RELIGION, COMMUNITY & DEVELOPMENT

Changing Contours of Politics and Policy in India

Editors
Gurpreet Mahajan
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Religion, Communities and Development
Social science research and popular discourse on ‘religion and public life’ have gradually moved away from binaries such as communal–secular, tradition–modern, or community–individual. It is now widely recognised that religion and cultural traditions do not simply disappear from public life with economic development. In countries like India, this shift has also been reinforced by the emerging social and political trends where issues relating to citizenship are raised through identity movements of historically deprived categories such as the Dalits, Adivasis, and religious minorities such as the Muslims, for inclusive and just development.

This ‘positive’ view of religion parallels changing attitudes in other parts of the world as well where there is growing interest in religious communities and faith-based organisations and their potential role in enhancing development and service delivery. While this has led to a renewed interest in the study of religion, rigorous social science research on ‘religion and citizenship’ is still at a nascent stage.

This series attempts to fill the gap by bringing together scholarly writing on this important and rapidly expanding area of research in the social sciences.
Religion, Communities and Development
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Gurpreet Mahajan
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The post-colonial Indian state visualised economic development to be a modernising process. Development and secularisation were to go together — one strengthening the other. In keeping with the classical theories of ‘modernisation’ of the post-War period, secularisation was considered an essential part of the process of economic development. ‘Traditional’ societies like India were to consciously work to get rid of their ‘old’ ascription-based hierarchical structures and identities, in order to facilitate the process of modernisation and economic development. Once ‘taken off’ the process of economic development was also to facilitate the creation of conditions for the emergence of a modern secular society, where religion would slowly be privatised and would lose its hold over the public sphere. As it presumably happened in Western Europe, the citizens of modern and democratic India would draw their identities from their individual worth and not from the status of the caste and religious community into which they were born. Even though they recognised the historical specificities of South Asia and the enduring hold that religious faith had over the people of the region, the mainstream political leadership of independent India aspired for a modern and developed nation with a scientific and secular outlook.

India’s experience of the last six decades of economic development and democratic governance has completely defied this expectation. While the country has witnessed steady economic development and the social and political institutions of the country have become more participatory, the presence of religion in the public sphere has also expanded. Democratic political processes have not only provided new modes of articulating development aspirations, they have given life and legitimacy to many ‘old’ identities. In fact, these ‘old’ communitarian identities are often mobilised for effective participation in the competitive political space for a fair share of development goods.

Over the years, the democratic/development state also appears to be changing its attitude on this subject of religion and development. A good example of this was the appointment of a High Level Committee.
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(the Sachar Committee) by the prime minister of India to look into the ‘development deficit’ among Indian Muslims.

The articles presented in this volume reflect upon these changes in Indian politics and policy. Most of them were first discussed at a seminar organised in March 2007 at the Jawaharlal Nehru University as a part of the initial activities of the DFID/University of Birmingham-supported research programme on Religions and Development. The Sachar Committee Report (SCR), submitted to the Government of India in November 2006, offered a meaningful entry-point for the research programme on religions and development in India. While the SCR has focused on the Muslims of India, we invited our contributors to also look at the development experience of other religious groups and communities. Apart from looking at the subject from a comparative perspective, we requested some of our colleagues to also reflect on the larger theoretical and political implications of the SCR. They were asked to critically examine the policy shifts that could take place because of changing the categories used to classify populations for the identification of development deficits and the impact this would have on the larger discourse of development in India.

The articles have been extensively revised and re-written and together they look at the shifts taking place in the politics of communities and the state’s development policies. We hope this will be useful reading for all those interested in understanding the sociological complexities of democratic politics and development processes in contemporary India.

While putting this book together we were supported by many people. We are grateful to Professors Carole Rakodi and Gurhapal Singh of University of Birmingham who have been extremely supportive in our efforts to articulate our perspective on the subject. We are also grateful to DFID for providing funds for the seminar. Views expressed by authors and editors, however, do not necessarily represent the views of DFID.

This volume would not have been possible without the hard work and patience of our contributors. We would like in particular to thank Dr Amir Ali for his help in organising the seminar at JNU. We are also grateful to the editorial team at Routledge, New Delhi, for their careful editing of the manuscript and their quiet and unflinching support that took care of all our anxieties through the production process.
Secularism may have been an important, if not the distinguishing, attribute of the modern West in the twentieth century, but in contemporary times Western liberal democracies are increasingly being represented as ‘post-secular’ societies. To be post-secular means, as Habermas[1] reminds us, that these societies must have been secular once. They must have been governed, at one time, by the social indicators that marked secularised societies. But in the present world, particularly after 9/11, these societies are witnessing a change, one in which religion is reappearing as an important marker of identity, compelling these secularised societies to come to terms with the existence of religion and religious communities in the public domain.

Secularism was informed by the understanding that when societies become modern the significance of religion and religious institutions would decline. Religious explanations of events would give way to scientific and rational explanations, and functional differentiation within the social system would diminish the role of religious institutions, like the Church. The Church might continue to exist but its control over individual and collective life would diminish. Religion would be primarily a personal matter, restricted to the private realm.

This understanding of modern Europe persisted even though religion did not vanish from the public domain. In many parts of Europe and even in America, religious beliefs shaped the conflict over values. Religion entered very centrally into the debate on divorce, abortion, homosexuality, suicide, euthanasia, and education, particularly when it came to teaching the theory of evolution. Religious parties were formed, and on several occasions in electoral politics, they also received the support of the people. Yet, the representation of Europe and America as secular polities remained uncontested, primarily because religious institutions had suffered substantial loss of prestige in these societies, and they no longer controlled the individual or the public and political domains.

There was also a marked decline in religiosity in these societies. On finding that the majority of the people in American suburbs claimed to go to church every week, Robert Putnam sent his team of researchers to local churches only to find empty pews on Sunday morning. From this survey he concluded that associational forms of life were declining and with it also social capital (Putnam 2000); but what his study also showed, at least implicitly, was that on matters of religion, there was a marked difference between assertions and actuality. People in America saw themselves as Christians but the hold of religion over their lives was considerably weak. As the secularisation thesis had suggested, religion was not an important player in the public arena.

Most theorists maintained that the Church had become an association, like many other voluntary associations (Barber 1996) and, in several cases, decisions in these bodies were taken by collective deliberation rather than by any designated church official. There were of course a few uncomfortable facts that did not fit well with the decline of religion thesis. New churches had surfaced and new religions also seemed to be blossoming in America. Whether it was the Evangelical Church or the Church of Falwell, Art of Living or Osho, new ‘godmen’ had emerged and were obviously drawing large audiences. These religious formations could not be ignored, nor could they be dismissed as mere ‘reactions’ to the emerging multicultural

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2 In 2003, referring to this at the Annual Conference of the Political Studies Association, UK, Putnam pointed to the decline in religiosity primarily to underline the decrease in social capital. In his work he goes on to argue that people with stronger religious beliefs and commitments are more inclined to engage in collective activities.
ethos. The only comforting fact was that these religious groups were fairly unlike the ‘established Roman Catholic Church’, both in their attitudes and modes of functioning as well as their institutionalised forms. They could be viewed as cults, revolving around particular individuals and having little influence on public policy.

This perception of religion changed dramatically after 9/11. In his much-commented essay, ‘Clash of Civilizations’ (1993), Samuel Huntington had argued that the next major confrontation that the world will witness will be between different cultures and not between nation-states as we understand them. For him, there existed a deep incompatibility between the values enshrined in different cultures: if the Western Christian world represented the values of equality and freedom, Islam symbolised collectivism and respect of leadership. The events that followed the bombing of the Twin Towers in America, especially the war on Iraq, drew upon Huntington’s thesis and in some ways gave substantive content to his prognosis. As more and more people, including those who had been born and brought up in the West, donned symbols of Islamic identity, particularly the veil (see Riddell 2003), and religion became not just a matter of personal identity but a source of solidarity and a sense of community, it came to occupy a new position and centrality in social and political life.

Thus far it had been easy to label the ‘other’ at home and abroad as religious; it could be said that the new popularity enjoyed by religion came with the immigrant populations. It is ‘they’ (and not ‘us’) who are religious, and have brought into these countries a new form of religion — dominated by rituals and orthodoxy. This representation of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ was no longer tenable. The ‘other’ now was not just an alien outsider, there was also an internal ‘other’ comprising people who had been born and raised in the West. As these internal populations began to represent themselves as ‘different’, the existing understanding of religion and religious identities seemed no longer adequate for making sense of the new solidarities that were surfacing in these societies. If the controversies that followed the publication of cartoons on Prophet Muhammad manifested these new divisions and concerns, the racial profiling that the US State Department undertook to combat the threat of terrorism reinforced them. Collectively, they assisted in the crystallisation of difference. The challenges posed by the apparent distance between communities, however, unfolded another logic — one where there was an urgency to understand the other, and this time perhaps on its own terms.
These changes in self-perception and social representation had an impact on the way questions of religion and community were articulated and discussed. The new visibility of religion and the accompanying assertions made by religious communities gave an urgency to the task of factoring in the presence of different communities with diverse conceptions of life, histories and experiences. Three pragmatic considerations further reinforced the pursuit of this task. One, it was apparent that the experience of terrorism could easily lead to the polarisation of society and the stigmatisation of the ‘other’. If this was to be avoided, it was necessary to disaggregate the apparent ‘other’ and distinguish potential friends among all communities and religious groups. Two, the policies that some of these states pursued to counter the threat of terrorism had met with opposition from its own citizens. To understand this growing dissent and to minimise the possibility of alienating groups of citizens, it once again appeared necessary to understand the experiences and lived histories of different religious communities. Third, the controversies that followed the publication of the cartoons, on wearing a headscarf and other forms of headgear and the use of religious symbols, showed that religious beliefs mattered and affected different populations differently. Religion influenced people’s choices and some of these concerns had to be taken into consideration while determining the boundaries of what is or is not permissible, in the public arena. Indeed, John Stuart Mill’s ‘harm principle’ ([1859] 1971), through which the boundaries of the permissible had previously been defined, needed to be reconsidered.

In brief then, while previously the secular state had ignored religious communities, their beliefs and practices in determining public policies, in the changed scenario the presence of religion had to be factored in. Indeed, non-engagement with religion and religious communities appeared as a striking lack that needed to be corrected and rectified.

As mentioned earlier, there were pragmatic considerations that compelled an engagement with religion. But, along with them, there were also other normative considerations and political compulsions that were steadily pushing in the same direction.

Enlightenment thinkers, particularly the French Philosophes, had been critical of all sects and forms of institutionalised religion. Voltaire held the existing religious formations responsible for inculcating hatred and animosity among people. Though Voltaire was not an atheist
and he affirmed his faith in a ‘creating God’ ([1764] 1963: 105), he maintained that organised religion had bred intolerance.

There is scarce any city or borough in Europe, where blood has not been spilt for religious quarrels; I say, that the human species has been perceptibly diminished, because women and girls were massacred as well as men; I say, that Europe would have had a third larger population, if there had been no theological problems (Voltaire [1767] 1963: 111–12).

This understanding had defined the interface between democracy, state and religion in the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, but by the end of the millennium an alternative way of looking at social and religious institutions was gradually surfacing through different political discourses. On the one hand, the New Right created the space for a positive evaluation of non-state actors, including religious groups and institutions, and on the other, from a completely different vantage point, multicultural theory underlined the importance of ascribed cultural identities.

The New Right, which emerged as a political force in Europe in the 1980s, espoused the withdrawal of the state from social and welfare activities. Margaret Thatcher, for instance, criticised the welfare framework for having encouraged dependency on the state and spoke of the desirability of having a limited state that would protect the rights of the individual (see Boyle 1988; Eatwell and O’Sullivan 1990). While justifying the rollback of the state, this libertarian understanding strongly supported the need to build a network of vibrant social and civil associations to improve the administration and to create a more free and democratic polity.

Initially, the leaders of the New Right did not directly identify religious communities as agents of social development, but they also did not exclude them from the different social bodies that were expected to perform welfare-related tasks better than the state. In certain cases, particularly while dealing with immigrant populations and marginalised groups, the makers of social policy drew upon local support groups, which, at times, included religious leaders and community members. They in fact sought the help of the latter in providing social services to marginalised groups. Communities were also encouraged to organise themselves into self-help groups or act as facilitators, mediating between the government and the individual to ensure that community needs and demands were represented and, vice versa, that the available government resources were accessed by
all community members. It is this understanding that US President George W. Bush expressed shortly after being elected to office.\(^3\) He openly acknowledged the work done by faith-based organisations (FBOs) and argued in favour of a partnership between them and the government. The direct and unambiguous call to FBOs to assist in the social programmes of the government is perhaps the clearest indicator of the distance that some of the most advanced modern polities have travelled from the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Multiculturalism added another dimension to the critique of Enlightenment thought. It challenged the positive evaluation of the modern and, with it, the distinction between the modern and the traditional/primitive. In its place it emphasised the value of diversity and argued that the value of a culture could not be understood in terms of standards that are borrowed from our present liberal perspective. Due recognition needed to be given to each culture and the conceptions of a good life that it presents through its many expressions (Taylor 1994). Whether it was the response to the war on terror or the wearing of the veil/headscarf, liberal norms and secular modernity needed to factor in the diverse cultural contexts of life. Indeed, the failure to accommodate the diversity existing within a given polity,\(^4\) would result in more conflict, misunderstanding and mistrust — elements that were likely to endanger the very existence of a democratic polity.

The defense of diversity was backed by normative considerations in addition to pragmatic ones. Theorists of multiculturalism argued that cultural diversity can create an environment in which a liberal ethos can flourish; the presence of different cultures makes us aware

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\(^3\)In 2002, George W. Bush issued an executive order that enabled faith-based organisations to ‘provide federally funded services from designated programmes on the same basis as any other non-federally providers….’ (Canada and Ackerman 2003: 2).

\(^4\)However, only a few multiculturalists endorse all the social and cultural practices that exist in different societies. Most accept the need to draw boundaries and determine which of these practices are acceptable. Indeed most of them today accept that the concerns of diversity have to be reconciled with those of equality. Yet, their defense of diversity underlines the need to be self-conscious about our own different conceptual framework and recognise the prejudices, or pre-judgments, through which we approach the ‘other’.
of the different ways of organising ourselves and, in the process, offers multiple options from which we may choose (Kymlicka 1991). An encounter with other ways of living, different value systems and human projects also allows critical self-engagement (Parekh 1994).

