995) and Subrata K. Mitra, 'What is Happening to the Political Science of Ethnic Conflict?' (1996).

Rather than describing India as a multi-national or multi-ethnic state (as in Brass 1974), the essay prefers the concept of multiculturalism. Both nation and ethnicity, despite declarations of instrumentalists to the contrary, give the impression of permanent structures where as culture retains its fluidity with comparative ease. However, multiculturalism, whose normative ideal requires the active coexistence of different cultures (as different from their mere tolerance, let alone the policy of benign neglect), as we shall see later in this essay, in practice if not in abstract theory, it lacks empirical precision. Drawing both on individual rights and group rights, multiculturalism in practice can lead to a veritable explosion of the public sphere of the state, with every shade of identity demanding equal representation. While in theory it is the veritable holy grail of contemporary liberalism, its practical implications are the nemesis of liberalism at the philosophical level. The liberal conviction that deep cultural and religious differences can be solved through the institutional mechanisms of the state is questioned by such events as the violence that accompanied the publication of the Satanic Verses in Great Britain, the Islamic head scarf in French state schools, the naturalisation of Turks in Germany or the white flight from the inner city in the USA. That such issues are accommodated within the legal and political processes of the stable liberal democracies rather than necessarily spilling over to bloody riots or terrorism of the kind one witnesses in Eastern Europe or Northern Ireland, has more to do with the superior force at the command of the state and the dominant social groups than with the superior arguments at the disposal of either. Seen through the eyes of the aggrieved parties in the above disputes, the legitimacy of the liberal state remains essentially contested.

If the Indian Republic at fifty is high on the agenda of the multiculturalist then it is not because of her poverty and mass illiteracy but in spite of them. India attracts attention because of the daring with which the post-colonial state adopted the values of multiculturalism as its salient goals, and its occasional and visible failure, thanks again to the transparency of her legal and political process, to live up to the same objectives. What can the Indian state, traumatised by its failure to protect the Babri mosque of Ayodhya from destruction by a mob of Hindu fanatics on the fateful day of December 6, 1992 and subsequently, caught between the double bind of majoritarian democracy and the absence of a tradition of the toleration of difference³ which has tempered the potential excesses of majority rule in the west, offer to the world-wide debate on multiculturalism, either by the way of indigenous concepts or cross-cultural theory? To put it bluntly, judging from the opinions and actions of her people with regard to issues that define the communal fault lines of her society, does the talk of a multicultural nation in India *make sense*?⁴

³ Embree (1990:25) questions the image of Hindu society as one based on absorption, synthesis and toleration of differences and attributes the endurance of Indian society in terms of its ability to 'encapsulate' other cultures which makes it 'possible for many civilizations to live side by side'. But then, he comments wryly, 'encapsulation is neither toleration, absorption, nor synthesis'.

⁴ The issue is raised by India's vocal left as well as by students of Indian religion, see (Vanaik: 1997) for the former. Heinrich von Stietencron articulates the misgivings of many

In raising the question in the specific context of India, this essay also joins the general debate on the capacity of the liberal state and its institutions to accommodate the competing demands of theological and cultural differences and collective historical memories of oppression. The general debate in itself is vast. It is only briefly alluded to in this essay for the purpose of setting the terms of analysis. Its main thrust is on the empirical forms that the issue of multiculturalism, and secularism which is used as its surrogate concept in Indian political discourse, have taken from the early years following independence.

Drawing on aspects of India's political culture and the debate on Hindu theology, the essay suggests that contrary to the spectre of the rise of Hindu 'fundamentalism', India presents a relatively successful case of the growth of a multicultural nation, ensconced within of a post-colonial, democratic state. The essay examines this argument on the basis of the history of state formation, the freedom movement, the uncertainty of the ultimate nature of divinity in Hinduism. The abstract issue of accommodation is juxtaposed to some concrete measures of the Constitution of India as well as some survey data⁵ with regard to four salient issues from contemporary Indian politics which are significant for the debate on multiculturalism in India.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE DEBATE

How does a society segmented on the basis of tribe, caste, religion, language and a number of other considerations institutionalise itself into a multicultural state? What institutions or policies will promote this objective in the context of a post-colonial state? In the wake of the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party to power in the central government at the head of a coalition, and its recent attempts to 'Indianise' education, few questions polarise Indians as much as the nature of the Indian nation and its relationship to the post-colonial state. Unlike economic development which became the main issue of public debate immediately after the achievement of independence, the issue of nationhood in post-colonial India came into the mainstream of national politics only in the 1980s. Compared to her South Asian neighbours India is very much a case apart in terms of the comparative lateness of

German Indologists: 'The ideology of nationalism, imported from Europe and now instrumentalised for the purpose of creating a 'national' Hindu religion to the detriment of 'minorities', seems to be bringing about a change in the much praised Hindu religious tolerance' (1997: 28). The cultural policies of the central government have sparked a national debate, see (Singh: 1998).

⁵ The attitudinal data on legitimacy and nation-formation, based on a survey of a representative sample of about ten thousand men and women shortly after the parliamentary elections of 1996, presented in the last section of the essay should provide further insights into the process that provides a bridge between the post-colonial state and the people. These empirical observations question the pessimistic prognosis of some historians who have declared such a mission of bridge building between the post-colonial present and the pre-colonial past through the mediation of the institutions of the modern state as a doomed project. The data were collected by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, in May-June 1996 shortly after the parliamentary election on the basis of face-to-face interviews with a sample of ten thousand men and women representing the Indian electorate.

the public debate on nationhood. Unlike in neighbouring Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, right from the outset the Constitution of India did not go far enough in defining the core beliefs of the nation.⁶ Though, as mentioned before, the supreme law of the land spoke *both* of the rights of individuals and primordial groups but provided no consistent guide lines as to why the state should support one or the other in a specific context.⁷ However, five decades of full, free and uninhibited competitive politics following independence has succeeded in putting the ambiguity implicit in this fuzzy definition of multiculturalism to test, forcing an alternative in the form of a nation based on *Hindutva*.⁸ That alternative is the source of great anxiety to the 'secularists' who see in such arguments a dangerous portent towards the rise of Hindu 'fascism'. But, this secularist argument on its own does not advance a theory of a multicultural state in India. For, besides mechanically repeating that India is a secular state and should remain so, the secularist lobby offers no satisfactory theory of the nature of the Indian nation and its relation to India's culture and religions.

The relevance and urgency of the issue for contemporary India can hardly be over emphasised. From the nineteen eighties Indian politics has polarised dangerously on the issue of religion and politics. Fuzzy concepts like 'unity in diversity' as the cultural basis of a tolerant pluralism in India, or the *Congress System*, based on consensus and accommodation are no longer seen as acceptable and sufficient guarantees of India's national unity and integrity as a state.⁹ At heart of the issue today is: what kind of nation underpins the state in India, and, what resources do the post-colonial state and society in India possess in order to sustain multicultural nationhood in India?

The essay questions the image of contemporary India as a society of resurgent Hinduism that threatens liberal institutions. Though, five decades after the end of colonial rule and the experience of a functioning democracy, Indians do not any longer consider their perception in the west to be a determining influence in their perception of themselves nor of their political choices. In a comparative essay where larger social processes are analysed in terms of the choices of individuals and groups that constitute those societies, we need to look briefly at the changing perception of India and Indians in the west over the past centuries in order to be able to question these 'orientalist' constructions. Vasco da Gama's discovery of the

⁶ The basic values of the Constitution are defined in the Preamble. The word 'secular' was added subsequent to the formation of the Constitution, through an amendment in 1976.

⁷ Thus, while the rights of the individual to equality were to be seen as a fundamental value, milk cattle were to be protected in the interest of the agrarian economy and the tradition of devadasis to be suppressed for the sake of morality and religious minorities were to be provided for with regard to their separate educational establishments.

⁸ This is defined as the common denominator of Indian culture by its proponents who insist on adherence to its values as the basis of citizenship in India. The Indian Supreme Court has accepted *Hindutva* as a manifestation of Indian culture rather than being synonymous with the Hindu religion.