Since there is no single criterion by which we can judge all ways of life, it is only through such encounters that we can appreciate our strengths and limitations.

While underlining the value of cultural diversity and the need to protect it, the multicultural perspective did not merely place individuals within their cultural community, it also valued culture as a marker of personal identity. Who we are, it maintained, is shaped at least in part by the culture to which we belong. Even though this conception of the self and its embedded nature was fairly problematic — it conceived culture as a seamless web rather than a historical construct with many diverse and at times even conflicting voices within it — it was able to underscore the need to consider cultural community membership as a relevant context for understanding individual and collective action. By this reasoning community membership could not be ignored. At the very least (that is, irrespective of whether we accept the norms of that culture or not) we need to acknowledge the presence of difference in our society. This itself provided sufficient rationale and urgency to the task of studying different cultures and communities.

It must be noted, however, that most theorists of multiculturalism spoke of culture rather than religion; they distinguished between the two and linked language to a cultural world (Taylor 1993; Sikka 2004). Some of its advocates clearly maintained that the special consideration for communities advocated by them was not intended for religious communities (perhaps because religion-based discrimination had already been noted and democracies were trying to address this). Yet, the arguments it offered for valuing cultural community membership could easily be extended to include religious communities. Indeed, as many critics pointed out, religion does influence, and at times even determines, aspects of a cultural life. The former, therefore, could not be excluded while dealing with cultural matters. So, even though this was an unintended consequence of multiculturalism, religious communities, particularly those with a distinct and different way of life, became legitimate and important subjects of inquiry.⁵

⁵ Multiculturalism advocated the protection of cultural diversity with a view to making minority cultures secure and equal in the public domain.
The influence of multiculturalism in shaping the current reflections of religion and religious diversity therefore cannot be discounted. Like the New Right’s thinking (which it was strongly opposing), multiculturalism too drew attention to religious and cultural communities and played a critical role in re-evaluating their place and relevance in the modern world. While ‘disenchantment’ with the secularised world had, for more than a century previously, propelled the desire for a larger unity (the writings of Hegel being a foremost example of this quest), the New Right on one side, and multiculturalism on the other, provided a rationale for recognising and accommodating communities in the discourse of contemporary democracies. The subsequent experiences of terrorism and growing inequalities in an indifferent and inhospitable market economy, along with the failure of the state to address emerging inequities, cumulatively created a space for the re-emergence of religious communities as the basis of new solidarities, and this was visible in almost all Western societies.

If the compulsions of the socio-economic reality made religion and other identity-based structures a relevant empirical category, multiculturalism provided a normative foundation for understanding and respecting their difference and the New Right created a space for their active presence and intervention in social life. There were thus multiple axes from which religion and religious communities entered the public domain, became significant players and gained centre stage even in the most advanced Western liberal democracies.

Whether the changes that we are witnessing in Western societies justify or warrant the label ‘post-secular’ is irrelevant here. The point that needs to be noted instead is that the certainties of the secular framework and the thinking with which it approached issues of religion and community have gradually faded away and been displaced by new frameworks which, in varied ways, place the study of religion and communities at the centre of contemporary social science.

It assumed that this would minimise ethnic conflict and the growth of an inward-looking psyche that foments fundamentalism. It is, however, paradoxical that the legitimacy that cultural and religious identities received through this theorising gave space for a range of different articulations of religious identities. Indeed, the space created by it could be used by some religious leaders to enter the public domain and advocate a more essentialist reading of religion and identity.
What we have in the process are alternative theoretical frameworks which are recognising religion and its role in radically new ways.

Religion, State and the Constitutional Framework

India did not endorse the notion of secularism that came from America. It did not consider a complete separation of religion from politics to be a necessary condition for ensuring equality of all religious communities. The path that India embarked on was shaped by her own experiences and the understanding of the political leadership that framed the Constitution of the newly independent nation. Nevertheless, in recent times, the debates surrounding the reassessment of religion and its role in Western secular polities have come to frame and inform our understanding of these issues in India. This has yielded a shift in our conception of secularism and our approach to questions of diversity.

The distinctiveness of the Indian conception of secularism has been discussed fairly extensively in recent times. It is by now widely recognised that even though India perceived herself to be a secular state it did not adopt the principle of separation. However, what has not been sufficiently discussed is the understanding of religion and religious communities that accompanied that chosen path. The framers of the Indian Constitution saw religion both as an ethical system of values as well as a sociological phenomenon. The Constitution recognised that religion offers a set of moral values that shape, at least some of the time, the choices that people make and the actions they perform. But in acknowledging this dimension of religion it did not ignore the fact that religion can be used instrumentally to mobilise groups and communities not only for pursuing certain desired goals but also for resisting and opposing the claims of others. To put it in another way, it recognised that religious communities can be a source of support to its members, but equally they may be a means of silencing internally marginalised groups and stoking inter-community conflict.

The experience of communal violence had made this latter aspect of religion and community life amply evident. It had shown that religion was not just a source of personal beliefs and practices; it was a readily available site of mobilisation. The framers recognised the potential of violence and solidarity that was co-present in religious communities; they also noted the patterns of internal stratification and hierarchy that existed within religious communities. Yet, despite this, they could not set aside and completely disregard the existence of
religion and religious communities. British colonial policies, involving separate representation for identified religious communities along with representation through separate electorate, had reinforced religious identities and made communities the subject of political discourse. Religious communities, some more than the others, were being mobilised politically and they were beginning to see themselves as distinct nations whose claims needed to be accommodated separately. The presence of and claims put forth by religious communities, therefore, could not be entirely ignored.

Religious communities were assertive in the political domain. But in addition to this they were also engaged in a variety of social welfare-related functions: they had established educational institutions and set up charitable trusts, some of which provided health/medical services to the community; communities ran and administered places of worship; set up sarais (inns) and boarding houses for their community members; provided scholarships for the young, and assistance or, more appropriately, charity to the needy, particularly from their own community. A range of different institutional structures associated with religious communities thus existed and the political leadership did not dismantle them. In accepting their continued presence, they implicitly acknowledged the contributions that communities made in this respect.

It is in recognition of these positive contributions that the framers of the Constitution accepted the demands of the Anglo-Indian community (which administered a large number of educational institutions with financial support from the colonisers) and stipulated that the state would provide, in varying degrees, financial support to them for the next 10 years. More generally, under Article 26 of the Constitution, religious communities were granted the right to establish and run their

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6 This was not unique to India. Indeed in America, as also in different parts of Europe, different churches in the post-Reformation world reinvented themselves and reclaimed their congregations through a range of social interventions, such as, providing education, care of the needy, the sick, the aged, and the poor.

7 Article 337 of the Constitution states:

During the first three financial years after the commencement of this Constitution, the same grants, if any, shall be made by the Union and the states...for the benefit of the Anglo-Indian community in respect of education as were made in the financial year ending on the thirty-first day of March 1948.
own religious institutions and charitable trusts. In addition to this, articles 29 and 30 enabled any group of individuals who constituted a minority to set up educational institutions of their choice. While both these articles, placed under the chapter on Fundamental Rights, were included to assure the minority communities that their religious and cultural identity would be protected and they would have the necessary space and facilities required to promote their distinct way of life, it also made space for religious and other communities to continue with, and perhaps even extend, their social and welfare-related functions.

At one level the inclusion of Articles 29 and 30 validated the work that was being done by religious communities and the different sects and groups within them. It indicated that despite the misgivings that many members expressed about religion, religious mobilisations and the working of religious institutions, the constructive dimensions of religious communities were recognised. But what is equally important here is that the framers of the Constitution did not see religious communities as agents of social development. There were many reasons for this. Religious communities were perceived to be exclusive entities with internal differentiations and hierarchies. Their work was essentially voluntary, so their reach was also limited. And, more importantly, even when communities/groups provided essential and important facilities, their primary intention was not to change the existing social structure. So even though the contributions made by different community organisations were recognised, these communities were not seen as agents of change or development.

During every succeeding period of three years the grants may be less by ten percentage, than those for the immediately preceding period of three years;
Provided that at the end of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution such grants, to the extent that they are a special concession to the Anglo-Indian community shall cease:
Provided further that no educational institution shall be entitled to receive any grant under this article, unless at least 40%, of the annual admissions therein are made available to members of communities other than the Anglo-Indian community.

In a like manner, Article 336 provided the Anglo-Indian community special consideration for appointments into posts in railways, postal and telegraph services of the Union. These privileges were to be gradually reduced and would be in effect for no more than 10 years.
Development involved, on the one hand, material and technological advancement, and on the other, democratic citizenship. The former was at best an incidental rather than a central concern of religion and, by extension, of religious communities. The latter too found only a weak resonance in the work of religious communities. While some of them were engaged in reform-related activities, few, if any, visualised a polity free of the hierarchies of caste and gender, religion and region. Religious communities could offer social services, and the value of these efforts could not be overlooked, but they could not supplant or substitute the work of the state, which was to be the main agent and catalyst of social change and development.

Most historical accounts of the period point out that the political leadership of the country wanted to construct a national identity that would transcend differences of caste and creed. However, even as the experience of the Partition, and the communal violence that followed, made the political leadership wary of religious communities and compelled them to consider matters of religion more carefully. The conditions in which India gained independence contingently privileged religious identities and differences (Chandra et al. 2000: 98–100), and pushed into the background all other identities. But the presence of other competing and multiple identities was not entirely forgotten (see S. Mahajan 1999; Misra 2005). Linguistic diversity, which had received considerable attention earlier, was to a limited extent recognised in the Eight Schedule of the Constitution.8

If history mattered and context shaped choices, it was on the issue of separate representation for religious communities. This issue was debated and discussed extensively in the early stages of the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. Eventually, in the final stage of the drafting of the Constitution (May 1949), the chairman of the Sub-committee on Minorities, H.C. Mookerji, withdrew this demand for separate representation. This fact has since been subjected to varied interpretations. While some scholars maintain that this shift came in response to the experience of the mass killings that accompanied the transfer of populations at the time of Independence, others argue that it was the voice of political leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel that prevailed finally and the demand for separate representation was withdrawn (Ansari 1999). Irrespective

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8Since the 1920s the Indian National Congress had formed committees on the basis of language.
of the considerations that may have prevailed in the minds of different actors, the willingness on the part of the members of the sub-committee to consider the withdrawal of community claims for separate representation suggests that they did not consider religion to be the single most important marker of identity. Religious identities were important but they were not the exclusive or defining basis of one’s identity. Had separate representation been granted to minority religious communities, this assessment of religious identities may have undergone a change. Clearly, however, when the Constitution was being framed religious communities saw their cultural and religious liberty related needs as being primary. Hence, they settled for the protection of these elements of their identity, even as the claim for separate political representation was withdrawn.

In brief, at the time of framing the Constitution of independent India the members (and the political leadership) recognised the presence of different religious communities. It assured these communities that their distinct identity would be protected and they would also have the space and the opportunity to promote it. The rights of religious communities, particularly the minority communities, to set up community-based educational institutions and other charitable trusts was also accepted and endorsed. But, and this needs to be emphasised, an individual was seen as having multiple identities. Religion was an important marker of identity but it was by no means his/her only identity nor even the defining identity. The attention that religion thus received in the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly can best be understood in terms of the specificity of that historical conjuncture. Perhaps nowhere more than at that moment was it evident that religious identity was subject to construction and many hoped that in the future it would not have the same salience in social life.

If religion was seen as a source of both ethical values and an identity that is open to construction and appropriation in society, religious communities were seen as complex entities with their own patterns of internal hierarchy and differentiation. For this reason, even as the diversity of religions was accepted and accommodated, religious communities were not considered the units of democratic discourse. The basic rights of citizenship were not linked to religious identity, and while minority concerns received special attention, the needs of religious and linguistic communities received equal consideration.

As mentioned earlier, India did not endorse the American model of secularism and the idea of keeping religion and politics completely separate. In India, religion had a presence in the public arena, but
religious communities enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy albeit only in matters of religion\(^9\) and spiritual well-being. Other matters relating to religion, such as, the social and cultural practices of particular religious groups, or financial administration of religious institutions, were open to state scrutiny and intervention.\(^{10}\) Article 25 of the Constitution permitted the state to intervene in the ‘secular’ aspects of the functioning of ‘religious institutions’. So even in the affairs of religious groups and communities a distinction analogous to the private–public kind was made. Eventually the courts were burdened with the responsibility of drawing the boundary and determining when state intervention in religious institutions is or is not permissible (G. Mahajan 1998).

Here again, religious communities were defined in terms of having a set of shared religious and cultural beliefs. The commonality among the members of a religious community was understood in these terms. It was assumed that on all, or most other matters they were divided along the lines of class, occupation, region, location, gender, and language. As such no shared interest was attributed to them. Religious communities could, under certain circumstances, share in each other’s fate; their experiences, and with it some of their concerns, may overlap from time to time. In situations torn by communal conflict and violence this linking of fates may be more pronounced, but this was, once again, a contingent phenomenon. Religious communities were not in themselves seen as having discrete and shared interests in matters other than religious beliefs and practices.

For this reason religious communities were not the direct subject of state policies, especially on matters of material wellbeing and development. As far as issues of development were concerned, differences

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\(^9\) Some analysts maintain that even in the sphere of religion complete autonomy has not been given to communities and their leadership. The courts have intervened even in this respect and in the name of ‘modernising’ religion prohibited certain practices. The most striking case in this regard being the banning of the public procession, wearing skulls around their neck, of the Anand Margis (see Mehta 2008).

\(^{10}\) Intervention was mandated in matters dealing with caste-based discrimination and practices associated with untouchability and segregation within the Hindu community. On most other matters, like the running of religious institutions, places of worship and community personal laws, state intervention was, under certain circumstances, permissible but not mandated.
of religion were considered to be irrelevant. Only the case of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) was considered separately, as they were seen as facing specific kinds of difficulties on account of their past historical experience of exclusion and cultural identity, respectively. At times, when it came to the implementation of some policies, for instance, those related to health and family planning, the cultural beliefs and practices of religious communities were factored in, but economic and political policies were by and large not designed to target specific religious communities. Even when the demands of specific groups were attended to, religious communities did not surface as the unit of analysis or the subject of policy discourse.

New Framework of Analysis in a Post-Secular World

The constitutional framework thus recognised religion but did not operate with a communitarian understanding of society. That is, it did not view individuals simply as members of specific communities. Even though it acknowledged the presence of communities and also instituted rights that protected religious and cultural diversity, the basic rights of citizenship were given to individuals as citizens and not as members of religious communities. This political imagination has gradually given way to a communitarian understanding of society. More and more policies today target individuals through their community membership, which has as a consequence become primary, and the notion of a plural society that has emerged links rights and opportunities directly to community memberships.

In the 1990s it was caste identity that was the privileged community identity, today it is religious identity that is taken to be the basis of social life and the plural structure of society. This shift in perspective is also manifested in the move from class-based to identity politics. While class politics had viewed communities as social and political constructs that were internally differentiated along the lines of caste, class and gender, identity politics tends to gloss over these differences. Communities surface, in the latter, as monoliths or homogeneous entities.

The recent debates on religious communities and development therefore have to be located in the first instance in this altered political imagination. Indeed, the initiatives taken by the United Progressive
Alliance (UPA) on forming the government at the centre in 2005 only show the extent to which the community has become the axis through which the needs of individuals for development goods are understood and approached.

Shortly after coming to office, the UPA government set up a Ministry of Minorities Affairs\(^\text{11}\) and, along with it, a time-bound National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities. This was in addition to the already existing National Minorities Commission that looks after the welfare and interests of the minority religious communities. More importantly, it constituted a committee, under the chairmanship of Justice Rajinder Sachar, to report on the economic, social and educational status of the Muslims in India.\(^\text{12}\)

This was not the first time that a central government had turned its attention to the Muslim community. Committees had been established even in the past and many State governments had introduced measures to benefit the Muslims, but the Sachar Committee was set up in a very different context. In the past the ideology of secularism had placed a constraint upon the use of religion as the unit of analysis, particularly when it came to policies aimed at pursuing distributional goals. In fact, on occasions when religion alone was taken as the basis of extending reservations to the Muslim community at the State level, the action was struck down by the court as being unconstitutional. The Indian constitution, they argued, did not consider religion on its own as a valid ground for identifying beneficiaries. In the new millennium the constitutional checks remained but the thinking on identities and religious communities had changed the world over and also in India.

Religion also entered the public arena in the modern secular West. Multiculturalism had made cultural identities a relevant context

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\(^{11}\) The Ministry of Minority Affairs came into being on 29 January 2006. It has a fairly wide charter, which includes: (i) planning, coordination, evaluation and review of the regulatory and developmental programmes relating to the minority communities; (ii) initiating policies, in consultation with other central government ministries and State governments, necessary for the protection and security of the minorities.

\(^{12}\) The Sachar Committee (as it has come to be known) was set up through a notification of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) on 9 March 2005, and it submitted its report on 30 November 2006.
of experience. It had pointed to the need to accommodate these identities and see how state policies impact upon them. In the fight against terrorism, states in Europe were trying to factor in religious identities. They were making an attempt to reach out to immigrant populations to see that these groups, on account of their identity, were not being excluded from the benefits of social welfare policies. Since informal processes of exclusion could also result in the alienation of a community, the needs of specific religious communities were being attended to within the liberal democratic framework.

In many of these states, marginalised immigrants were also people with a different religious faith, and this only reinforced the compulsion to engage with religion. In the context of the ongoing ‘war on terror’ attention was focused particularly on the fate of Muslim immigrant communities. In this process the discourse on development was re-assessed and older conceptions of secularism began to give way to a more plural conception of society. While few European states were willing to make any significant shift in their larger liberal framework to accommodate the cultural practices of these communities or to endorse plural legal systems or frameworks of jurisdiction, the cultural barriers that had stood in the way of accessing development goods and social services were being acknowledged and attended to. Development actors were increasingly disaggregating the population, identifying specific communities on the grounds of religious and ethnic identity, to help them access available development resources.

It is in this changed political and intellectual environment that the Sachar Committee was set up in India and given the mandate to look into the social, economic and educational status of Muslims. The committee submitted its report in 2006. The report identified three major concerns of all minority communities, particularly the Muslims: identity, security and equity. Among these three concerns the committee emphasised the issue of equity and, within it, focused overwhelmingly on the educational and economic status of the Muslim community.

The Sachar Committee Report (hereafter SCR or Report) pointed out that Muslims are lagging behind in all aspects. ‘[T]he community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development’ (SCR 2006: 237). In the field of education, economy and employment, and representation in public services, they are worse off than other social and religious groups, including the Scheduled
Castes (SCR 2006: 72–76, 90–108, also see 110–22). Fewer Muslims receive credit from banks (ibid.: 123–27) and social and physical infrastructure is weak in districts which have a higher concentration of Muslims (ibid.: 146–50).

The SCR has been described as path-breaking, marking an important departure from past practices. In the past, religious community had not been taken as a unit of analysis while deliberating on issues of development. The census in India reports on religious communities, their size and population in the country and in different regions, but until the last census hardly any attempt has been made to correlate religious community identities with other markers of development. Religious communities were at times factored in but this was primarily at the point of implementation of policies. So it was for the first time that a development checklist had been prepared with a religious community as the unit of analysis. Even though the Report made some references to the presence of caste-like structures within the community, gender divisions and class differences, the religious community was taken as a single unit and comparisons were made between the development profile of the Muslims as a single collective and other socio-religious groups. In the comparative development profile, literacy rates, presence in higher education, employment in government services and the public sector, ability to access welfare schemes and credit, healthcare, mortality rates, etc., were all compared by taking the community as a whole as the unit of analysis. This was undoubtedly a departure from past practices.

Despite this significant departure, many people, including some diehard secularists, have welcomed the Report on the grounds that this time the government has rightly focused on the material and economic concerns of the community, and not just its religious and cultural needs. In the past attention had been concentrated on the latter; the ‘real’ issues related to development by and large being neglected by political parties. There is no doubt in fact that issues related to education, housing, employment, etc., were rarely raised by the political leadership, and that most found it easier to appeal to the community by raising identity-related questions, but in the larger context of inter-community conflict questions of identity and security were equally real and important. Indeed, the latter continue to be significant and may need to be factored in to understand the inability of the community to access the available opportunities and the resources necessary for development and mobility.
The SCR did not accuse past governments at the centre or the States of prejudice against the Muslim minority; implicitly at least, it maintained that the policy of what might be called ‘benign neglect’, which flowed from the understanding that community identities were irrelevant in the pursuit of development goals, had disadvantaged the community. As a consequence, compared to all other social and religious communities, the Muslims were lagging behind in every respect, not having benefited even from the limited development that has occurred in different regions and parts of the country. Whether it is the urban Muslim population or the rural Muslim population, both are worse off than their counterparts from the majority community as well as other minority communities.

Analysing the Sachar Committee Report

The Report has initiated a new discourse on religious communities in India. When the Report was submitted several community leaders and political activists maintained that it had revealed the falsity of the Hindu Right-wing propaganda that accused governments of ‘pampering’ the Muslims. The Report had shown that far from being a pampered minority, the Muslims were the worst off; lagging behind all other communities, including the SCs/STs, on almost all indicators of development. As a community they faced a ‘development deficit’. Since then the question that has been uppermost in public discussions is — what should be done to remedy this situation? Should separate reservations be provided for the Muslim community, along the lines of the provisions already available for the SCs and STs? Although questions of policy and recommendations for the future have already begun to be raised, a debate has not yet taken place on the issues that have been brought to fore by the Report. The data that it has made available, the methodological framework it employed and the analysis that it has offered, all require careful consideration and critical engagement if appropriate and meaningful policies are to be devised.

This volume hopes to rectify this lack by bringing together scholars from different disciplines and methodological orientations. The articles discuss issues raised by the SCR and assess its findings, raise theoretical and methodological questions, interrogate the notion of development that has been employed in the Report and look at the lingering concerns of development in other religious communities, the majority and the minorities.
At the theoretical and methodological level, the volume examines the viability and implications of using the religious community as a unit of analysis, the adequacy of cross-community comparisons, and the appropriateness of treating all existing inequalities as alike, without any consideration to past history, societal practices, community engagements, and the relationship between communities. While presenting the economic and educational status of the Muslim community the SCR makes a comparison between the Muslim community and other social and religious groups. But the ‘other’ (which is principally a residual category here) comprises different communities with their own distinct history, needs, development concerns, and deficits. Since so little has been said about these other communities, this volume tries to construct a profile of these communities through the available data as well as their own self-representation and the debates going on within these communities.

Most people today agree that in order to lead a reasonably decent life, access to certain basic goods like clean drinking water, housing, healthcare, and education are essential, but can development be defined in these terms alone? There are communities with high literacy levels and simultaneously high rates of female infanticide; and others which show high literacy but are mostly self employed, which means that they enjoy no social security and other related benefits. How do we categorise these communities — as developed, when compared with communities with lower literacy but lower female mortality? The fact is that indicators like literacy and education alone do not give us the entire picture. Indeed they are of limited value for understanding the multiple kinds of development deficits and challenges that particular groups and individuals may face.

Equally important, communities, and individuals within them, have their own understanding of what constitutes a good life. Communities (or groups and sects) are also engaged in promoting that conception of a good life. What do they identify as the most important concerns? Has their self-understanding changed significantly over time? What results do community engagements with development yield? These are also questions that need to be explored as they frame a conception of development and reflect on the capacity of communities (or more appropriately, their members) to access opportunities. Availability of opportunities and the presence of necessary infrastructure are important prerequisites but the ability to access what is available depends upon a range of other factors, such as, the priorities of...
the individuals, past history and self-understanding of the community, and relationship with the state and other groups. These contexts are important and cannot simply be bracketed out of the discourse of development; and vice versa, the hurdles that limit or curtail a person’s ability to access available resources and opportunities cannot be understood without reference to these contexts.

The present volume raises these questions and in its attempt to contextualise the issues of development it attempts to map and profile some of the other minority communities. It tries to understand the kind of development concerns that exist in other communities, and through the experience of different communities nuance the concept of development that is so frequently used in the post-Sachar Committee discourse.

As was noted earlier, there is a wider social and political environment in which religion and religious communities are receiving the attention of social scientists and policy-makers today. There is also a marked shift in the way religion and religious communities are now being brought into the political and public discourse. What are the implications of these shifts for the nature of India’s democracy? These are questions that D.L. Sheth examines more closely in his articles. He represents this shift as a move from the paradigm of secularism to that of pluralism. At a time when it is customary to associate secularism with the protection of minorities, Sheth draws attention to the difference between a secular and a pluralist conception of society. The latter views the community as the central category but this does not mean that all forms of community-centred politics or identity politics have the same form. Caste politics tends to fragment, whereas religion-based politics totalises. For Sheth, when religion becomes the operative category one can expect the consolidation of majority and minority political discourses, which in turn have important implications for the functioning and survival of India’s democracy.

Communities had received recognition in the Indian Constitution. They had, as a consequence, some rights, but by and large they remained objects of patronage and hand-outs from the governments in office. The communities too have functioned along similar lines. Internally, they also operate through personal networks and patron–client relationships. What space does either of these leave for protecting individual liberty and ensuring equal respect to the marginalised sections within? These are the challenges that communitarian politics must confront; and these are also the reasons why we have to
be cautious about making the community the primary unit of social and political life, even when it comes to questions of distribution? Amir Ali hints at some of these difficulties in his article, as he critiques the ‘realist ontology of the group’ that takes groups/communities to be fixed entities with clear boundaries and membership. Communities are, he argues, subject to construction, both internally and externally.

This understanding is shared by many social scientists the world over, except that most of them argue that we need to use the category of the individual in order to protect and address the concerns of groups and communities. If groups/communities form and dissolve in response to external elements such as political and institutional discourse, then no ‘fundamental moral claims’ can be attached to groups/communities (Kukathas 1992: 110). If group boundaries change and vary then the group cannot be the basis of determining the shape of our institutions or be a firm basis of drawing boundaries for political and policy concerns. Some critics of realist ontology also maintain that when community becomes the basic unit of analysis, identities get hardened and reinforced. In fact, this is the ground on which secularists in India previously questioned policies that distributed benefits on the basis of group identity. Hence, the question that needs to be confronted and addressed is why should communities be considered the appropriate subject of political and public policy?

In the early 1990s Iris Marion Young argued that oppressed groups should not just have the opportunity to enter the public arena but also the prospect of shaping the norms that govern it. Special measures were therefore required to ensure their presence and participation in the public sphere (Young 1989, 1990). This reasoning has since been invoked to justify special provisions, especially separate representation, for oppressed and marginalised groups like women. In India, special representation was given to the SCs, who were victims of past practices of segregation. Should this provision now be extended to include other marginalised groups as well, particularly religious communities, even though they were never formally excluded from the political and public domain? Looking at the debates of the Constituent Assembly, Rochana Bajpai points out that in the Indian Constitution special consideration was justified on grounds of ‘backwardness’ and successive governments had been empowered to identify backward classes and initiate appropriate policies for them. The Constitution contains special arrangements in the form of
reservation of seats in the legislatures for the SCs and STs but similar provisions for religious minorities were eventually not accepted. The cultural rights that were given to the religious minorities had a weak normative basis in the Constitution as it was backwardness that most strongly justified the need for special measures.

This certainly helps us understand why the SCR’s designation of the Muslim community as backward has brought to the fore demands for separate representation of the community in public posts and educational institutions. Reserved seats or quotas for the Muslim community is one issue that has been thrown up by the Report, but by no means is this the only axis along which the report may be read. Amir Ali interprets the report as a way of making the public domain more inclusive, and Javeed Alam argues that it has initiated what might be termed ‘citizen politics’ — that is, a politics of empowerment that attempts to draw Muslims into the nation.

A shared religion and past experiences may have given the Muslim community a sense of shared identity, but can we really take the entire community as a single cohesive whole? It is by now widely recognised that almost all religious communities, irrespective of their religious theology, do have some form of internal differentiation and even hierarchy. Sociologists like Imtiaz Ahmed (1973) and Yoginder Sikand (2004) have pointed out that caste-like distinctions exist even within the Muslim community. Indeed, it is on the basis of this understanding that the Mandal Commission included around 82 different Muslim groups (primarily non-Ashraf) as part of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs, for whom seats are reserved in government jobs and now in higher education as well). In addition to caste there are differences of gender that affect the opportunities and resources, both public and private, that are available to an individual within a community. Under the circumstances, should a religious community be conceived as a single unit for measuring the development status of a group?