⁹ Of the two mainstays of the fuzzy Indian nationalism, 'unity in diversity', the main ideological device, lies in the rubble of the Babri mosque and the second, the 'Congress System', which served as its institutional base, after successive electoral defeats, now firmly belongs to Indian history.

direct sea route to India five centuries ago is a useful vantage point from where to ask this question. This was a crucial turning point in world history which introduced a major discontinuity in the political historiography of this much visited and often 'discovered' land. Until then, each external visitation to India - Greek, Chinese, Arab or Central Asian - was part of a larger project, ranging between plunder and conversion to trade, pilgrimage and sometimes, simple intellectual curiosity. But Vasco da Gama's visit was qualitatively different, for it coincided with the rise of European imperialism in terms of historical conjuncture. As such, this last visit also drew a line beyond which India would be constructed chiefly by Europeans and for Europeans, often with the help of Indian clerks, sepoys, academics and moralists - working in the interest of the Empire.¹⁰

Historically, however, though the process of imperial dominance of India started with the Portuguese, they were themselves beaten at the imperial game by others destined to take the project of European domination to its crowning glory. But they certainly contributed to the laying of its foundation by constructing Indian society in terms of locally based and hierarchically related *castas* as a categorical opposite of the European ideal of moral equality and Christian brotherhood.¹¹ Later theorists refined these categories and invented the broader principles that wove these *castas* together as cognate groups and produced the grand edifice of the eternal, organic, spiritual and complex India. The next steps in that process of demonising India, and to a lesser degree, Pakistan, is to describe these populations, drunk on the power of majoritarian democracy, as the harbingers of the *Clash of Civilizations*¹², and now, in the wake of the nuclear tests of May 1998 in South Asia, of the *Hindu bomb* and its Muslim counterpart in Pakistan. As the essay argues below, post-colonial India, conscious of the political reality behind the orientalist construction of India, devised a series of institutions and policies in order to work her way towards liberal multiculturalism.

THE THEORETICAL FRAME OF THE INQUIRY: FUZZY MULTICULTURALISM AND THE POST-COLONIAL STATE

The nascent Indian state, with fresh memories of the Hindu-Muslim riots that marked independence and the partition of India, attempted to find an institutional solution for the problem of the accommodation of religious differences within the institutions of the modern state through the twin concepts of *sarva dharma*

¹⁰ See Sullivan (1993). Looking back, one marvels at the sheer power of the imperial rulers to persuade everybody concerned including themselves of the legitimacy of their presence on alien soil. Indeed, at its height, the imperial domination of India was so powerful that even the nationalist movement would be at its wit's end in distancing itself from the ideological objectives of the Empire, lacking the ontological and epistemological tools with which to rediscover the links with a largely forgotten past.

¹¹ An enduring part of this bedrock is caste, a major tool in the armoury of the orientalist. In describing Indian society as that of *castas*, the Portuguese had in mind lumps of internally cohesive but externally fragmented social groups, rather like types of grapes. For details see Hust (1996: 20).

¹² The reference here is to the book under the same title by Samuel P. Huntington (1996).

samabhava (equal attitudes towards all religions) and *dharma nirapekshata* (religious neutrality). Secondly, it made every effort to acknowledge the salience of individual rights to freedom of religion and equality before the law, and group rights to cultural and religious practices in its charter of fundamental rights. The post-colonial state thus made attempts to accommodate both the fact of the existence of several religions which played a salient role in the social life of her citizens and to assuage the apprehension of non-Hindus of a possible Hindu majoritarian dominance. This created what can be termed a *fuzzy* notion of multiculturalism, to distinguish it from radical multiculturalism which required the state to explicitly acknowledge the existence of plural identities in the public sphere, and from various forms of mono-culturalism which promotes the culture of one social group to the detriment of others by putting its language, religion and status to a hegemonic position within the structure of law and administration.

The post-colonial state in India considered its solution of fuzzy multiculturalism to be an optimal solution for the political conditions that surrounded its inception. The founding fathers of the Constitution of India considered the multicultural ideal crucial to the success of a liberal democratic regime in India. While some like Nehru saw in this concept a magic formula for culturally different and politically conscious groups to share a common space as fellow citizens, the attitude of other influential leaders like Patel and Hindu nationalist parties like the Bharatiya Jan Sangh ranged between scepticism and hostility with regard to fuzzy multiculturalism. But, in the euphoria of independence and the institutionalisation of the fuzzy view of multiculturalism in the concept of 'secularism' which became the ruling ideology of India under the rule of the Congress party, the key questions regarding the lack of logical rigour and empirical validity of the very concept of multiculturalism and its applicability to India were rarely raised. The prognosis of D E Smith, that clarity would emerge out of the confusion surrounding the ambiguities of secularism effectively conveys the general ethos of the period:

There is a good chance that twenty years from now, many of India's constitutional anomalies regarding the secular state will have disappeared. It is reasonable to expect that by that time there will be a uniform civil code and that Hindu and Muslim law, as such, will have ceased to exist. Legislation having already dealt with the most serious abuses in Hindu religion there will be little need for further interference by the state (1963: 14).

In retrospect, however, underneath the superficial consensus on the meaning and applicability of the concept of 'secularism' to Indian conditions, controversy raged from the outset. The inconclusive nature of the 'cow slaughter' issue during the 1950s, the incomplete character of the project of a unified personal law for India,¹³ the 'text book' controversy of the first Janata Party governments and the celebrated Ram Janambhoomi issue from the nineteen eighties which ultimately led to the

¹³ See Mitra and Fischer, forthcoming.

violent clash of Ayodhya all bear testimony to this deeply embedded problem (Mitra 1991).¹⁴ At issue is the inconclusive nature of the solution to the problem of incorporating multiple religious identities within the structure of the state. While short term calculations of political opportunists certainly play a role in giving particular salience and virulence to each of these issues, their consistent appearance in time and space point towards factors that go beyond the exigencies of everyday politics. Secularists like Nehru sought to reduce the salience of this problem on the national political agenda by making a non-issue out of it, or by promoting the spread of 'rational thinking' through science and technology and social reform which they fondly hoped would make these traditionalist opposition to modernity disappear. But, looking back to the fifties and considering from that vantage point all that has happened since in this specific area, one is inescapably driven to the conclusion that in terms of its political significance and philosophical basis, the issue multiculturalism rightfully belongs to the agenda of the high politics of values and institutions of the post-colonial state in India.

Why did the Founding Fathers of the Constitution adopt the fuzzy view of multiculturalism as the founding stone of the project of nation building? This section, which inquires into this issue first raises the question of state-society relations which lies at the core of the problem of legitimacy in post-colonial societies.¹⁵ Three questions are encapsulated within this complex theme: how does the state emerge in a post-colonial context; which specific function the nation is expected to perform within this specific process of state formation and, finally, what is the likelihood that the resultant nation would be multicultural in the end? Since the specific case of India is discussed in the context of the general theory of multiculturalism, it is important here to refer briefly to the conceptual issues involved.

MULTICULTURALISM AND THE POST-COLONIAL STATE

Multiculturalism, a hallmark of contemporary political correctness, often remains in practice more a statement of faith in western liberal societies than a theoretical tool with which to analyse social and economic policy at home and abroad. There are, in this respect, strong parallels in the nature of the debate on multiculturalism in India and western liberal democracies. In India, as in stable democracies, the proffered solutions that advocates of multiculturalism suggest are federalism, consociationalism and legislation that cater to the needs of minorities. The stance taken by the advocates of these solutions vary greatly as well. The advocates of radical multiculturalism argue in favour of the contentious public assertion of difference where as those on the liberal side of the spectrum opt for a less

¹⁴ For a discussion of the debate surrounding cow slaughter and the Hindu Code Bill, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, 'Cultural Policy, the Textbook Controversy and Indian Identity' (1982); for the textbook controversy Arun Shourie, *Indian Controversies: Essays on Religion in Politics* (1993) and K.R. Malkani, *The Politics of Ayodhya and Hindu-Muslim Relations* (1993) for the conflict surrounding the birthplace of Rama and its implications for Indian politics.

¹⁵ Some arguments that follow are taken from Subrata K. Mitra (1991b).

conflictual approach. However, all those in favour of a multicultural nation ask for a solution which brings different groups together within a larger structure of synergy rather than merely assimilating all those that are considered marginal, relative to a politically constructed core. But the theoretical complexities that underpin the concept of the multicultural nation are often not stated in explicit terms. One of these complexities is the relationship between the legitimacy of the state and its capacity to accommodate conflicting identities.