This is a question that comes up over and over again in the volume. Rowena Robinson and Surinder S. Jodhka, in their analysis of the Christian and Sikh communities respectively, point to existence of caste-like structures within each of these. Looking at the available data Robinson argues that there are development differentials within the Christian community along the lines of caste. Jodhka reminds us that the Sikh leadership at the time of Independence recognised internal differences, and with their intervention the lower castes among the Sikhs were placed along with the Scheduled Castes,
thus enabling them to receive the benefits of reservations. So even though the Sikh community has some shared concerns, differences exist on questions of development.

Besides pointing to the difficulties associated with the notion of a religious community as a coherent and cohesive category, the articles in this volume also consider just how we can attend to the needs of marginalised groups within communities. Javeed Alam suggests that policies should not target communities but districts and, more specifically, villages that have a high percentage of Muslims and are backward in terms of basic infrastructure. One might extend the argument that the government should attend to the concerns of the most backward districts, beginning perhaps with those that have already been identified in the SCR as having weak infrastructure but with a significant Muslim population. This would benefit the worst off in almost all the communities.

The Sachar Committee has pointed out that a very high percentage of Muslim-dominated areas have weak infrastructure. Exactly why the Muslim-dominated villages are lacking in infrastructure, however, is difficult to ascertain from the available data, and even the SCR offers no explanation for this. It is not easy to infer that this is a consequence of a deliberate policy of exclusion or neglect as some of the identified areas are in States like West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh — which have in different ways been conscious of the concerns of the Muslim population. West Bengal, for instance, is a State remarkably free of communal violence, something that has marginalised and ghettoised the Muslim community in many other parts of the country (Wilkinson 2004). In the case of Uttar Pradesh, political parties compete for the Muslim vote and over the last couple of decades at least some governments have been attentive to the needs of the Muslims. Perhaps the governments in these States have focused only on the security and identity-related needs of the community, but why does this attentiveness have to translate into the neglect of basic infrastructure? This requires explanation. If development goods are to reach the intended populations and regions, it is necessary not only to identify those pockets that are lagging behind but also explain, or at least understand, why some areas and communities continue to remain neglected. Without the latter, identifying specific regions or a community for preferential treatment may not yield the desired results.

The Sachar Committee makes a special case for the Muslim community on the grounds that it is facing a development deficit and is
worse off than almost all other social and religious communities, including the SCs and STs. In other words, the report does not merely point to the deficit faced by the Muslim community; it makes a comparison between the Muslim community and other social and religious groups. Perhaps the most striking assertion of the Committee is that Muslims are faring even worse than the most marginalised sections of our society — namely, the SCs and STs. Are such comparisons between communities and groups appropriate and reasonable? Given that all communities are internally stratified, can we take the Muslim community as a whole and compare it with a disaggregated Hindu community, where the worst-off sections have been individually identified and counted separately? These are questions that have been almost entirely ignored in the present debate, but definitely need to be examined systematically.

In this collection, D.L. Sheth points out that we do not possess the necessary data to be able to make comparisons across communities. Even the SCR relies on data that places all the Muslims together in one group, ignoring differences of caste and occupation, whereas data for the Hindu community is differentiated along caste lines. For instance, the worst-off among the Hindus, the so-called Scheduled Castes, are seen as a separate category, as a result of which the picture presented of the Hindu community is not an aggregate representation of that community. Moreover, since the lower castes in all communities are worse off than their higher-caste counterparts, this means that the comparison made across communities, on the basis of which a development deficit has been identified, is methodologically flawed. It gives neither an accurate picture of the existing social reality nor a sound basis for planning for the future.

With the existing government policy we have disaggregated data for some communities but not for all. This makes comparisons untenable. But this is only one aspect of the problem, Gopal Guru adds another dimension to this. He asks if it is at all appropriate to compare existing distributions and shares without reflecting on the past inheritances and experiences of the different communities? Taking up the comparisons made between the Muslim community and SCs, Gopal Guru argues that the policy measures initiated for the latter were a consequence of the political struggle of these groups and were related to the historical injustices faced by them. The present situation of the SCs is, in this sense, not comparable with the Muslim
community which did not wage a similar struggle for dignity and self respect. Therefore, even though there may be other communities that face deprivation and marginalisation, a comparison between different kinds of marginalisation is misplaced and serves little purpose.

Questions regarding a development deficit become further complicated when we take a close look at the data presented in the SCR itself. The data shows, for instance, that in government services and the public sector the representation of the SCs, unlike the Muslim community, is closer to their share in the total population but it also shows that a much smaller percentage of SC/STs live in 

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houses in urban India as compared to Muslims (47–48 per cent of the former as compared to about 60 per cent of the latter). A similar trend can be found in the rural areas. Also, even among people with 

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houses, the SC/ST population has the highest incidence of houses without a toilet facility (SCR 2006: 146, Figure 7.3). The point that needs to be stressed is that marginalisation manifests itself in many different ways and cannot be compared or ranked along a single continuum. Indeed, we need to be extremely cautious while arriving at any conclusion about the status of a community or the development deficit that it faces reached on the basis of a comparative perspective.

Ravinder Kaur underscores this point by using data from the National Sample Survey (NSS), 1983–2005. The SCR uses mean education figures for Muslims in the age group 7–16 to argue that they are lagging behind even when compared with the SCs (SCR 2006: 56–57), but if we take the ‘larger age group, of 8–24 years, there is hardly any difference between the two communities in 2004/5. Indeed, Muslim educational attainment is marginally higher, 5.3 vs 5.2 years (SC/STs)’ (ibid.). At another level, her article shows, youth literacy in all communities is increasing at a much faster rate than for the entire population. During the above period it increased by 24.5 percentage points and, contrary to popular perception, it does not seem that the barriers for the Muslim community are greater in the field of education. Even more importantly women in all communities — Hindus and Muslims — are progress at a much faster rate.

At the risk of repetition what must be emphasised is that the available data relating to development is extremely complex and tells a far more complicated story than what is often painted using a broad brush. When dealing with questions of development and planning for the future it is this more nuanced story that needs to be the focus of attention.
In the debate that has followed the submission of the SCR, development has often been reduced to such things as literacy, healthcare facilities, employment, housing facilities, etc. There is no doubt that these are the basic amenities that must be provided to all, however, a look at other religious communities shows that access to these basics, though necessary, is certainly not enough. Different communities face different kinds of challenges. The Sikh community, like the Muslim community, is largely self-employed but seems to be engaged in fairly different sectors. Relatively speaking, many more Muslims are engaged in textile work and metal handicrafts than the Sikhs and it is not surprising therefore that they have a higher percentage of household industry. Sikhs, in comparison, work in small trades that offer services to others so they have, as Jodhka tells us, a higher presence in the urban sector. Although we do not have the exact figures, a significant number of Sikhs send their children to schools run by the community, though most of these schools, like those of the Christian community, are affiliated to state boards of examination and follow the same curriculum. Given the nature of work that the Sikh community is engaged in one can assume that amongst them too a relatively small percentage enjoys social security benefits. Whether these members receive subsidised health facilities in dispensaries and hospitals managed by the community is not entirely known, but we do know that the community’s religious institutions run free dispensaries in many areas.

In his profile of the Sikh community Jodhka points out that the Sikh men and women, in rural as well as urban areas, have higher literacy rates, yet, paradoxically enough, this is a community that is essentially self-employed. What percentage of the community is working as professionals is again not known but we know that in Punjab, where Sikhs constitute more than 60 per cent of the population, employment opportunities are a matter of deep concern. Economic prosperity in the region has coexisted with, and some might say, even fed into social problems and political unrest in the State, manifesting itself in the desire to go abroad in search of better living conditions and work opportunities. Even though the community has a high percentage of educated women, it also has the most adverse male–female ratio. Literacy and higher income has not translated into the kind of development that enhances the freedom of the individual or his/her capacity to make choices.
The example of the Sikh community reveals the limitations of the way development has been understood and conceptualised in the recent development discourse. Rudolph Heredia adds another dimension to this discussion by focusing on the way development has been understood and redefined within Christian religious discourse. The Church always had a notion of charity, mercy and helping the weak and the needy. This traditional role of the Church has continuously been rearticulated; at an international level, the encounter with science and modernity has compelled the Church to rethink its role and position in society. In India, the encounter with the ground reality has yielded a ‘holistic’ understanding of religion where charity, development and justice stand together. Social intervention with a view to minimising inequalities, promoting development through access to basic opportunities and charity constitute a triad which defines the community’s ideals and goals of social and political action.

If the Sikh experience highlights the need to have a notion of development that includes gender equality and, following Sen (1999), the capacity to act as free individuals, the Christian experience underscores the link between minimising inequalities and addressing concerns of justice and equal respect. Both reveal the limitations of the current discourse on communities and development. This is not to say that a conception of development must be derived from a religious understanding of the same, but the experience, history and self-understanding of different communities cannot be ignored when we are discussing the issue of a development deficit. In fact, community discourses and self-understanding can offer, on the one hand, an insight into the range of issues that need to be addressed and, on the other, a more nuanced understanding of what the tasks of development are.

Heredia’s article points to the churning that is taking place within the Christian community and reveals also the contribution that a critical engagement with one’s own inheritance can make. Has a similar discussion taken place on issues of development within other communities, even the majority Hindu community? The latter question is explored by Pralay Kanungo and Sujata Patel. In a context where the cultural and political agendas of Hindutva have been the main focus of attention, Kanungo highlights how some of the most influential voices within Hindu religion understood and took up the question of scientific progress and development in the nineteenth century. His article underlines the notion of holistic
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development that was articulated by many of the community leaders: where social and educational needs are crucially linked with spiritual and cultural development. Patel takes a closer look at the notion of seva or service that exists in religious organisations. Through a case study of two organisations, one of which is closely associated with the voices of Hindutva, she reveals that the educational and health services that these organisations provide to members of their own community (along with others) is invariably accompanied by a set of cultural and religious messages as well.

Almost all religious organisations are engaged in providing healthcare, education and other social services to the people, including members of other religious communities. Constructing a profile of the Christian community, Robinson draws our attention to the vast range of community organisations supported and administered by the community. The Christian community currently runs some of the best known educational institutions in the country, and in addition to it, it also has a large network of hospitals, orphanages, homes, and shelters for the needy.

Like the Christian community, Sikhs have also set up several educational institutions, hospitals, dispensaries, inns, and free community kitchens. As Jodhka points out, the community is engaged in a variety of social and welfare-related functions, particularly in areas close to their places of worship. These community institutions are surely a valuable source of social capital for the members of the community. Most Sikh and Christian educational institutions are well integrated with the state system of education, and this is to some extent responsible for the high literacy present in both communities. Given the record of Christian educational institutions it is not surprising to find that the community has a large number of teachers, professionals, managers, and individuals working as clerical staff. Just what percentages of them are employed in community-run institutions is once again not known, but on the whole Christians have a high work participation rate.

The work undertaken by community-run institutions cannot be ignored. Yet, the point raised by Patel needs to be considered seriously. Do religious organisations engaged in offering services to the community also produce individuals and collectives that are readily available for mobilisation by the said communities for their different political and cultural agendas? These are questions that need to
be examined more carefully in the present context when the role of religion and religious communities is being recast.

The debate around the SCR, however, has revolved around the limited question of a community’s access to educational institutions (literacy), employment in government jobs, credit availability, etc. Even here the range of data that has been provided by the Committee has not been examined systematically. It has, for instance, been continuously pointed out that all religious minorities, particularly the Sikhs and Christians, have high literacy rates when compared with the Muslim community. This is surely the case, but, as Ravinder Kaur aptly reminds us, in the case of the Sikh community literacy for the girls has not yet translated into equality for them. The community has the most adverse female–male ratio. Then again, literacy may be higher in the Christian and Sikh populations (higher than the national average in each case), yet, if we look at the unemployment rate among graduates from different communities, the figure for the Muslims stands at 25.6 per cent and for all other minorities it is 25.3 (SCR 2006: 73). This is just one illustration of the difficulties we encounter when development is narrowly defined. Even more important, high achievement on some indicators may not translate into better living conditions for the members of that community. In fact, the article by Jodhka shows that high literacy with high unemployment rates among graduates yields a different order of problems which under certain circumstances are as pressing as the lack of education.

In the case of Muslims, it is evident that their presence in government services and the public sector is very small; other communities are present in relatively larger numbers when compared to their size in the total population. There are benefits that go with salaried jobs in the public sector and state services, and as Muslims are present in small numbers in this sphere it means that they do not have the social security benefits that these jobs provide. But this is just one part of the story, for the SCR tells us that a very small percentage of Muslims write the civil service examination. In 2003–04, Muslims constituted only 4.9 per cent of the total number of candidates who appeared for the written examination of the civil services (ibid.: 166). But they had a fairly equal success rate; of the candidates selected for interview and those that were subsequently recommended, Muslims constituted 4.8 per cent of the total at each stage (ibid.: Table 9.3). Just why are so few Muslims attracted to these jobs is the question
that needs to be asked if we are to understand the problems that communities face and the reasons why they remain marginalised.

There is another side to the development story. The data provided by the SCR shows that the single largest concentration of individuals, whether Hindus or Muslims, is in the field of agriculture, livestock, forestry, etc. However, while almost 60 per cent of the Hindu population falls within this occupation group, only 40 per cent of the Muslim population is engaged in these activities, though this is the field in which the largest number of people from the community are engaged. More than 20 per cent (as compared with 11 per cent of the Hindu population) are in the field of manufacturing (SCR 2006: 117, Table 5.9), and 16.8 per cent of the Muslim population is engaged in wholesale and retail trade, as compared to 8.1 per cent of the Hindu population. What is equally striking is that among the male populations of the two communities, 4.1 per cent of the Hindus are in the occupational group ‘professional, technical and related workers’, compared to 3 per cent of the Muslim population, but in the case of female workers in each community 3.5 per cent of the Hindus and 3.8 per cent of the Muslims are in this occupation group. In the category of administrative, executive and managerial workers, 3.9 per cent of the Hindu men and 4.7 per cent of the Muslim men are involved. The parallel statistics for the female population is 1.5 per cent for Hindus and 2.9 per cent for Muslims (ibid.: 119, Table 5.12).

Perhaps the most striking element is that in several areas of work, which necessarily entail an interface with the rest of society, trading, sales personnel, hotel and restaurants keepers, transport related work, machine fitters, assemblers, etc., the Muslim presence is comparable to that of Hindus. These are areas where, despite history of communal tensions, we have the basis of sustained and continuous interactions between members of different communities.

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13 Percentage of workers (all workers aged 15–64) by industry group, 2004–05.

14 According to the SCR, in urban India the percentage of Hindus (H) and Muslims (M) involved in the following occupation groups is —

- Merchants, shopkeepers, wholesale and retail trade: H–8.3; M–10.8
- Hotel and restaurant keepers: H–0.9; M–0.5
- Salesman, shop assistants and related work: H–6.3; M–9.3

See SCR (2006: 330, Appendix Table 5.4).
As far as policies and planning for the future are concerned, each individual statistic tells a partial story. We have a larger percentage of the SC/ST population receiving benefits of some form of social security system, yet a much larger percentage of them live below the poverty line and many more of them, when compared with other communities, live in houses that are not pucca, and even when they have pucca houses they have no toilet facility. We have communities with vastly different literacy percentages but almost the same unemployment rate among graduates.

The reasons for these differentials are many, they cannot easily be reduced to any one single factor. If we want to bring in the concerns of different communities we will need not only to reconsider our initial understanding of what constitutes development but also have far more complex and differentiated sets of policies rather than a simple one-off policy like reservation. Besides, in addition to inter-community differences there are also differences within communities. Almost all communities, when differentiated on the grounds of caste, occupation and gender, reveal internal variations in terms of access to opportunities and presence in different areas of work and life. There are also variations across regions. If we look at the worker population rates in each State (all workers, 2004–05), Muslims have a higher percentage in States like Delhi, Haryana and Punjab compared to the Hindus, but in several other States, like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, the percentage of Muslims is far less when compared with the Hindus (SCR 2006: 341). Even when a large percentage of the total population of a country is engaged in the same occupation, across communities the percentage of members involved in these occupations varies. Consequently, changes in a specific sector impact each of these communities differently. This only underscores the fact that planning for the future needs to be sensitive to such differentials in order to mitigate the effects of intended and unintended changes.

In India, whenever the question of backwardness or development deficit is discussed, a case is made for extending reservations to the identified group. There are some groups that believe that reserving seats for members of a marginalised community is the best way of dealing with the problem of marginalisation. In the case of the Muslim community the issue that has come up is that of constitutional correctness. The Supreme Court has in the past maintained that religion alone cannot be the basis of reservations. Tanweer Fazal examines the question of reservations for Muslims. Looking at the
contexts in which reservations have been made for at least some sections of the Muslim population in different States, he offers three frameworks within which the benefits of reservations can be extended to the Muslim community. The Sachar Committee noted these options briefly in its report, but interestingly enough did not make any recommendations for reservation for the community. Even as it underlined the need to ‘strengthen the legal provisions to eliminate’ discrimination (SCR 2006: 239), it asked, among other things, for the setting up of an Equal Opportunity Commission to ‘look into the grievances of the deprived groups’ (ibid.: 240).

Most of the articles in this volume discuss the question of development in relation to religious communities as they have emerged in the post-Sachar Committee scenario. However, no discussion of development, religion and community can be complete without taking up the question of personal laws. There is no doubt that all community laws tend to disadvantage women, but over the years some changes have been made in the personal laws of the Hindu, Christian and Parsi communities. This is not to say that these revised laws are completely gender just, but they have moved significantly in that direction. However, similar changes are yet to be made in the case of the Muslim community. This has allowed some groups to link development with the establishment of a uniform civil code (UCC). V. SriRanjani explores this aspect by taking up the case of Muslims in Goa, a State where the UCC is already in effect. Her case study shows that the UCC has not entirely fulfilled its promise of ensuring gender equality; parallel community institutions continue to exist. So while the law provides some reprieve to women at the formal level, the benefit accrues to the concerned women only when the legal order/decision is accepted by the community institutions. Even more importantly, the justification for the UCC is that it will treat all religious communities equally. In actuality it has rendered the Muslim population invisible, which the local community members are reluctant to change because they feel more secure in their invisibility.

The operation of the UCC in Goa is just an illustration of the complex ways in which marginalisation surfaces in different contexts. Unless we deal with the multiplicity of conditions that intersect to create a given scenario, the chosen policy initiatives are likely to falter and fail us. The case of development and development deficits is no different in this respect. In a context where the overwhelming tendency is to manage social reality and create subjects rather than
citizens, only some things become newspaper headlines and subjects of political debate. The task that an intellectual and academic engagement can serve in this environment is to draw attention to the totality — comprising a complex of relationships between many discrete observables and outcomes. A critical interest can only be served when the complexity of the social world is not reduced to abstracted particulars that can be readily appropriated for technical control over the political and public domains.

References


In the closing decade of the twentieth century profound political changes took place in India. While the changes may have occurred as part of the ongoing process of democratisation, today, 20 years after the 1989 elections, it seems the changes that were not managed (or were mismanaged) politically and institutionally have produced a severe breach in the secularising process of democracy. The independent Indian state managed and evened out considerably the built-in asymmetrical relationships in what is a deeply hierarchical, multiethnic (lingual) and multi-religious society. It redefined — institutionally and legally (through the Constitution) — the relationship among antecedent pluralities (communities), and between them and the state using the new terms of secularism which recognised the basic rights of individuals qua citizens and their collectively-held cultural rights as members of ethnic and religious communities. However, this framework, that had then imparted sustainability to Indian democracy, has today been replaced by a new form of pluralist discourse.

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that totalises interests and community identities. This has resulted in a battle between majoritarian and minoritarian communalisms.

**Democracy’s Secularisation Process**

Democratic secularisation, more appropriately political secularisation, unlike interminable debates on secularism, is not about ideological contestations. It is democracy’s silent, if not insidious, way of permeating every corner of social, economic and cultural life with politics. In so far as politics opens up competition for different kinds of goods, particularly for political power, in the long run, for better or worse, it desacralises relationships in society — including those between an individual and a collectivity (such as caste, tribe, religious community, etc.). Like any open competition, political competition between collectivities ends up linking collective pursuits and goals to individual ends and desires.

Political secularisation, which is intrinsic to democracy, works quite differently from modernity’s project of secularisation. The latter privileges, among other things, the individual over collectivities. This is not, however, the case with political secularisation. In so far as institutions of democracy derive their legitimacy from responding and conceding to popular demands and sentiments, they are often compelled to recognise, and even privilege, collectivities. However, for effective functioning in politics and for maintaining their very identities, these collectivities have to acquire new, democratic habits of handling political power, to ensure that the power of the group becomes politically (i.e., electorally) viable. Such politics of viability invariably involve alliance-making among diverse collectivities and, more importantly, making the collective — in whose name power is accumulated — accessible and disposable for the use of its members. That is, to serve their own social (mobility related) and individual goals. Put differently, it is democracy’s structural autonomy from modernity which, at one level, draws antecedent collectivities directly into politics. In this process, collectivities are required to adapt to the ways of democratic politics — resulting in what is often called the politicisation of social and cultural collectivities. The antecedent collectivities entering politics in turn modify, and even change, the ‘universal’ normative basis on which the institutions of democracy are expected to function. They bring with them the operative norms of the society in which democratic institutions are set up — yielding the other, insufficiently recognised, process of the socialisation of politics.
Political secularisation, thus, is a process democracy generates from within itself, for its own survival.¹

In India this process worked vigorously, especially in the 1980s, through democracy’s ever-expanding sphere of political participation, involving the high-paced inclusion of numerous groups of socially excluded populations straight into the arena of political power. Until recently, these groups were systematically kept away from centres of power; they only received the ‘impacts’ of power, without participating in its making or its use. The inclusion has been processed simultaneously through: (i) institutions of political parties and elections, (ii) policy initiatives of the state, and (iii) political–social movements that force such issues and policies on the state — necessary for creating entry-points but which the state may not always find convenient to address. On the whole, it seems that this is how political secularisation works: processing the awareness of exclusion on the part of a multitude of social–cultural groups into political demands for ‘rights’ and ‘justice’ on the one hand, and the state itself evolving mechanisms and procedures to accommodate the social–cultural identities and idioms of the incoming groups on the other.

The recognition and a large-scale entry of these usually unseen and unrecognised entities/collectivities into politics created a new dialectic in society: between the political (state) and the social–cultural — the former was seeking to establish its hegemony (primacy) over the latter. It therefore unsettled the established equations of power and the norms that sustained these relationships. An even more problematic aspect of such politics of inclusion, however, has been that the identities and idioms the incoming groups brought into politics by and large remained untranslatable in terms of the ‘universally’ established norms and procedures of a liberal democracy. This has resulted in creating a wide gap between the normative–institutional discourse of democracy — the terms of which have been set generally by sections of the ruling elite (English-educated upper castes), to whom political power accrued by virtue of their occupying higher positions in the traditional hierarchy — and the everyday politics of groups forcing

¹My discussion of political secularisation draws on insights developed by Rajni Kothari in his Politics in India (1970). Political secularisation, however, is conceptually distinct from Kothari’s politicisation, in that the concept political secularisation treats secularisation as a process integral to democracy and not modernity.
their entry into the new power system and justifying their claims to power often in terms of their numerical–collective strength, rather than in normative, democratic terms. The former viewed such politics as distorting the secular and democratic functioning of the institutions of the state, and the latter saw this argument as a strategy of the established power-holders to prevent the entry of new groups into the power system opened up by democracy.

The inevitably messy and chaotic character of this high-intensity politics of democratisation, even as it empowered the socially peripheralised majority of the Indian population, is fraught with the danger of the open and competitive politics of representation being reduced to a sheer politics of numbers, and democracy to the singular principle of rule by the majority.

However, it seems that the challenge that the politics of numbers (identities) has posed to institutions of representation is not insurmountable, for even such politics must articulate not just identities but also interests and issues, and in the process seek a degree of normative legitimacy. Put differently, insofar as democratisation involves the everyday politics of negotiation and trade-offs between the social–cultural and the political, the primordial and sacral language of collectivist movements will continue to be recast in political terms; and the politics serves collectivist interests in secular terms. Thus, even if the political discourse of some caste and ethnic movements continue to be carried out in emotional, communitarian terms, their actual politics have been about forging social alliances and political coalitions across social hierarchies and ethno-cultural groups, and, in the process, expanding the functional social, cultural and economic choices of their individual members, who, in fact, typically use collective politics for their individual ends. This is how, it seems, secularisation works through democratic politics.

Over the course of the last two decades though secular elements — which had become integral to democratic politics — are being rapidly eroded. The process of political secularisation, that evolved over a long period involving hard political choices made by Indian leaders during the freedom movement, and the grafting of these (secular) elements in the basic structure of values and procedures laid down by the Indian Constitution and their strengthening through a series of social, economic and cultural policies is being overtaken by a new process involving the all-round communalisation of Indian politics — majoritarian as well as minoritarian. This change in politics,
a massive erosion of secular elements from a democratic system, has become manifest simultaneously through changes that have occurred in political organisation, in discourse and in the policy process, causing a severe disruption, rather a big rupture, in the established on-going secularisation process of Indian democracy. The politics of the past two decades is an account of this rupture.

**Collapse of the Party System**

The party system, which had organised political competition and evolved some principles and practices for processing electoral outcomes into government formation, collapsed by the end of 1980s. And today, after 20 years and seven national parliamentary elections, the new (coalitional) system that has emerged, is yet to acquire institutional stability.

The decline began with the 1989 election. Far from being a chance occurrence, as was then seen, wishfully, by many a politician and analyst, 1989 inaugurated a decade of governmental instability (five elections being held in 10 years), political turbulence and the making of a volatile electorate. It turned out to be truly a system-changing election. All national elections beginning with 1989 failed to produce electoral majority for any one party.

With growing electoral and legislative instability, massive shifts occurred in the support bases of political parties, both in quantitative as well as qualitative terms. The Congress party, which had already conceded substantial Other Backward Classes (OBC) votes to different parties in earlier elections (since 1967), also steadily began to lose chunks of its support bases to a number of regional and sub-regional parties, especially from among the Dalits, tribals and Muslims, in different parts of the country. To the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) it substantially lost its urban and upper-caste support and, to a lesser degree, tribal and Dalit support. In the 1989 election, the Congress was reduced to under 40 per cent votes and less than 200 (197) seats. Since then it has remained in a declining mode, the only exception, being the 1991 election held under the special circumstance of the unfortunate assassination of its leader Rajiv Gandhi; it won enough seats to be able to manage the small numerical deficit needed for continuing in government for the given term. In short, 1984 was the last election in which the Congress won majority seats as a single party; it was a phenomenal electoral success with 48 per cent vote share and 415 seats. Since then it has not been able to get a clear majority in
The Crisis of Secularism

It appears to have reached a structural barrier. Note that using 1984 as the base, in the 1989 national election, electoral support for Congress declined by over 8 per cent (39.53 per cent) and number of seats fell to less than a half (197). As against this, the non-Congress non-BJP vote (which largely comprised the vote for regional and smaller parties) claimed nearly half the total number of seats and votes, 247 seats and 49.11 per cent of the votes. If we look at the overall statistics for the last four elections (1996–2004) it seems the Congress is stuck at between 26–28 per cent votes and to 140–145 seats. In sum, although the Congress has tenaciously retained its political character as a national party, receiving support across castes, religions and regions, its old, long-cultivated support bases are becoming thinner with every election without being sufficiently compensated by gains from votes of religious minorities and non-partisan citizens. These bases have been lost to regional and sub-regional parties, and also to a significant extent (especially the urban middle-class vote) to the BJP. In order to cross the electoral barrier it faces the Congress will have to evolve a political strategy aimed primarily at retrieving the support it lost to regional and sub-regional parties in the 1990s and parts of the urban middle-class vote from the BJP. Further, it will have to prevent the BJP from expanding into new electoral spaces at the State level and from establishing dominance of political discourse at the national level.