The state is, above all, a political organisation possessing the four main characteristics of sovereignty, government, territory and a population. But over and above these formal characteristics is the ability of this organisation more than any other political body in society to have the final control over the lives of its citizens. It is only the state that has the ultimate right over life. Its monopoly of legitimate violence entitles the state to execute a citizen guilty of the offence of treason, or to order its citizens to war and risk death. But, even if these measures appear extreme, a state properly speaking needs to be able to do more than that.¹⁶ The modern nation-state needs to have control over the political and the moral instruments with which to provide a comprehensive theory of legitimacy. For the protagonists of this view of the state, chiefly associated with Tilly's (1975) *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (though his subsequent work (1985) takes a less sanguine view of the state), the nation is the chief ally of the state in this project of generating legitimacy through an ideological justification of state control. For a variety of reasons, this solution was not available to the post-colonial state in India.

As a post-colonial state, India after independence was more a state-nation than a nation-state, for the institutions of state, very much a part of the British legacy, were already in place when the colonial rulers left, having transferred power to an English speaking Indian elite. The nation, as a conscious political creation was absent from the political discourse of the day. The nation was of course *implicitly* present in the anti-colonial movements that preceded independence but it was, of necessity, a thin political construction, not possessing the deep cultural and moral unity that characterised the rise of nations in the west. The post-colonial state thus needed to build a nation which would then be the repository of the ultimate allegiance of the citizens. But which of the many nations that underpinned the freedom movement was to be chosen as the core of the state-nation? Faced with this question, the Fathers of the Indian Constitution did what the leaders of the

¹⁶ The state needs to be able to expect its citizens to *volunteer* to lay down their lives in its defence. The modern state expects to be able to do this, even more than Hobbes's Leviathan who could order citizens to war but not to commit suicide. When the authority of the Hobbesian sovereign has shrunk to the level where it can no longer guarantee internal security or is no longer able to provide incontrovertible evidence that it can protect its citizens from shameful defeat and destruction from outside, the citizen is morally free to explore other possibilities to get the protection the legal state can no longer guarantee. The modern state is able to get past this narrow, mechanical and instrumental construction of the state by making its presence appear as part of the larger project of the nation. The nation, representing the cultural and moral organisation of the will that also embodies the wills of its children, expects this ultimate sacrifice of its members when the need for it arises.

Freedom Movement before them had done. They remained deliberately vague in their formulation of the core values of the Indian nation.

As a post-colonial state that has chosen the democratic path to legitimacy, India was confronted with a further problem. Post-colonial states like Pakistan started with a declared superiority of an official religion but tolerance for other religions. In states like Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, and Bangladesh, a state in its own right since the secession of East Pakistan in 1971, where the superiority of a specific religion did not exist at the outset, subsequent developments established the moral superiority of the cultural values of the majority.¹⁷ In the case of India, this process of the search for the identification of the core values of the state was effectuated by a constitutional provision of equality of all faiths and the commitment of the post-independence regime to this principle. The attempt even to establish Hindi in Devanagari script as the national language quickly became an open invitation to the different social and cultural groups of India to assert their difference as the opening gambit in the oncoming negotiation of their status within the new Republic. The Congress Party, based on a political culture of consensus and accommodation, acquiesced in these developments and adapted itself to this process for the purpose of winning elections. As such, the post-colonial state in India abandoned, at least for the time being, the path taken by nineteenth century nation states to pulverise cultural differences in the greater cause of the nation. Ironically, just as Nehru's regime and the Congress party as its main ruling instrument were resisting the attempts to impose Hindi as the national language but giving in cultural symbols like language as the basis of regional state formation, the less secure regimes in Pakistan and Ceylon were moving in the direction of elevating the status, respectively, of Islam and the Urdu language, and, Buddhism and Sinhalese on reluctant minorities, respectively, in East Bengal and the Northern Sri Lanka.

Nehru anticipated some of the problems of nationhood in his inaugural speech to the newly independent country. Nehru's speech, the *Tryst with Destiny*, delivered in his capacity as the recently anointed Prime Minister, still appears fifty years into time as both a masterpiece of rhetoric and prescient:

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when *the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance*. It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity (cited in Rushdie/West 1997: 1-2, emphasis added).

¹⁷ Examples are Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, where post-independence changes like the democratic induction of the 'Sinhala only' policy in Sri Lanka and the 1975 coup in Bangladesh which removed secularism from the core values of the constitution, show this process in action.

At that fateful moment, Nehru, as the leader of the new Republic, committed the state to an unprecedented experiment of actualising the value of multiculturalism as the cornerstone of the nation and the most important basis of her legitimacy, without quite anticipating the problems it was to generate at a later stage.

MULTICULTURALISM AS AN ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPT

The enormity of the political implications of Nehru's rhetoric become clear once we look closely at the two meanings of culture suggested by Said in the context and conjuncture that frame Nehru's statement. Said defines the two functions of culture in terms of the definition of the *self*, the *other* and the relationship between the two. Culture in this sense implies all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms and that often exist only in aesthetic forms. With regard to the definition of the *self* and its relationship with the *other*, one can envisage three possibilities. First, the other is better; and as such, should be seen as superior to the self. A second possibility is that the *self* is better than the *other*, which is potentially capable of improvement; s/he should be encouraged to learn from self. But beyond this relationship of knowledge and power is the possibility of the recognition of the moral equality of cultures such that the *self* and the *other* could learn from one another as equals.¹⁸

The likelihood of a multicultural nation is thus contingent on the definitions and perceptions of the self and the other, not as uniform, or substitutable cogs in the gigantic machine of the nation-state but as different but related through the state and the nation, both of which are located at a higher level where citizens actualise their mutually rewarding relation. This ideal, powerfully articulated by Martin Heidegger¹⁹, is not often met with in practice. Not surprisingly, inter-cultural relations are often fraught with uncertainty, injecting a corresponding degree of uncertainty of a nation state sustaining itself through a concept of

¹⁸Said says 'culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought'. 'In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state, this differentiates 'us' from 'them', almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent 'returns' to culture and tradition. These returns accompany rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behaviour that are opposed to the permissiveness associated with such relatively liberal philosophies as multiculturalism and hybridity. In the formerly colonised world, these 'returns' have produced varieties of religious and nationalist fundamentalism' (1994: XIII).

¹⁹Arvind Sharma (1998: 139) cites from Heidegger to make the point. 'Poetry and thinking meet each other in one and the same only when, and only as long as, they remain distinctly in the distinctness of their nature. The *same* never coincides with the *equal*, not even in the empty indifferent oneness of what is merely identical. The equal or identical always moves toward the absence of difference, so that everything may be reduced to a common denominator. The same, by contrast, is the belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of the difference. We can only say 'the same' if we think difference. It is in the carrying out and settling of differences that the gathering nature of sameness comes to light. The same banishes all zeal always to level what is different into the equal or identical. The same gathers what is distinct into an original being-at-one. The equal, on the contrary, disperses them into the dull unity of mere uniformity' (Heidegger, 1971: 218-219).

multiculturalism. As Parekh reminds us 'the terms 'multicultural' and 'multiculturalism' have no clear or fixed meaning, often in practice, sliding from the descriptive to the normative' (Parekh 1991).

The version of multiculturalism that proves the most direct challenge to liberal institutions is radical multiculturalism. The core principle of radical multiculturalism as it is often articulated in the United States is the idea of respect for cultural, racial and ethnic differences in a manner where it is enjoined on the state to provide them with 'equal time' in the public sphere. The principle is far more extensive than mere toleration of the other. A radically multicultural society '[...] must allow each of its members to define her identity for herself, by finding the group or groups to which she has the closest affinity, and must also allow each group to formulate its own authentic set of claims and demands, reflecting its particular circumstances. The state must respect and acknowledge these demands on an equal basis. It cannot hold up one model of the good life at the expense of others, nor may it be its policies on principles of justice that some groups but not others regard as legitimate' (Miller 1991: 131).

Thus, to illustrate radical multiculturalism through one of its expressions, we have from Young:

Today most gay and lesbian advocates seek not merely civil rights, but the affirmation of gay men and lesbians as social groups with specific experiences and perspectives. Refusing to accept the dominant culture's definition of healthy sexuality and respectable family life and social practices, gay and lesbian movements have proudly created and displayed a distinctive self-definition and cultures. For gay men and lesbians the analogue to racial integration is the typical liberal approach to sexuality, which tolerates any behaviour as long as it is kept private. Gay pride asserts that sexual identity is a matter of culture and politics and not merely 'behaviour' to be tolerated or forbidden (cited in Miller 1995: 131).