The BJP, on the other hand, entered the 1990s with a bang (after its miserable performance in 1984), winning 85 seats in the parliament and 11 per cent of the vote share as against two seats and 7 per cent vote share it had in the previous election. Since then, through the course of the 1990s, the BJP steadily maintained its electoral performances. Its pre-2004 dream of reaching the number of seats needed for registering a clear majority in the parliament, however, remains as distant as ever. It is stuck at about 20–22 per cent national vote share and 130–160 seats. This stagnation is due to the same reason for which the Congress experienced decline in the 1990s; namely, the capturing of large electoral spaces by regional parties. The regionalisation of politics has brought about a long-term structural change in India’s...
The emergence and growth of the smaller, sub-regional parties has had far-reaching implications for the growing instability of the party system. Although these parties have not yet become competitive at the national level, they have registered a significant presence at the regional level. In some States, like Tamil Nadu, they have begun to stall the expansion in the support bases of the major regional parties. Regional parties, which are playing an important role in the new configuration, tend to represent directly one, or at the most two or three, socially interrelated communities of the region. They, in fact, are more like community organisations going by the name of ‘political’ parties. They have an inelastic but ensured support of specific caste–ethnic groups but which they cannot — perhaps they may not want to — expand. But in the political marketplace they earn steady dividends, finding direct representation in the national government, often disproportionate to the numbers of their electors in the population. Their leaders often succeed in influencing crucial governmental decisions and they tend to wield, despite their numerical smallness, veto powers in a coalition.

To sum up, changes in the party system has produced four long-term negative consequences for the secularisation process. First, regional and sub-regional parties have by now become deeply entrenched in the party system, making the national parties structurally dependent on them for support. The two major parties — the coalitional leaders — appear to be electorally hemmed in from all sides, unable to substantially expand their support bases. This is not allowing the coalitional system to attain stability. The other important factor hampering its stability is that sufficient political and legal–constitutional recognition is not accorded to pre-electoral coalitions. Until long-term institutional and political solutions are

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3 For an insightful discussion on changes in the party system brought about by the politics of the 1990s, see Yadav (1999).
4 For insightful analyses of electoral data over time, concerning the rise of regional and sub-regional political parties also see, Mehra and Sharma (2008).
found, the post-1989 structure of inter-party competition seems fated to remain in the grip of the cynical politics of blackmail or that of electoral desperation, often leading to communal polarisation.

Second, the change in the nature of political competition has reduced the electoral process into a pure politics of votes. The idea that elections are not the be-all and end-all of democracy, but are the means for acquiring political legitimacy for the rule of an elected government has lost appeal, even meaning. Third, political parties have by and large been rendered incapable of playing the mediating role and, of reconciling diverse interests and identities between the state and society. As a result, parties at the regional and sub-regional levels function more as coalitions of specific ethno-caste and ethno-religious groups than as political organisations articulating the collective interests and aspirations of the region as a whole. In this sense, regional politics today is an aggregated register of ethno-caste and ethno-religious interests and identities.

Fourth, the national parties, especially the coalition leaders, are now compelled to find or invent ‘national issues’ which can motivate and mobilise vast sections of voters to transcend their regional–subregional and caste loyalties. This search for ‘transcendent’ pan-national politics has led to the communalisation of politics. Ironically, in such a situation, it is the caste–ethnic and regional politics which serve as a countervailing force to communal politics. Hence, the political strategies of the two parties, the Congress and the BJP, are competitively alike: how to stall and, if possible, push back the advance of regional and sub-regional parties. The solution they often resort to is strangely similar: the totalising politics of majoritarian communalism versus minoritarian communalism.

Communalisation of the Political Discourse

In the post-1989 phase of political instability and electoral stalemates, which appeared almost irreversible thanks to the steady decline of the Congress party, the BJP and other Sangh Parivar members saw a big political opportunity for themselves. This was an opportunity they had always wanted to create in Indian politics by using every means available at their disposal, but had never quite succeeded. Now that opportunity virtually fell in their lap — changing the political discourse as well as institutional politics in favour of the idea of India as a Hindu nation. They raised and orchestrated a nationwide debate on cultural nationalism, and sustained it politically by
launching the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. The objective of this politics was to convert the demographic majority of Hindus into a political majority, ensuring a durable, if not permanent, electoral majority — a first step in the direction of making India a Hindu nation. To realise this possibility, the BJP (along with the Sangh Parivar) has been working frantically on various fronts, and with a longer timeframe in mind. It is, therefore, not overly concerned about its current predicament of being halted from achieving an electoral majority in the immediate future. Its primary concern is about not losing the initiative in the politics of discourse on secularism and thus expanding political spaces nationally on its own and deepening electoral power in the States through coalitional politics. It would be interesting to see how the BJP worked in the 1990s to change the terms of political discourse by radically altering its approach to political mobilisation as well as to electoral politics.

First, the BJP transited smoothly from a discourse which it had itself created, that of genuine versus pseudo-secularism (as if the party really was committed to secularism) to a new one of Hindu *Ekta* (unity). This was initially articulated defensively, in terms of cultural nationalism, but later, brazenly, as Hindutva — a political doctrine that claims that India belongs to Hindus and asserts that all people living in India must identify themselves historically and culturally as Hindus, even as they follow their different religions. Second, the BJP devised a new electoral strategy, which it implemented at two levels. At one level it forged a stable coalition with regional parties and thus created a wide political gap, a structural separation, between the Congress and the regional parties. It effectively used coalitional politics to emerge as a major national-level party, an equal contender for power vis-à-vis the Congress. At another level, the strategy involved dispersing the support structure of regional parties and incorporating its disintegrating parts within itself or in the coalition it led. One consequence of this strategy — as it was not merely an electoral strategy — was that in as many States as was possible the Congress faced a strong electoral contender in the form of a major regional party or the BJP. Thus, politics in many States was reduced

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5For an engaging historical narrative showing how the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) kept the politics of Hindutva alive in its worse days and could bring it into the centre of Indian politics in the 1990s, see Kanungo (2002).
to a bipolar competition between the Congress and the BJP, or between the Congress and the BJP’s coalitional partners, and at the national level too the Congress and the BJP emerged as the two major contenders for power. This radically changed the old structure of inter-party competition when Congress was the only major national party that faced the disunited opposition of disparate parties.

All this has been a part of the BJP’s long-term political programme, though it unfolded in its politics in the 1990s. Its objective was to create communal polarisation nationally and in the process secure and durably consolidate the Hindu majority support in its favour. This was sought to be achieved through the framing of electoral issues and conducting mobilisational campaigns with the idea of ‘nationalising’ communal politics and sentiments. To this end the BJP engaged in a series of campaigns, beginning with L.K. Advani’s rath yatra, and then mobilising grass-roots support of Hindus in the form of bringing bricks to Ayodhya from different parts of the country for building the Rama temple at the site of Babri Masjid. While the party may not have built the temple on the site of the mosque, but it did literally build, brick by brick, the political edifice of Hindutva in the wider society.6

As the politics of Hindutva expanded, winning an electoral majority became an expectation incidental to this process. It culminated in the destruction of the Babri structure, with its aftermath communally polarising almost every aspect of India’s political and social life.

The Counter-Discourse

The growth of ethno-religious majoritarianism witnessed during the decade of the 1990s cannot be attributed solely to changes internal to the party system. Nor can it be seen as a linear outcome of the Hindutva movement. It was a process to whose growth multiple political agencies and actors contributed — and continue to do so — from within the Left and liberal secular spaces. Social activists and public intellectuals of Left and liberal persuasions failed to make sense of the caste–ethnic politics of the 1980s. They saw the so-called caste movements for democratic participation and social justice (especially the policy of reservations) as constituting a threat to the

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6 Using empirical data Suhas Palshikar (2004) has shown how Hindutva politics expanded and moved towards the centre, occupying social–structural spaces.
values and institutions of India’s modern secular state. In effect, they treated them, in their discourse and politics, as anti-secular, communal movements. Further, while facing the Hindu communalist assault on secularism (for minority pandering), they preferred to frame the policy and public discourse on secularism in counter-communal (minorityist) terms rather than in secular terms. Thus, in countering the BJP riding on the wave of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, national-level parties and the major regional parties and civil society groups, unaligned to the BJP, all engaged in a political discourse, whose terms were set by the BJP. Under the circumstance they perhaps believed that the best they could do was to counter the Hindutva discourse using the same ethno-cultural vocabulary but turn it around in a way that would help them cultivate long-term political loyalties from non-Hindu religious communities and, generally, anti-Hindutva secular support. If nothing else, such a strategy was seen as being necessary for staying at the forefront of national-level electoral politics. The counter-discourse that thus emerged was principally couched in terms of the threat the Hindutva movement posed to other (minority) religious communities, to their cultural rights and their identities. They also vociferously, and rightly, protested against the symbolic as well as physical acts of violence committed by activists of the Hindutva movement. However, especially after the destruction of the Babri Masjid, but more particularly after the Gujarat carnage, some of them strongly justified, if not openly advocated, the counter-violence of the victims of the Hindutva movement. Strange conceptual conflations emerged in this counter-communal discourse: seeing Hindutva communalism as the other face of the ‘oppressive’, caste-ridden Hindu society and casteism as ‘caste-communalism’ — a variety of Hindu communalism.

The left and liberal discourse on secularism thus became framed in negative, totalistic terms — a unidimensional doctrine which was defined in oppositional terms and developed to counter the politics of Hindu communalism or what was also termed as majoritarianism. This discourse, while it did achieve the important goal of halting the advance of the BJP, prevented long-term issues, crucial for secularism, from entering the public discourse. Issues such as the harm the Hindutva movement caused to the institutions of the secular state and to the idea of the rule of law, when raised, remained confined by and large to editorial comments in the media. They were rarely articulated in political campaigns. In effect, the secular discourse got
confined to the narrow, electoral terrain. While the pro-minoritarian anti-Hindutva campaigns got pitched nationally, they expanded the discourse in counter-communal, rather than in secular terms. It thus became a mirror image of the Hindutva discourse. This counter-discourse succeeded in targeting the BJP electorally, but did not succeed in bringing the discourse back to the national–secular space within which Hindu nationalism in the past had been dealt with effectively — namely, India’s distinctive secularism, which maintained the secularity of the state while promoting sustainable diversity and plurality in society. Had the counter-discourse responded frontally to BJP’s charge of pseudo-secularism and thus compelled it to hold ground on its claim to genuine secularism, the ‘secular’ parties would have clearly exposed the anti-secular and anti-national politics of cultural nationalism.

Instead, the ‘secular’ parties, as well as a section of public intellectuals and civil society groups, responded to the charge of pseudo-secularism dismissively and with contempt, but as the charge persisted they responded defensively by shifting the terms of discourse to the idea of pluralism; they now almost unceremoniously dumped the term secularism and privileged pluralism. Now pluralism, not secularism, began to be affirmed as constituting the opposite of communalism. Although both terms were used interchangeably, secularism was now explained and defended as pluralism.

The shift to pluralism also appeared defensive not only because it was unexamined and sudden, but also it appeared to justify the politics of minoritarianism as constituting a legitimate response to the advancing majoritarianism. It was almost as if the charge of pseudo-secularism had stuck in minds of those leading the counter-discourse. Perhaps their idea of secularism like the ‘genuine secularism’ of the BJP was also not anchored firmly in the distinctive Indian-Constitutional idea of secularism.

To put it in another way, the unanchored secularists could not effectively counter the charge of ‘minority appeasement’ made by the votaries of cultural nationalism — and this when all that the government of the day was doing was to protect the constitutionally endowed cultural rights of religious minorities. The terms and arguments they used in defending such measures in public discourses sounded pro-minoritarian rather than secular. Facing the charge of adopting ‘double standards’ (one set for the majority community and another for minorities) in the practice of secularism, they assumed
a defensive posture and found it convenient to make their counter-argument in terms of ‘pluralism’ and ‘diversity’ — rather than in the established terms of constitutional secularism which explicitly recognised the vulnerability of groups (social as well as religious-cultural) and provided for special protective and enabling measures for them. It seems they felt more comfortable, rather enthused, in their rebuttal to the ‘appeasement charge’ by characterising it as an expression of majoritarian communalism, rather than responding to the merit, if any, of the argument. In the process, electorally motivated but communally appealing actions of a self-defined ‘secular’ party in power (be it in a State or at the centre) aimed at placating the communitarian leadership of a religious minority — thereby securing the ‘vote bank’ — began to be defended in terms of ‘pluralism’. It hardly mattered whether such measures compromised the neutrality of the state or its commitment to the rule of law. Such a neo-pluralist view of minority rights and identities, in effect, led to the propounding of a new principle of secularism in public discourse, by which the state could legitimately abet, even aid, the communal political practices of a religious group. This argument was based on a peculiar idea of pluralism which held that the state should not just allow but must also recognise and proactively work to advance the collective interest and identity of religious communities if these were minorities. Here the underlying assumption is that membership of the state is constituted not of citizens qua citizens but of citizens-in-communities. The new pluralist secularism, however, could not escape facing assertions of a similar communitarian principle by the ‘leaders’ of the majority community. When these assertions and claims were backed by governmental power (of the BJP-led coalition), they began to be articulated as rights of the totality of Hindus. The assertions being made implicitly in the language of the Hindu Rashtra (nation) made such totalistic communal claims appear legitimate.

The new discourse considerably enfeebled the constitutionally espoused and distinctive (equal distance from all religions and religious communities) secularism of the Indian state. It diluted the principle of secular neutrality, exposing the state’s institutional mechanisms and procedures, usable for partisan ends. The neo-pluralist turn in the discourse legitimatized the politics of making the state internally pliable to communitarian claims of different collectivities, each claiming an equal opportunity to communalism, along with a slice of state power in proportion to its numerical power. Such politics
pushed the Indian state in the direction of becoming a permissively communal, and when not communal, a partisan state.

In sum, the old established secular discourse was thus transformed and replaced by a discourse of ‘pluralism’. The majoritarian assault on secularism that refused to recognise the cultural and religious identities and rights of minorities, on the one hand, and the neo-pluralist discourse which tended to favour the politics of totalising the interests and essentialising the identities of the minority religious communities, on the other, resulted in an ongoing political battle between majoritarian and minoritarian communalism. The minoritarians inserted a strange pluralist logic in the secular discourse, in which pluralism is used as a defense of religious minoritarianism and secularism as a weapon of offense against ethno-majoritarian politics. Put simplistically, the message was: secularism for the majority and pluralism for minorities. At the same time, the majoritarian’s counter-logic converted their communitarian claims on the state into the language of the ‘democratic’ right of the majority, thus obfuscating the ‘political’ and the ethno-religious.