A direct transposition of the assumptions of radical multiculturalism in the Indian context would require a clearing up of the ambiguities and anomalies that surround some of the salient issues with regard to cultural and religious conflicts and their implications for law and order. Should India have one central set of personal laws for all citizens regardless of their religion? Can one place of worship 'belong' to different communities? Can Kashmir, an 'integral' part of India, nevertheless have a different constitutional status?

INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS, GROUP RIGHTS AND MULTICULTURALISM

In order to cope with these difficulties, the Fathers of the Indian Constitution provided for a dual policy of rights. There were rights of individuals, guaranteed

most of all in the Fundamental Rights (article 16) but stated explicitly all over the Constitution. But there were also rights of groups, particularly those of the minorities (article 29). Article 1 of the Constitution, which solemnly declares 'India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States' gives voice to this duality. But, ever solicitous to cap what was called 'majority communalism', Nehru's India was careful to rein in the free use of the word culture as the basis of the self-definition of groups. The realisation of these difficulties led to the innovation of a number of institutions such as federalism, various forms of explicit and implicit quotas for different communities and the twin principles of secularism as the cornerstone of the state's policy towards competing communities and identities. These institutions were to be ensconced within a state policy of economic and social reform and a state sponsored policy of secularism. Nehru committed the state to this goal in his inaugural speech to the post-colonial state, made immortal as 'Freedom at Midnight':

We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again. The achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity, to the greater triumphs and achievement that await us. Are we brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future? The future is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we may fulfil the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity. The ambition of the greatest man of our generation has been to wipe every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us, but as long as there are tears and suffering, so long our work will not be over [...]. To the people of India, whose representatives we are, we make an appeal to join us with faith and confidence in this great adventure. This is no time for petty and destructive criticism, no time for ill will or blaming others. We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children dwell (cited in Rushdie/West 1997: 1-2).

Nehru's rhetoric was full of implicit references to the notions of citizenship and rights, and had none of the connotations of the mass, a homogeneous and homogenising entity, drunk on the sense of its power and purpose, striking terror in those who stand on its path. Nehru spoke on the background of the carnage of India's partition, and also of the urgency (as in Cannetti, 1973) of a concerted effort to remove mass poverty and ignorance. Democracy, a sense of community and modernisation were the fire that would lead the way. The fact that the moral equality of man and methodological individualism, with which Nehru planned to give a concrete, institutional shape to these ideals originated in cultures foreign to India did not matter at that moment of euphoria. For India had already been exposed to some of them for the better part of the duration of colonial rule, at least in the form of legal values. The most radical of these new institutions, namely the

principle of universal adult franchise as the basic principle of legitimacy and popular accountability, was very much in the air at least since the 1937 elections. The six decades that preceded independence had witnessed a steady, incremental extension of the right to vote under the overall hegemony of British colonial rule. While these limited experiments had already planted the seeds of mass democracy, the extension of franchise to the entire adult population in one fateful moment was a bold leap, particularly when one takes into consideration the fact that the Constituent Assembly which decided on this momentous step was itself the product of restricted franchise. But the measure was in keeping with the spirit of popular sovereignty which was the guiding principle of India's freedom movement and whose essence Nehru described in his famous oration on 'Freedom at Midnight'.

In the event, after five decades of application of universal adult franchise as the main ideology of the state, and as such, the preferred instrument of social and political change, and democratic accountability as a critical ingredient of the principle of governance, India continues to offer hope, but with a lingering sense of doubt. The reasons for hope become clear as one browses through the record of her achievements since independence. Regular, free and fair elections have been held to the legislatures at national and regional levels from 1952 onwards. Participation in these elections has been respectable, in comparison to the United States if not to continental Europe. The locus of political power has changed as a result of elections. The political prominence and control of resources by social groups to which power was transferred by the British in 1947 has been successfully challenged by subaltern groups in many regions and localities of India. Though the state has in many cases initiated these changes through legislation, the incentive has often come from the anticipated electoral dividends. There have also been occasions when the beneficiaries have themselves forced the hands of the government through protest movements and electoral mobilisation. The main consequence of these multiple modes of politics has been that five decades after independence, India can with some justification claim to have achieved a minimum of welfare and food security. In the same vein are the records on inflation and social inequalities, the extremes of which have been tamed. And now, with the liberalisation of India's economy, international business confidence in India has increased considerably compared to the recent past.

If Nehru's bold vision has been borne out by the overall success of India's democratic record, it has had to contend with persistent mass poverty and illiteracy, communal conflagrations and political insurgency. Democracy itself has wilted from time to time, but only to bounce back eventually with renewed vigour. In the mean time, structural change of the society and the economy has continued to progress, even though at an uneven pace. But majoritarian democracy has also revived the fear of the mobilisation of the Hindu masses under the banner of religion, and counter-mobilisation by the minority religions which structured the thinking of colonial administrators in the wake of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, and the communal riots that have dotted the landscape since. Nehru, very much a product of his times, had no doubts about the necessity of setting 'secular' limits to

politics, very much on the pattern of the fuzzy nationalism of the Freedom Movement that the Congress led against the Raj.

The historians of comparative nationalism must marvel at the tameness of the Indian formulation of the national agenda, for the classic cases of nationalism have shown ample readiness to crush all challenges to the supremacy of the national idea, both from within as well as from without. Nationalism is famously intolerant of differences. Similarly, just as colonial rule draws its legitimacy from a hierarchy of cultures which puts the masters at the apex, anti-colonial movements are intellectually and morally committed to the reversal of this hierarchy. Edward Said quotes Jules Harmand (1910), the French theoretician of race, colonialism and civilisation:

It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilisations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilisation, still recognising that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimisation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity. Material power is nothing but a means to that end (Said 1994: 17).

Partha Chatterjee, in his formulation of the Indian response to British Raj argues that the representatives of the colonised people had early decided to beat the British at their own game. But this strategy came with a price tag: 'Nationalism sets out to assert its freedom from European domination. But in the very conception of its project, it remains a prisoner of the prevalent European intellectual fashions' (1986:10). Thus, Chatterjee argues, the Freedom Movement left out the 'less enlightened, and the culturally marginal', from the nationalist agenda. But Gandhi and Nehru were aware of the problem. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, admonished on August 9, 1942:

[...] Hindustan belongs to all those who are born and bred and who have no other country to look to. Therefore, it belongs to Parsis, Beni Israels, to Indian Christians, Muslims and other non-Muslims as much as to Hindus. Free India will be no Hindu Raj; it will be Indian Raj based not on the majority of any religious community but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion (cited in Sharma 1994: 107).

Jawaharlal Nehru reiterated the same point in *India Today and Tomorrow*: 'India is a common home for all those who live here, to whatever religion they may belong [...] they have equal rights and obligations. Ours is a composite Nation'. The

composite and inclusive character of the nation is enshrined in the constitution in several articles.²⁰

When we look at the events that surrounded the birth of the new Republic, one question that comes uppermost to the mind is why Indians did accept the 'secular' state and the multicultural nationalism that Nehru's regime was offering them. There were surely enough grounds to inflame communal passions but they do not seem to have affected the secular character of the Constitution, nor the fact that having had the choice to leave India for their 'homeland' one third of the Muslims of India decided to stay on in the country of their birth. In retrospect, one wonders how this remarkable historical feat could be possible. Could it possibly be accounted for by the collective charisma of the Congress leadership? Or, was it yet another indication of Indian passivity? Or, was it a passive acceptance of Jinnah's two-nation theory? Finally, can the Indian reaction be seen as an indication of multicultural nationalism at a deeper level? Perhaps there was an element of all of these, but the latter requires some explanation. The sections below examine the roots of the concept of 'unity in diversity' which is deeply entrenched in Indian tradition from religious and literary sources.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF MULTICULTURALISM IN INDIA

Many Indians see the ideals of inclusive nationhood and multiculturalism that underpin the constitution and political practice in everyday life as a continuity, and as a reflection of unity in diversity, an overarching value that provides coherence to the metaphysical universe of Hinduism. This of course is a heuristic device rather than a descriptive category, intended to help discover the efforts that people sometimes make to bridge the gap between the ideal and the actual. In theoretical terms, the concept is deeply problematic both at the epistemological and ontological levels. For unity in diversity denotes both the empirical knowledge of different cultural modes and their boundaries as well as the legitimacy of their difference in terms of the moral equality of the different ways. Implicit in the definition of the different modes are also ontological hierarchies, so that, the actual determination of the plurality becomes necessarily problematic. Aditya Malik illustrates the point with reference to a dialogue from the Brhadarnayaka Upanishad as an example of one of the earliest statements on theological plurality found in Hinduism:

Then Vidagdha Saklyā questioned him, saying:
‘How many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?’