The shift in discourse, however, also worked in another way. It achieved significant gains for neo-plural secularism. It pushed the aggressive majoritarian–communal campaigns on the defensive and to the periphery of competitive politics. It acquired moral–political legitimacy, especially after the post-Godhra massacre of Muslims in Gujarat. In the run-up to the 2004 elections, the BJP and Sangh Parivar retreated from the majoritarian–communal campaigns, foregrounding ‘development issues’ instead. Leading the coalition of ideologically diverse parties, the language of cultural nationalism was now put on hold. Instead ‘India’s emergence as a global power’ became the theme song, culminating famously in the ‘India Shining’ electoral campaign. Strategic reversals, however, are not easily achieved in politics, not withstanding the shortlived public memory. The party could not live down Gujarat at the polls. The India Shining campaign could not wash the odium of Gujarat, not even for its ‘secular’ coalition partners. The suddenly raised and newly secularised discourse failed to strike a chord with the electorate. The BJP and its partners, the NDA coalition, lost the mandate, and that ushered in a new phase of the coalition system.  

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7 For a detailed and insightful analysis of the post-2004 politics, based on State-level electoral data and national surveys see, Yadav and Palshikar (2009).
The idea of cultural nationalism, which was made to appear as though it represented the common-sense of Indian nationalism, dissolved into pluralist spaces which the new Congress-led coaltional government quickly made available through pronouncements of policies assuring religious minorities the restoration of their rightful place in the polity and vouching for their safety in the society. It seemed that the electoral outcome of 2004 was democracy’s moment for self correction, of mending the breach in its on-going process of political secularisation created by communal politics — the majoritarian verses minoritarian of the 1990s.

The New Policy Discourse

Building on the counter-discourse of the 1990s the Congress-led coalition government initiated and sought to legitimise an entirely new discourse on social policies. As soon as it came to power the coalition government announced, and implemented with alacrity, a series of policy measures, assumedly with a view to reclaiming trust and recognising the stake of the religious minorities in India’s secular democracy. Such measures were indeed urgently required, considering that members of the minority communities, especially Muslims and Christians, felt highly insecure and emotionally shaken by the relentless, at times violent, assaults on them by the Hindutva movement.

The expectation, however, was also that the new policies of the government would take into account the pervasive sense of insecurity in the citizenry at large caused by a series of ‘jehadi’ terrorist attacks, and that the government will take quick and effective measures to pacify and mend the deeply disturbed inter-community relations that had caused communal polarisation not just in politics but in society at large. The challenge, in short, was to address the larger picture of communal polarisation and devise policies that would restore the secularisation process. This was severely disrupted by the discourse, politics and inter-communal violence of the 1990s, and had culminated in the horrendous pre-Gujarat assembly elections event of the Godhra train burning, followed by the massacre of Muslims in different parts of Gujarat in 2002. More specifically, the need was to recover the secular neutrality of the state, which had been compromised in the

8For a detailed argument see Sheth (2005).
course of the previous two decades by governments at the centre as well as in the States — whether led by a ‘secular’, ‘Left-secular’ or a ‘communal’ party — making instrumental use of institutions of the state, variously for private (e.g., in U.P. and Bihar), partisan (e.g., in West Bengal) or communal (e.g., in Gujarat) ends.

This historical moment was allowed to pass. The newly-elected coalition government devised policies that remained focused mainly on the immediate issues concerning the religious minorities. It sought legitimation for these policies from the neo-pluralist, counter-communal discourse which, of course, also made eminent electoral sense to the concerned political parties for their vote-bank politics.

At the core of the new policy discourse was the Sachar Committee Report. When the announcement came that the new government was planning a policy initiative to take concrete measures focused exclusively on the Muslim minority, possibly through the appointment of a Commission or a High Level Committee (HLC) it was greeted with great enthusiasm and expectation by Muslims all over the country. It also received a warm response in secular–political circles at large. This was not surprising, for it was the first time since Independence that the government of the day had shown interest in investigating the life-conditions of the Muslim community as a whole. So far, the ‘secular’ focus on Muslims was either in terms of the personal law issue or the peculiar Congress-secularism that cultivated a benign neglect of Muslims — ‘allowing them to stew in their own juices’ — in the name of respecting the Muslim identity. This has been so despite the known fact that a substantially large section of Muslims lived in structurally segregated (ghettoised) and obscure existence, which deprived them of access to modern education and occupations. Only those belonging to the upper rungs of the Muslim social hierarchy have had access to modern means of mobility and could lead life as middle- and upper-class Indians.

The formal notification regarding the constitution of the HLC, the Sachar Committee (after the name of its chairperson), came on 9 March 2005. It took nearly two years, to be precise one year and eight months, of holding public debates and hearings, engaging in

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intensive interactions with sections of social activists and public intellectuals, and receiving inputs from different State governments and ‘experts’ in the field — before the Report was formally submitted to the prime minister on 17 November 2006. The contents of the SCR were widely disseminated and discussed among concerned constituencies of citizens. The SCR made a good, positive impact on Muslims all over the country.

Impressed by the reception of the SCR and its political potentials, the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) expanded and amended the previously announced (June 2006) 15-Point Programme for the Welfare of Minorities. Now the PMO came up with the New 15-Point Programme that took into account the findings and recommendations of the SCR by separately identifying the minority component (for allocation of resources and implementation) of existing schemes and devising new schemes. The Programme contained social, economic, financial, and educational provisions made exclusively for members of the minority communities. It also provided specific schemes and measures meant only for the Muslim minority. The (four) years following the formation of the Sachar Committee (its first meeting was held on 21 April 2005), thus saw the issue of religious minorities moving to the centre of political discourse. This development, coupled with the series of policy measures and implementation reports, publicised regularly between 2005 and 2008 by the government, concerning the welfare and development of minorities marked the emergence of a new policy discourse. The terms of this discourse, as we shall presently see, were in large measure influenced by the procedures adopted and findings and recommendations made by the Sachar Committee. My concern here is not the quality of research and analyses that informed preparation of the Report. Nor is it about whether or not it actually produced, or will produce, policy measures uplifting the social, economic and educational conditions of the poor and deprived among Muslims in India. The purpose of this exercise is to explore the politics of discourse that the SCR triggered and its implications for the secularisation process. It is also not meant to undermine the need and importance of the benefits that the policy measures arising from the report could

10 Steven Wilkinson (2007), has made an incisive and rigorous examination of data and methods used by the Sachar Committee and shown how flawed the ‘findings’ based on these methods are.
bring — and perhaps they did — to various sections of the Muslim minority.

Looking back, it seems the whole idea of appointing the HLC was to constitute a political intervention in the secular discourse and thereby changing the established paradigm of social policies. The Congress party desperately needed to regain the Muslim support bases which it was steadily losing to regional ‘secular’ parties. The Committee seemed a ‘legitimate’ means to achieve this objective.

First, in its investigation and reporting, the HLC was required, as per the Terms of Reference (TOR) prepared by the PMO, to focus on the totality of the ‘Muslim Community of India’ and to prepare a report on its social economic and educational status. The Committee was particularly asked to collect and collate data showing how did the status of Muslims compare with the other religious communities within and across various States and regions. This was a departure from the constitutionally established principles of social policy-making in two respects: (i) the TOR did not require that the Committee to focus on the conditions of the poor and backward Muslims in designing its investigations and making recommendations, and, more importantly, (ii) the HLC was asked to investigate and report on the relative status (social, economic and educational) of Muslims vis-à-vis the other communities, and not their conditions. The former required treating the Muslim community as an undifferentiated collectivity. The latter allowed the Committee to justify making comparisons of difference between Muslims and the other communities in terms of ‘outcome measures’ rather than indexing the social, economic and educational conditions of the Muslim community, and of sections within it, with reference to averages for the whole community as well as national averages.\(^{11}\)

The HLC faithfully carried out the mandate given to it by the PMO. The only internal differentiation the Committee made for the Muslim community was the Muslim-General and the Muslim-OBC. This too was required, because the TOR asked the HLC to report on the proportion of Muslim OBCs in the total OBC population in various States and to find out the share of Muslim OBCs in public sector employment in the centre and States relative to OBCs of other communities. For all other inter-community status comparisons no

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\(^{11}\)This argument is effectively made by Wilkinson (2007).
internal differenciations are made among Muslims, they are treated as a single lot. The committee justified this on the grounds that Muslims by and large face similar problems: (i) being poor (ii) being a minority and (iii) qua Muslims. Hindus on the other hand, are divided into three different categories: the upper-caste, the OBC and the SC/ST. These categories are characterised in the Report as Socio-Religious Communities (SRCs).

On most status variables comparisons are made between the totality of Muslims and one or the other SRC of the Hindus. When the total Muslim category is not used, comparisons are made either for Muslim-General or Muslim-OBC, with one or more segments of Hindus. The Report systematically avoids comparisons between All-Muslims and All-Hindus, nor does one find a comparison being made between the upper rungs of Hindus and Muslims. Thus we find such comparative analytical statements as: (i) literacy rates among Muslims are lower than the most other SRCs except for SCs/STs, and (ii) the condition of Hindu OBCs is better than the Muslim-general (note the category general includes Dalit and tribal Muslims in it), who in turn are somewhat better than the Muslim-OBCs. Most reporting is about how well or badly the Muslims fare compared to one or the other socio-religious community of the Hindus. Comparisons with non-Hindu communities are rare and are routinely made in terms of bi-variate relationships. Only exceptionally can one find multi-variate comparisons. It is difficult to conclude from such analyses whether a bad performance of Muslims on a particular status indicator is because they are Muslims, or due to some other factor which might equally prevent similarly placed (poor, rural, etc.) members of the other religious community. Since ‘outcome measures’ are used for constructing statuses which are then compared bi-variatelty, and that too not always between comparable groups, it becomes difficult to infer reasons for status inequality between communities. Findings based on untenable comparisons between the communities are sought to be explained in terms of ‘perceptions’ about discrimination articulated by a section of social activists and public intellectuals to the HLC. The perceptions pertain to the extent and causes of neglect, deprivation, discrimination, and alienation experienced by Muslims. The perceptual accounts

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12 Rakesh Basant (2007). Basant was a member of the Sachar Committee.
recorded by the Committee belong to those who volunteered to offer them to the Committee and those whom the Committee approached. These narratives were then problematised in terms of the Muslim community’s concern for achieving conditions of security, protecting its identity and establishing equality vis-à-vis the other communities. The Committee found this “method” of generalising community feelings and perceptions more appropriate for the TOR purpose than for ascertaining the opinions and attitudes of a cross-section of respondents from the community by using a systematic, representative sample survey. Significantly, the perception chapter is placed next to the introductory one, and this sets the tone for the entire report. The chapter highlights an important caveat: all perceptions may not be true, but they also do not exist in a vacuum.

The political discourse and policy measures triggered by the SCR became fused with the ongoing counter-communal discourse that had grown and strengthened in opposition to Hindutva communalism and produced a major shift in the focus of social policies. The shift has been in the direction of changing the principle of the policy as well as the criteria for recognition of beneficiary groups.

Social policies in India are based on the simultaneous recognition by the Constitution of the cultural rights of faith-based communities and development rights of the structurally and historically deprived groups within every community of faith. It is in this recognition that the secular foundation of social policies in India lies.

This principle enabled the formulation of the policy of reservations, covering structurally deprived groups within each religious community. The relevant policy issue has been of devising mechanisms to ensure that the policy-wise deserving, but so far left out backward groups among the minority religious communities, are included in the official lists of backward communities. Similarly, it is important to ensure that special economic and financial schemes are devised from time to time to alleviate the social, economic and educational conditions of the backward groups within every religious minority. Even some specific issues, like according SC status to the untouchable groups of minority religious communities, should also be raised and resolved in the existing framework of secular social policies. Even though these and many other issues can be effectively addressed by existing policies, the latter did not seem to suit the post-2004 political strategies of the coalition regime. In effect, a new policy discourse was initiated, which sought to shift the focus of social
policies from backwardness to the communality of groups, whereby religious minorities would be treated as totalities in politics, and as undifferentiated units of development policies and discourse. This shift has long-term negative implications for the secularisation process.

By all accounts every community of faith — while it shares a common religious symbolism and engages in common, piety-oriented ritual practices — is a highly differentiated entity from within, socially, economically, educationally, and even culturally speaking. Denying recognition to such differences has been at the core of all communal politics. Treating such a vastly heterogeneous community as a single unit while formulating social and developmental policies has already begun to manifest trends retrogressive to the secularisation process.

(i) It has contributed to the re-establishment of the dominance of a small minority of the community elite belonging to the upper rungs of its traditional social hierarchy — which has existed historically and continues to exist today in one form or the other in every religious community of India — over the entire community. In fact, the policy shift has enabled the elite of a faith community to mask its face and pursue its own separate politics of cornering the benefits of policies often meant for the poor and backward in the community. This elite pursuit is facilitated particularly when these social and development policies are made blind to the community’s internal structure of inequality. Further, such totalisation has begun to bring back the hold of the religious leadership over the lives of the followers of the faith. In this process a tacit understanding, if not an open alliance, emerges between the social elite and the religious leadership, who together seek to establish their claim of being leaders, representatives and sole spokesmen on every issue pertaining to the community or to any section within it.

(ii) The totalisation of a faith community has begun to suppress the voice and movements of the backward and poor sections within, e.g., the Pasmada movement among Muslims and the Dalit Christian movement among Christians.