²⁰ For example, see Article 325: ‘No person to be ineligible for inclusion in or to claim to be included in a special electoral roll on grounds of religion, race, caste, or sex. There shall be one general electoral roll for every territorial constituency for election to either House of the Legislature of a State and no person shall be ineligible for inclusion in any such roll of claim to be included in any special electoral roll for any such constituency on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or any of them’.

He answered by (reciting) this invocatory formula:

‘As many as are mentioned in the invocatory formula in the hymn to the All-gods - three hundred and three and three thousand and three (=3306)’.

‘Yes’, he said, ‘but how many gods are there really (eva), Yajnavalkya?’

‘Thirty-three’.

‘Yes’, he said, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnyavalkya?’

‘Six’

‘Yes’, he said, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnyavalkya?’

‘Three’

‘Yes’, he said, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnyavalkya?’

‘Two’.

‘Yes’, he said, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnyavalkya?’

‘One and a half’.

‘Yes’, he said, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnyavalkya?’

‘One’.

‘Yes’, he said, ‘but which are those three hundred and three and those three thousand and three?’

Malik (1997: 8-9, fn. 20).²¹

There are countless regional and local variations on the anecdote narrated above that point in the direction of a basic uncertainty about the essential nature of divinity that characterises Hinduism. There are sociological factors that reinforce this tendency. As von Stietencron (1997) informs us, when a girl marries into a family whose *kuladevata* (family god) is different from that of her family, it is not considered unusual for the *kuladevata* of the girl's family to travel with her and to be ritually ensconced in the family shrine of her husband and continued to protect her as an *isthadevata* (personal god). The *gramadevata* who wields influence over the whole village is of course present in a general way and so are any other powerful divine figures present in the area who need to be propitiated either to enhance their capacity to do good or to forestall any harm that one might encounter if an evil spirit is not kept satisfied. The fact that marriages within a specific degree of relation are prohibited thus holds the potential for an increase of sacred figures with every generation.

²¹ The 'unity in diversity' idea is present not only in the texts of high Hinduism but in popular discourse or folk Hinduism as well. Malik illustrates this with a story: ‘Once a Muslim, a Christian, and a Hindu began quarrelling about whose God was the greatest and most powerful. In order to prove their respective God's strength, they climbed up onto a cliff and decided to jump down one after another. Whoever's God was the most powerful would save him from crashing to death against the rocks below. First, the Muslim jumped off crying: 'Ya Allah!' Before he could hit the rocks, Allah saved him and he survived. Then the Christian stepped off the cliff exclaiming: 'O Lord, our saviour!' He too was protected from hitting the rocks. Now it was the Hindu's turn. He uttered God's names, but no one came to his rescue and he smashed against the deadly rocks. When he ascended into heaven, he went straight to Bhagaban complaining that the Muslim and Christian had been saved, so why not him? Bhagaban replied saying: 'Well, first you took Ram's name, then Sita's, then Mahadev's then Bhavani's, then Krishna's, then Radha's, then Hanuman's and after that Ganesh's - I was so busy changing my clothes, I didn't have time to rescue you!’.

The ability of one *sanatana dharma* - eternal religion - to be able to integrate all these diverse rituals and faiths within an overall structure is the subject of a major debate among specialists.²² The fact remains however that lived-in religion at the level of everyday life certainly admits of plurality, which is then complemented with another popular belief in *vasudhwaiva kutumbakam* - the whole world is one's family. Paradoxically, thus, Hinduism, that most non-missionary of religions has built into it an appreciation of the universe as it is (rather than as it might be under proper religious guidance) that the conventional missionary religions like Christianity or Islam are not capable of.

The accommodation of seeming contradictions within an all-pervading essence that both contains and connects differences is seen by many scholars of India as quintessential of her culture. Others, more accustomed to understanding India in terms of the choices of individuals and groups see the concept of unity in diversity more as a cultural ideal rather than as a description of behaviour. Not being equipped with a prior belief in the essential unity of India, some of these instrumentalists question the very basis of India as a nation, and the likelihood of the endurance of the fragile bonds that bind the accidental units that constitute it. The question for them is why political reality sometimes fails to live up to the normative expectation. Since this issue is often present in everyday political discourse and its reflection in fiction, we next turn to the *Midnight's Children* as an example of how the issue is articulated.

THE LITERARY CONSTRUCTION: INDIA, A 'PICKLED' NATION?

While religion provides a necessary core to identity, it is culture which adds the formal articulation and the logic that holds such disparate expressions of identity as literature, music, food, taboos and ritual together. Culture, particularly language and literature as its handmaidens, provide much greater freedom of self-definition than religion. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, offers a window to the literary discourse on the concept and form of the nation at the onset of independence.²³ Rushdie begins his book with a reference to the fateful moment when the birth of the promised independence is coupled with the tragedy of the partition of India and Pakistan:

I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947.
And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night [...]. On the
stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in

²² See Guenther D. Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (1989) for an excellent report on the various schools engaged in this debate. For a discussion of the traditional ability of Hinduism to celebrate its plurality rather than engaging in the creation of an exclusive and collective social vision, see Michaels (1998: 458).

²³ References to the concept are many, see for example Bhabani Sen Gupta (1996) who speculates about the continuity in basic values between the *Midnight's Children* and their elders.

respectful greeting as I came. [...] at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. [...] A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country (1982).

The fictive life of Rushdie's protagonist is of course only a literary device for the depiction of the career of the post-colonial state and the promise of nationhood with which it was launched. As the story unfolds, we find the youthful dreams of Naseem, the prototype post-independence figure, entitled by his own reckoning to joy and fulfilment, turning sour. Rushdie's narrative ends with an agonising admission of the defeat of an ideal, of a botched project of nation building in South Asia. The promised nation, pure and pristine in its potential form, underpinning the rhetoric of the leaders of the freedom movement, turns into *chutney* - an eclectic collection of bits casually thrown together. Rushdie's indictment of those responsible for it is laced with rage and disenchantment:

What is required for chutnification? Raw materials, obviously - fruit, vegetables, fish, vinegar, spices. Daily visits from Koli women with their saris hitched up between their legs. Cucumbers aubergines mint. But also: eyes, blue as ice, which are undeceived by the superficial blandishments of fruit - which can see corruption beneath citrus-skin; fingers which, with featheriest touch, can probe the secret inconstant hearts of green tomatoes: and above all a nose capable of discerning the hidden languages of what-must-be-pickled, its humours and messages and emotions [...] at Braganza Pickles, I supervise the production of Mary's legendary recipes; but there are also my special blends, in which, thanks to the powers of my drained nasal passages, I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepper pots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans [...] believe don't believe but it is true. Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation (1982: 460).

Rushdie's is clearly a search for a *Kulturnation*, which, four decades since independence (at the time of the writing) continued to be a chimera. But, is the *Kulturnation* the only kind possible? Is a multicultural nation, drawing on a plural society sharing a common geographic space, merely an *Ersatznation* - far from the real thing - and not an organic entity in its own right, a robust political construct that is capable of drawing on the contradictions of pre-colonial and colonial histories, religious diversity and the plurality of regional and local traditions?

But Rushdie's was not the only voice of pessimism. Predating him by over two decades was Selig Harrison, one of the early pessimists about India's chances of

giving concrete shape to India's cultural diversity within the framework of a liberal democratic state spelt out his doubts in the following words:

India's struggle for national survival is a struggle against herself. As a civilization and as an integrated cultural whole, India has shown a power of survival rivalled only by China. But multilingual India's separate territories have failed as consistently as Europe's to hold together as a separate political unity [...] India is a whole world placed at close quarters. Nowhere do so many linguistically differentiated peoples, all of them so self-aware, all numbered in millions and tens of millions, confront each other within a single national body politics. The prospect that 'anarchy', 'fascism', and 'totalitarian small nationalities' will each torture this body politic, at one time or another in the decades ahead, is a measure not of some endemic Indian incapacity but of the challenge built into Indian nationalism (Harrison 1960: 4).

From this pessimistic prognosis, Harrison deduced two possible outcomes. Either, in their earnest desire to build a national state, India's leaders would concentrate power so that state-formation would entail the creation of a culturally unitary state that would pulverise local, regional and communal differences, or, India would fall apart under the strain of centrifugal forces, generated by diverse cultural groups having to function as parts of one political system:

[...] Indian nationalism will most probably survive at the price of a series of authoritarian political forms, a conclusion which suggests that we are riding for a fall [...]. Deep-seated centrifugal forces on the one hand, and the quite contradictory urge for unified national power in the face of the unity of others, will act and interact too convulsively to leave India's present Constitution undisturbed. This interaction between extremes is characteristic of 'the most dangerous decades' those decades after an underdeveloped country has discovered progress, or the hope of progress, but before progress comes rapidly enough to satisfy rising aspirations (1960: 4-5).²⁴

The pessimistic prognoses of Rushdie and Harrison have not been borne out by the experience with democracy, state formation and national integration over the past five decades. The next section would show how the steel frame of the Raj - the police and the bureaucracy - have held, thanks to the infusion of new blood, and the democratic search for consensus, accommodation and good political management. While the conjectures about the state of accommodation of conflicting identities emerging out of indological and literary discussions provide us with rich insights into the political reality, their verification requires an empirical bridge into the inner world of the individuals. In the following section we

²⁴ On this point, also see Huntington (1968: 55).

shall examine the nature of communal accommodation in India on the basis of the opinions and attitudes of survey data.

THE DIALECTIC INTERACTION OF CULTURAL ESSENCE AND INDIVIDUAL PREFERENCES

How should one recognise the theoretical categories through which one studies cultures and religions in the everyday life of the individual? The inner world of the individual is the meeting point of large categories, where they are occasionally conflated and transformed and recast in radically different forms. Mass democracy where the ballot paper is a vital instrument of both identity and welfare is no great respecter for theoretical purity in its use of abstract categories. What the scientist of religion terms as a 'failure' is actually a success of the political process of a post-colonial state in creating new, thin and broad categories of identity:

Terms are intended for communication. Their purpose is to evoke in the listener a specific notion, the same notion the speaker has in mind and which should correspond to the reality which is to be conveyed. Therefore much of our intellectual and academic exchange depends upon the choice of terms and on their capacity to convey specific information with a reasonable amount of clarity. If everyone can derive different sets of meaning from the terms 'Hinduism' and 'religion' these terms obviously fail to serve their purpose (Stietencron 1989: 19).

The main reason behind the success of national integration in India arises from the fact that conventional theories of nation-building and social change usually present cultural duality like locality and region as the first steps of an incremental and linear march towards the more general category of the nation that ultimately dissolves local, regional, social and cultural differences within a larger, 'national' identity. These, in the typical metaphor of the 'melting pot', are finally reconstituted in the form of a legally uniform, and culturally homogeneous citizenship. In spatial terms, the conventional theory of national integration implies the transformation of the specific to the universal, and the locality to the nation. What conventional theory does not clearly indicate is whether these concepts are to be seen in dichotomous terms, or as concentric circles, where the outer rings encapsulate the inner. Under the later formulation, social change adds successive layers to the multilayered political persona of the society in change, rather than necessarily fragmenting it in line with spatial and primordial divisions. The political salience of this theoretical question can be seen from the apprehensions of balkanisation which always accompanied the discussion of modernisation and social change in the relevant literature of the 1950s. However, the evidence that we have opinions and attitudes of the mass public in India, culled from a survey of the national electorate after the parliamentary elections of 1996, show an alternative theory of the accommodation of locality, region and different concepts of the nation into a

common political space.²⁵ The detailed empirical analysis presented below draws upon the cases of value and identity conflict in Indian politics already mentioned above.

CROSS-CUTTING VALUE CONFLICT AND PARTISAN COMPETITION

The demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 was one of the most important landmarks in Indian politics after independence. The world media and the Indian press have consistently focused on it as a key issue in Indian politics and a key indicator of civil society in India. The interesting point to note here is that contrary to speculations in the media, Hindu opinion is neither as homogeneous nor as hostile to Muslims as one is led to believe. This we can deduce from the response of Hindus and Muslims to four questions relating to the destruction of the Babri Mosque, the attitude towards Kashmir, Pakistan and separate Civil Codes for communities which will be presented below.

Interest in the data on the attitudes towards the destruction of the Babri Mosque arises from the fact that in view of the expectations aroused by the spectre of Hindu fundamentalism, not the least by Huntington's imagery about the clash of civilisations, one would expect an internally undifferentiated phalanx of Hindus (and Muslims) taking radically opposite stances. However, when the Indian electors (an overwhelming majority of whom are Hindus) were asked to pass a judgement whether they considered the demolition justified or unjustified, they have largely condemned the act as unjustified. Only 22.7 per cent of Indian electorate have found the act (demolition) justified. Against this, 38.1 per cent termed it as unjustified while a large group of 39.2 per cent either have not heard about this episode or failed to take definite position on it. Of all those who express an opinion on it, 63 per cent assert that the demolition was not justified.

People endowed with greater information and exposure constitute larger shares of those who have found the act unjustified. For example, people belonging to urban areas, highly educated, upper caste and upper class do not approve the demolition (50.3%, 59.6%, 46.6% and 40.7% respectively, as compared to the Indian average of 38.1%). Considering the role these people play in opinion making these findings are very encouraging as far as secular credentials of the country is concerned. Similarly, party-wise analysis of justified and unjustified responses also does not show much polarisation on this line (see table 1). Except the Left Front (9.1 per cent) all other parties have significant shares of those who justified demolition. For example, as against 40.7 per cent of the BJP voters, 16.5 per cent of the Congress, 24.1 per cent of the NF and 27.3 per cent of the BSP voters come from those who perceive the destruction as justified. More

²⁵ The survey was conducted by the Lokchintan group of scholars based at the Centre for the Studies of Developing Societies in Delhi and other Indian universities in May-June 1996, shortly after the parliamentary elections. A random sample of about ten thousand respondents, representing the Indian electorate was surveyed through face-to-face interviews.

importantly, as much as one-fourth (25.7 per cent) of the BJP supporters have condemned the act of demolition. If 'don't know' and 'not-heard' cases are excluded all parties have sizeable proportions of support from both the groups. While larger share of justified category in the BJP support reflects its North Indian bias, a sizeable group of its supporters condemning the act which sets a limit beyond which the BJP cannot capitalise on its *Hindutva* stand.

Table 1: Partisan Response to the Demolition of Babri Mosque

Response	INC	BJP+	NF	LF	BSP	Total
Unjustified	42.9	25.7	48.2	54.9	26.7	38.1
Don't know	8.0	11.4	7.6	9.2	19.9	10.2
Justified	16.5	40.7	24.1	9.1	27.3	22.7
Not heard about demolition	32.6	22.2	20.0	26.9	26.1	29.0

People's response to an emotive issue like Kashmir also does not show any explicitly 'communal' bias in it. Partisan responses to question, *People's opinion are divided on the issue of the Kashmir problem--some people say that government should suppress the agitation by any means, while others say that this problem should be resolved by negotiations. What would you say, should the agitation be suppressed or resolved by negotiations?* are presented in table 2. Giving credence to their secular values, 33.4 per cent of Indian electors have rejected the option of suppressing the agitation by any means. Of the opinion holders, as many as 75.6 per cent have suggested that the problem of Kashmir cannot be solved by using suppressive measures but by negotiations only.

Suggestion to resolve Kashmir problem through negotiations receives support from almost all relevant segments of the society. That is, roughly half of the urban population, upper castes and upper class are in favour of negotiation. The 'communal' divide is quite slim: 31.3% of the Hindus support such a solution negotiation in contrast to 45.7% support from the Muslims. However, the maximum support it receives from the highly educated people (62.1 per cent) followed by urban dwellers indicating thereby a greater scope for a peaceful solution of the problem.

Table 2: Partisan Opinion on Resolution of Kashmir Problem

Response	INC	BJP+	NF	LF	BSP	Total
Negotiation	33.8	34.7	32.6	32.9	25.5	33.4
Can't say	32.8	26.4	30.7	28.7	28.9	32.0
Should be suppressed	9.7	17.5	11.0	4.9	14.3	11.1
Not heard of Kashmir	21.2	19.8	23.3	32.2	30.7	21.6

Like views on demolition issue, except the Left Front all other parties have, more or less, equal shares in those who support suppression of Kashmir problem by force. The BJP accounts for slightly above the average and the Congress falls slightly below it. But the fact that all parties have received

around one-third of their support from those advocating resolution through negotiations puts the problem in perspective.

The same positive attitude of religious and regional reconciliation within India is also reflected in attitudes towards Pakistan. Those who suggest that India should make more efforts to develop friendly relations with Pakistan outnumber those who suggest the opposite or do not have an opinion on the issue. If we exclude the don't knows, the percentage of those in favour of friendly relations goes up to 72 per cent.

Table 3: India should develop friendly relations with Pakistan (do you agree or disagree?)

Response	INC	BJP+	NF	LF	BSP	Total
Disagree	17.1	23.4	11.6	17.4	12.4	17.6
Don't know / No opinion	37.0	34.5	36.6	37.3	37.6	37.9
Agree	45.8	42.1	51.8	45.3	50.0	44.5

People's views on Indo-Pak relations are positively in favour of negotiation. The people of India, by and large, want that the government should make more efforts to develop friendly relations with Pakistan. Not only that 71.7 per cent of the opinion holders support the development of friendly relations, but also the people who matter in building a national opinion have come forward to lend more support than the non-opinionated sections of the society. For example, against all India average of 44.5 per cent, urban dwellers (59.3 per cent), people pursuing high ranking occupations (61.8 per cent), well educated (68.2 per cent), the rich (49.8 per cent) and the upper caste (51.9 per cent) have agreed to the proposition that India should make more efforts to develop friendly relations with Pakistan. The Muslims, the worst sufferers from the hostility between the two governments, have supported this viewpoint overwhelmingly; 72.5 per cent of them want friendly relations with Pakistan, compared to 40.8 per cent for the Hindus and 44.5 per cent for the population as a whole.

The issue of a common personal law for all Indians was a major consideration for the Constituent Assembly convened for the purpose of drawing up the basic laws of the new Republic. The original provision for a fundamental right of all citizens for a common civil code was ultimately scaled down to a Directive Principle of State Policy (Article 44) which merely suggests that the state should strive to enact such a legislation in the future. The resistance that the idea of a common civil code received both during the constituent assembly debates and subsequently during the debate in the Parliament on the issue of the Hindu Code Bill in the 1950s shows the extent of potential support there was for a plurality of civil codes in India. Inadvertently encouraged by the official even-handedness towards Hindu and Muslim laws during the early years of colonial rule and the subsequent desire to see the unification of conflicting religious laws as part of the building of a Hindu nation, the debate eventually got enmeshed with the bigger debate of the reform of Hindu society. Finally, the issue of independence took precedence over the issue of social and legal reform and the consensus in the Constituent Assembly was to postpone such debates to the future. In more recent

years as our data show, there is a large measure of support for a plurality of civil codes than what is often thought to be the case, though few Indian leaders would perhaps go as far as Conrad to argue that 'personal laws are part of the 'culture' guaranteed to any section of citizens by Article 29(1)'.²⁶

In this context, it is interesting to note here that a significant percentage of Indians are willing to concede to each community the right to retain its own personal law in the areas of marriage and property rights. In order to measure attitudes towards Personal Law, the survey asked: *Every community should be allowed to have its own laws to govern marriage and property rights. Do you agree or disagree?* and the responses are presented in table 4.

Table 4: Views on separate Civil Code for every community by Party

Response	INC	BJP+	NF	LF	BSP	Total
Disagree	29.9	36.5	29.4	22.1	30.4	30.4
Don't know	23.8	22.9	28.5	18.2	24.8	25.1
Agree	46.3	40.6	42.2	59.6	44.7	44.4

The issue reflects the tensions regarding the unresolved issue of identity and nationhood in India. Proponents of an exclusive definition of nation in India plead for a uniform law on all aspects of life. This position, very strongly propagated by the BJP gets far less support than the more inclusive view of nationalism in India. An impressive 44.4 per cent of the total sample or 60 per cent of the opinion holders say that every community should be allowed to have its own laws to govern marriage and property rights. Against this, only 30.4 per cent say the opposite and the rest, that is 25 per cent fail to express any opinion on it. It is true that the Muslims have lent greater support (67.1 per cent) to the idea of having or continuing with separate Civil Code, but the fact that their stand is also supported by the majority community makes a strong case for continuing with present law. However, this has a caveat to it, that is like 'Muslim Personal Law', other communities would also like to enjoy autonomy, at least on governing their marriage and property rights.

Judging from the above, there is considerable support within the electorate for a multicultural nation based on negotiation and acceptance or difference in India. There is no denying the fact, however, that a communal divide exists between Hindus and Muslims with regard to the social and political issues that are vital to identity. To show the variation in the distance between Hindu and Muslim attitudes, their respective answers to the four questions are presented in table 5. The table reports responses of Hindus and Muslims to the four 'communal' issues discussed above and their responses to two other questions more specifically geared to the measurement of the sense of legitimacy and personal efficacy in Indian society. These indicators are measured on the basis of the following questions: *Suppose there were no parties or assemblies and elections were not*

²⁶ Under Fundamental Rights the Constitution of India, 1950 (as amended) Article 29 (1) guarantees any section of citizens having a distinct language, script or culture of its own to conserve the same; see Conrad (1995).

held - do you think that the government in this country can be run better? Do you think your vote has any effect on how things are run in this country or do you think your vote makes no difference?

Table 5: Communal Polarisation and Political attitudes

<i>Response</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
Hindu	31.6%	31.3%	40.8%	41.5%	68.2%	58.1%
Muslim	86.3%	45.7%	72.5%	67.1%	72.2%	60.3%

Key: the numbers 1-6 stand for the response to the questions:

1. The demolition of the Babri Mosque (not justified)
2. The resolution of the Kashmir problem (solved by negotiation)
3. The development of friendly relations with Pakistan (agree)
4. Separate Civil Code for every community (support)
5. Approval of the democratic system
6. Efficacy of vote (vote makes a difference)

The process of accommodation of conflicting preferences within a larger political space described above has also been reported by Bailey on the basis of his fieldwork in Orissa as a process of accommodation and moderation based on strategic calculations of self-interest (Bailey 1996). But its occasional breakdown shows that the process is neither linear nor inexorable. Multicultural accommodation of conflicting identities in a macro arena is sensitive to the larger arena where it is ensconced and the larger networks from higher-level political processes that interact with the political actors of the local arena. An uncertain state contributes to the uncertainty of the multicultural solution in the local arena: the reverse is also true.²⁷

CONCLUSION

In its attempts to understand the concept of multiculturalism in the context of the post-colonial state in India and to examine the potential for its actualisation, the essay has drawn on the religious and cultural plurality that underpins India's institutions and her political process. A deeper analysis of the spirit of tolerance and accommodation that characterises Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and the way these values have influenced the development of Islam and Christianity in India particularly after they have been delinked from state power is beyond the scope of this essay. The point remains, however, that the Indian voter, given his sovereign

²⁷ In reversing the judgment of the Bombay High Court which forbade the use of the word 'Hindutva' under the ban on the use of religion for electoral purposes, the Indian Supreme Court came up with a landmark judgment. 'It cannot be said that any appeal for votes wherein mention was made of 'Hindutva' is by itself sufficient to amount to an appeal for votes for the Hindu candidates on the ground of their religion and is a corrupt practice or creates enmity and hatred amongst different classes of citizens on the grounds of religion and community'. All India Reporter, vol. 83, 1996 April, pp 827. But the long arm of the law would be available to intervene should any party use religious for the explicit purpose of 'promoting hatred or enmity between groups of people' (ibid).

democratic right to define nation and state, has reinvented India's traditional multiculturalism which has made it possible for people of many religious, languages and opposing political views to live together during the past five decades.

The Indian project of multiculturalism, fuzzy and implicit before independence, and explicitly fuzzy afterwards, has drawn scepticism from theorists and men of letters alike. However, the politics of negotiation and contestation that Indian democracy has institutionalised has provided the requisite space in which different communities have come together and made a concerted effort to add their voices to the definition of the core values of the nation. The state has played a crucial role in this process. When the state has succeeded in providing direction and fairness in its role as arbiter in disputes, it has grown in stature and taken the project of multiculturalism further. Its failure to intervene and suggest a way forward has resulted in tragic outcomes. The accommodation of group identities and individual rights has been crucial.

The sense of empowerment that India's traditional plurality and modern democracy have provided to groups and individuals is the key to India's project of multiculturalism. Both overwhelming power and its opposite - abject powerlessness - hold the potential of bringing the project to a temporary abeyance. Long before India's independence and the formal consecration of the multicultural concept in the constitution, Forster gave voice to this relationship of power and identity in an evocative scene towards the end of *A Passage to India* where he re-enacts the theme of race and culture under colonial rule.

The Muslim Doctor Aziz, freshly reconciled with the English school inspector Fielding, expands on his theory of how to accommodate Afghans in a future independent India with its inevitable Hindu majority.²⁸

‘India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one! Hurrah for India! Hurrah! Hurrah!’

But that was not to be. Nature and race prejudice combine to foil what was meant to be a reconciliation of the two friends. Forster's prescient comments capture how the great chasm of power that separated the two friends also stood on their way from meeting as fellow citizens in a common, multicultural space. Not fully understanding the depth of Aziz's feelings and dismissing them as youthful ardour of his earnest Indian friend, the British school inspector ridicules his sense of nationalism which momentarily seals their separation.

‘India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps! Fielding mocked again. And Aziz in an awful rage danced this way and that, not

²⁸ The talk of Indian Muslims would have been pre-mature, considering the location of this novel in the pre first world war period.

knowing what to do, and cried; 'Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then' - he rode against him furiously - 'and then', he concluded, half kissing him, 'you and I shall be friends'.

'Why can't we be friends now?' said the other, holding him affectionately. 'It's what I want. It's what you want'.

But the horses didn't want it - they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath; they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices. 'No, not yet', and the sky said, No, not there' (1946: 289).

Forster's poignant passage emphasises the difficulties of achieving a multicultural society under subjugation where overwhelming power of the English confronted the powerless Indians. Once agency and autonomy were restored after the formal end to colonial rule, India went back to a form of political transaction aimed at communal accommodation. In the political space of India, it is possible today for communities to form and dissolve, in order to re-emerge as part of other communities. Seen from a distance and over time, political transaction has taken manifold forms - ranging between voting and lobbying to protest movements and ultimately, violent conflict. These in turn have produced knowledge of what leads to violence, instilling in the process greater understanding and accommodation of cultural and religious differences. Castes, religious communities and ethnic groups are all impregnated by the spirit of transaction and coalition building. The result is a significant empowerment of minorities.²⁹ In India's multicultural society, the members of different communities, castes and language groups have risen to the highest levels, in public office as well as in sports, films or academia.³⁰

Thanks to the salience of coalition politics rather than party competition, the structure and process of Indian politics in the 1990s should have a familiar ring for those conversant with the politics of continental Europe. In consequence, compared

²⁹ When asked 'Suppose there were no parties or assemblies and elections were not held - do you think that the government in this country can be run better?', 69% of Indians argue in the opposite. But the number of Muslims, at 72%, making the same argument in favour of retaining the democratic structure, is even higher than the average.

³⁰ The percentage of India's largest minority has actually grown since independence. That is more than what India's South Asian neighbours can claim. Ayodhya was of course the most tragic instance of the failure of the process of communal accommodation. That is all the more reason to take into account what has happened since. The nature of national reaction against the destruction of the Babri Mosque has significantly altered the strategic thinking of the main protagonists and has helped moderate opinion on both sides prevail strongly enough to revive the process of communal accommodation through transaction.

to before, the moderation of shrill ideological overtones as part of a search of a winning formula based on governance has become the new *mantra* of Indian politics. Having come to their own, the regional parties are increasingly self-confident in terms of working out deals with one another as well as with national parties. The Congress is still suspect, but that may change once the after-glow of Congress hegemony has completely burnt out, leaving the Congress to behave much as any other political party. One sure sign of this is that the terms of political discourse are no longer mediated by the salient values that once defined the core of India's high politics. The 'regionalists' - which as a group draws in people from India's periphery, in terms of religion, elite caste-status or geographic distance from the centre- are able to generate a different construction of the nation-state that is in sync with the times in terms of being market-friendly, yet with a humane face. When speaking in the national mode, the regionalists do not count out the need to be well informed and decisive in defence of the security and integrity of the nation. But in terms of actual policies of the state, the regionalists are much more willing, and in view of its social base, able to listen to the minorities, to regions with historical grievances, to sections of the society that entered the post-independence politics with unsolved, pre-independence (in some cases, pre-modern) grievances. It is thanks to these 'regionalists' that the emerging multi-party democracy of India is not merely an anomic battle for power and short-term gain but the releasing of pent-up creativity and visions that provide a fertile and cohesive backdrop to the realignment of social forces. Far from being its antithesis, region has actually emerged as the nursery of the nation.³¹

Two citations, one from an Oriya Member of the Parliament in the first Lok Sabha and forty years into time, another from Parkash Singh Badal, show a continuity of the inclusive, multicultural nationalism of India:

'My first ambition', the Oriya M.P. said, 'is the glory of Mother India. I know it in my heart of hearts that I am an Indian first and an Indian last. But when you say you are a Bihari, I say I am an Oriya. When you say you are a Bengali, I say I am an Oriya. Otherwise, I am an Indian' (Misra 1955: vol. 1, col. 647).

The same sentiments are expressed by Parkash Singh Badal, made in the 75th birth anniversary of the Akali Dal:

'Shiromani Akali Dal is a symbol of the aspirations and hopes of Punjab. The Dal has always struggled for human rights, Punjab, Punjabi and the rights of Sikhs. For this the Akali Dal has made innumerable sacrifices [...] we are committed to peace and shall not allow it to be disturbed at any cost. We have full faith in the constitutional method. We shall curb corruption and shall strive to give a clean government [...] when today we are celebrating our 75th anniversary we reaffirm our commitment to our goals. [...] now regional parties and national parties who believe in internal autonomy

³¹ See, Mitra and Singh (1999: 213 ff.).

for States are coming together. Akali Dal is very keen to co-operate with them' (Chum 1996).³²

Though the essay is addressed primarily to the Indian case, the problem it is concerned with has deep implications for stable democracies of the west as well. As the problem of the Islamic headscarf in France, the issue of the *Satanic Verses* in the UK indicate, the issue of full integration of non-Christian permanent residents into the structure of law and full citizenship remains an open issue. On the other hand, though the essay argues that the combination of federalism and consociationalism has produced a powerful solution to the problem of the integration of different identities within a common structure in India, the issue of a common legal basis as the *sine qua non* of citizenship is still an important issue on the political agenda of India.

As the state in India crosses the mid-century mark in its steady, democratic progression, one can only hope that the accommodation of the conflicting pulls of regional and sub-national identities will lead to the *banalisation*³³ of the concept of nationalism altogether. This can only happen if the multicultural nationalism of India gains wide acceptance as a core value of the state from both political actors and observers, and becomes an integral part of India's political process. The post-colonial state can then develop an agenda that asks for real sacrifice from individuals and groups in the name of the whole nation. It would produce the necessary room to manoeuvre for the creation of a public space in the domestic politics, and tap the creative forces of nationalism while restraining the tendencies that are destructive of political community.³⁴

³² See Subrata K. Mitra (1997) for a further discussion of this point.

³³ This is a concept that Michael Billig uses to stretch the concept of nationalism, 'so that it can cover the ideological means by which nation-states are reproduced. To stretch the term 'nationalism' indiscriminately would invite confusion: surely, there is a distinction between the flag waved by Serbian ethnic cleansers and that hanging unobtrusively outside the US post office; or between the policy of the Front National and the support given by the leader of the opposition to the British government's Falkland' policy. For this reason, the term banal nationalism is introduced to cover the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some observers have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged', in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition' (Billig 1995: 6).

³⁴ In this sense, banal nationalism does not necessarily imply benign or effete nationalism. 'It would be wrong to assume that 'banal nationalism' is 'benign' because it seems to possess a reassuring normality, or because it appears to lack the violent passions of the extreme right. As Hannah Arendt (1963) stressed, banality is not synonymous with harmlessness. In the case of Western nation-states, banal nationalism can hardly be innocent: it is reproducing institutions which possess vast armament. As the Gulf and Falklands Wars indicated, forces can be mobilised without lengthy campaigns of political preparations. The armaments are primed, ready for use in battle. And the national populations appear also to be primed, ready for so support the use of those armaments' (Billig 1995: 7).

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