(iii) The totalisation politics has led to exteriorisation of almost all issues and problems facing a religious community. This, in fact, has become the ‘common sense’ of neo-pluralist secular discourse. Thus, problems and issues facing a particular section within the community, but not necessarily by virtue of its belonging to that community of faith, could now be credibly articulated as problems caused almost exclusively by forces from outside the faith community.
Almost complete denial in the public discourse and the erasures applied by commissions and high-level committees of the contribution of endogenous factors to the creation and perpetuation of inequalities and injustices within the faith community made it possible for the policies to conflate issues of deprivation and discrimination. Now one could easily argue that ‘socio-economic and educational underdevelopment of sections within a community infact reflected the organic underdevelopment of the entire community, which in turn constituted proof of the community being institutionally discriminated by the state as well as its ‘other’. The belief that, in India, religious minorities lived in conditions of socio-economic deprivation caused by their systemic discrimination became sustainable in the politics of perceptions, which had become the mainstay of the new policy discourse initiated by the SCR. Some public intellectuals and social activists, with impeccable secular credentials, also became enveloped by this new post-2004 politics of perception, and shared the belief that their entire communities have been victims of systemic discrimination and were deliberately kept in a state of backwardness, poverty and illiteracy.13

Further, treating total communities of faith as economically, socially and educationally undifferentiated collectivities, led to the politics of marginalisation of many smaller religious, cultural and linguistic minorities in the States. As is well known, in almost every State in India there has been a dominant cultural and/or linguistic community. What is not generally seen is that in these States there are several smaller, socio-cultural and linguistic minorities, for example, Muslims in Manipur, Buddhists in J&K, the Hindi-speaking population of Gujarat or the Rajbhrs in West Bengal, where children of the poor among the linguistic minority are virtually denied their right to education; they do not get into schools or if they do most of them drop out because the language used in the school is alien to them.14 The worse victims of neglect and non-recognition are Dalits in the hill States of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, tribals in Kerala and the nomadic communities in almost all the Indian

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14 A comprehensive discussion on the role of policies in the treatment of small linguistic minorities in different Indian States is found in Krishna (1999).
States. Put differently, the new policies, being oriented primarily to the nationalised politics of the larger religious communities, have compromised the secular principle of social policy-making which addressed issues of backwardness of groups across all religious communities.

A glaring instance of such a politics becoming manifest in the policy process was the scaling down of the importance of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities. This commission, although it was appointed in October 2004, was informally put on hold for about six months. It was ‘made functional’ only after the Sachar Committee was formally constituted and its terms of reference were announced.\(^\text{15}\) The reference is to the National Commission, headed by the former chief justice of the Supreme Court Shri Ranganath Misra. By any criterion this was a more prestigious and high-powered contraption than even a HLC. Its terms of reference were well within the established social policy framework. Its charge was to identify socially and economically backward sections among the religious and linguistic minorities, and recommend measures for their welfare, including reservations, and to suggest necessary constitutional, legal and administrative modalities as required for the implementation of these recommendations. If viewed politically, however, it should not surprise anyone as to why the PMO thought of another, fresh initiative in the form of appointing a HLC, the Sachar Committee, and why this was politically and administratively privileged over the National Commission, and why it remained in the limelight for a long stretch of time. Of course, the National Commission carried out the tasks it was given and submitted its report, but it attracted hardly any public attention, and made virtually no impact on political discourse.

\[\text{Summary and Conclusion}\]

The politics of the last 20 years (1989–2009) has had serious long-term implications for the secularisation process and the nature of Indian democracy. Not only have different kinds of communities moved to the centre of India’s political and public life, they have now acquired a

\(^{15}\) Public Notice of DAVP 8015 (1) 2005, announcing that the Commission became ‘Functional from 21 March 2005’.
systemic basis and a determining role in national politics. In everyday politics, religious communities began to be represented as culturally unified political entities. Ideas and practices concerning the faith became subordinated to this conception of the community and were used to supply validations for the political–communal solidarity of the faith community. In the political discourse, religious identities were culturally essentialised and sought to be frozen in time and space. As a result, issues of rights and equality got reduced to communitarian terms and were used to legitimate social policies for establishing inter-communal parity. In this reductive communitarian politics the community, rather than a citizen, began to be seen as the primary bearer of rights and a collective victim of injustice by its ‘other’ or the state. Claims to equality, and generally to public goods were now made by larger communities competing vis-à-vis each other rather than by citizens organised around secular interests or by groups sharing common social, economic or educational conditions of deprivation and backwardness. Thus, the rights and public ‘goods’ that persons could now hold or aspire to, were in their capacity as members of a community; *qua* individuals they were left with some residual political rights and communally unclaimed, indivisible, public facilities. The secular policy of the state, which ‘recognised’ all religions as equal, now treated the religious community in purely numerical terms. And the principle of equality was now to be applied to the numerically asymmetrical religious communities. The community thus became a religion’s primary representation, with all other aspects of religious life, such as piety-related practices, being incorporated by the religion’s communitarian identity. In effect such issues, concerning freedom of faith and practices, began to be defined and decided politically by community leadership. Thus, for policy purposes, communities of minority faiths began to be treated as totalities — each believed to represent a commonly shared social, economic and educational status. This has created a new social hierarchy of religions, seeking to remove from the discourse the issue of caste/social hierarchy within religions.

This change, marked by the emergence of minoritarian politics in the last two decades is, qualitatively different from the rise of ‘caste politics’ of the 1980s. First, the so-called caste politics was an expected development in the process of democratisation — an inevitable moment of assertion of rights and aspirations for social justice by the
subaltern classes when democratic politics opens up the economy and society that had, by and large, remained closed for centuries.

Second, the nature of political competition of the 1980s was among relatively small and, in themselves, electorally unviable groups which traditionally occupied the lower rungs of social hierarchies, across macro communities of faith. They did indeed create larger political conglomerates to stake a claim to political power, but their politics remained structurally confined to the States and regions. In this process of ‘castisation’ and ‘regionalisation’ of lower-class politics (which encompassed a huge majority of the socially, culturally and religiously diverse communities of subaltern Indians), the politics of class (wage labour vs capital) and communal conflicts (among macro communities of faith) were prevented from acquiring any visibility in national-level politics, even as they were being fragmented and absorbed by caste–regional politics. In short, the so-called ‘Mandalised politics’ of the 1980s had remained manageable by the secularisation process.

The nature of caste politics, however, began to change as a consequence of the communalisation of national politics in the 1990s, when it stoutly confronted the Hindutva communalist movement, on the one hand, but failed to relate politically to the counter-communal minoritarian discourse on the other. This confrontation and collaboration with communal politics over the last two decades produced two effects: (i) a large part of caste politics began to be linked to, and even absorbed by, pan national politics of ethno-religious communities, and (ii) the internal political dynamic of ethnicisation of caste — especially the larger, regionally powerful castes — began gradually to be subfused with the culture of religious community, thereby transforming the faith community into a ethno-religious community. This process has been illustrated in recent years by the organisational and cultural changes in Hinduism, marked by the growing participation and power of the OBCs in the organisational activities and events of popular Hinduism, often sponsored and promoted by the Sangh Parivar. This development in Hinduism constitutes at least one important factor that has lent an ethno-majoritarian political character to Hinduism in the form of the Hindutva movement. Somewhat different in its organisation and character, but similar in consequence, is the fusion of an ethno-lingual Gujarati identity with Hindutva, which became manifest in the BJP’s Gujarat-asmīta movement led by the Gujarat Chief Minister,
Narendra Modi. A similar movement seems to be in the making in Karnataka. A classic case of ethnic fusion of caste and religion, however, is the rise of political Sikhism in Punjab, marked by the almost complete dominance achieved by Jat-Sikhs in the organisational and theological affairs of Sikhism, and in the determination of ethnic boundaries of the religious community, albeit drawn in impeccable theological terms. The result has been the exclusion of lower-caste Sikh communities from the ethno-religiously defined boundaries of today’s Sikhism.

The cumulative impact of the politics of caste and religious communities has been that India is being transformed functionally, although not yet constitutionally, into a democracy of communities — changing in the process the very idea of how India is constituted.

If we look back at the 1980s and 1990s we find two competing models of communitarian politics at work: ethno-caste and ethno-religious. In my view, restoration of the secularisation process, rather the fate of secular democracy, will depend on which one of the two will prevail over the other. Although this remains an open question, it is crucial to note in this context that the caste-ethnicity based political entities — unlike the large, collectivist, macro-level political communities being formed through the communalisation of faith communities — are numerous territorially bound micro-level political formations, each comprising a few caste-ethnic communities negotiating constantly among themselves, and with the state, usually, the short-term interests of their constituent members. They are, by themselves, politically unviable; walking in and out of the now splitting, now merging alliances they remain continuously engaged in managing to find places in shifting political alliances. As such they cannot emerge as one, communally united political force with its members sharing any common system of ideas or symbols. And thus cannot emerge as a counter-democratic communal force. Nor can they find any strong basis for emotional or ideological unity and attain the Durkeinian kind of mechanical solidarity. Ethno-caste

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16 For an analysis of the change in political culture of Gujarat, especially the fusion of the lingual and ethno-religious (Hindutva) identities see Sheth (2003).
political entities are more likely to be contained, in fact, absorbed by the larger institutional structures of competitive politics. In short, the politics of caste and ethnic identities would always remain subject to the working of the secularisation process of democracy.

Thus seen, the threat to secular democracy does not lie so much in caste–ethnic politics as in the possibility of the ‘nationalisation’ of the communal politics of faith communities — a politics that has emerged due to the inability of the secular leadership to counter the politics of communalism at the national level by raising issues of national concern in terms of the constitutionally rooted idea of secularism.

The results of the 2009 parliamentary election has nevertheless raised expectations about the de-communalisation of national politics. The optimism stems from the belief that the second successive defeat of the Hindutva party is likely to compel it to reconsider its exclusivist politics of majoritarian totalisation. Besides, the expanding liberal market economy (an important dimension of political secularisation not discussed here), working in conjunction with the political market of votes in the coalitional system, is expected to reduce the possibility of mass-mobilisational politics — communal or otherwise. This might make the politics of raising communal passions and engineering riots politically and even electorally unrewarding. Also, the politics of the minoritarian-communal solidarities that emerged under the threat of majoritarian communal assaults may now lose its appeal and the unity attained by religious minorities may be expressed politically in terms of their ethno-caste identities and the interests of their constituent units at the regional level.

On the other side, especially if one focuses on the shifts in the votes of Muslims and other religious minorities in 2009,²⁸ it appears that the minoritarian counter-communal model of politics and policies has worked well for the Congress. It has brought back to the party support of the Muslims and other religious minorities which it had lost over several elections to the regional parties. So the party may want to stick to this model of politics, albeit by deploying greater sophistication in the discourse.

Although there may be pulls and pressures of this kind for the ruling coalition it must keep in mind certain specific elements of the 2009 election verdict, for this appears to be a landmark election for the Congress and hopefully for the future of Indian secularism. First, at this point of time the Congress is a party in a coalition, it is not managing a one-party minority government. Second, the BJP has been pushed back cross-sectionally in the electorate and across regions, making it difficult for the party to turn to its old strategy of the 1990s. In such a situation, it becomes possible for the Congress to convert its gains of this election into a long-term trend. First, the return of Muslims and the other minorities does not appear to have happened under any pressure or fear of majoritarian communalism; they have by and large deserted ‘secular’ regional parties which nurtured, if not pampered them, as their ‘vote banks’. Second, the Congress gains are not exhausted by the shifts in minority votes alone. It has wrested, in significant proportion, support of the urban middle and lower-middle classes from the BJP. The short point of all this is that the Congress-led coalition has been given the Second Moment after 2004 for restoring the secularisation process by shifting the focus of development discourse and policies from communality to the backwardness of groups which remain submerged within every community of faith. And in politics there is no pre-determined path; choices that the leadership make can lay, to a significant extent, a path at least for the immediate future.

References


The debate that has been generated around the Sachar Committee Report (SCR) and its findings brings out the limitations of multiculturalism as a form of minority protection. It does so by raising the crucial question of addressing group inequalities that are less of a cultural nature and more of a socio-economic nature. This article will discuss such a notion of socio-economic equality in the public domain and will thereby contrast this with the kind of cultural equality that the multicultural framework has privileged and which it seeks to guarantee for minority groups in the public sphere.

This article, as it progresses, will develop a critique of multiculturalism based on the simple fact that the kinds of disadvantages suffered by minority groups may not all have a cultural content to them (see Barry 2001). The sources of discrimination and disadvantage may be of a more material nature, related to the lack of employment, housing, availability of finance/credit, etc. The SCR has done well to highlight such aspects of material deprivation that the Muslim community experiences in India. It should be immediately obvious that these issues are distinct from the symbolic–cultural ones relating to identity that are privileged by multiculturalism.

While this article will develop a critique of the multicultural framework by highlighting and bringing out its limitations, it is generally appreciative of the spirit of multiculturalism, viz. the need to afford protection to minority groups. The article argues that multiculturalism may be a helpful but limited device in trying to
protect minority groups. Its value lies in the fact that it is able to highlight the symbolic–cultural aspects of minority disadvantage. This symbolic–cultural protection that multiculturalism advocates has proved especially important in India by acting as a bulwark against the advance of Hindutva, which at a symbolic level has tried to appropriate and stamp the public sphere with its own privileged cultural vocabulary.

Multiculturalism can be understood as a self-conscious affirmation of the equality of different groups in the public sphere, a feature that differentiates it from cultural pluralism (Mahajan 2002). This article specifically picks up three related themes in order to highlight the limitations of multiculturalism and the need, therefore, to go beyond the kind of group equality that it envisages. These three themes are linked to certain discrete concepts that will be immediately recognisable as concepts that have been discussed intensively in contemporary political theory. These three themes and the concepts associated with them are equality, the public sphere and groups. The three themes and their associated concepts are linked in the sense that what is being argued is an equality of a more substantial material kind for different minority groups in a more inclusive and democratic public sphere.

By picking up these three themes the article is also arguing in favour of reconceptualising each of the three concepts that are related to these themes. Thus, the public sphere needs to be understood in such a way that it is made more inclusive, democratic and participatory for the different minority groups. The article attacks the dominant understanding of equality as per contemporary liberal theory and argues in favour of a more vigorous understanding instead. There is also a brief section that attempts to understand the complexities involved in adequately theorising and conceptualising the group. A brief note by way of explanation as to how the concept of a group is used in this article may be useful. The difficulty in theorising a group in the abstract sense has made it difficult for groups to be considered viable candidates of rights and also beneficiaries of ameliorative policies by the state. This article attempts to understand groups very much in the manner that the Sachar Committee has looked at socio-religious communities. The advantage of looking at groups in this manner has facilitated consideration of such entities for the purposes of policy-making. Such manner of theorisation of groups, not in terms of groups in the abstract but as a type of group, creates
the possibility of envisioning the group not as homogeneous and monolithic but as internally differentiated, much in the manner that the SCR differentiated the Muslim community into the Ashraf, Ajlaf and Arzal.

There are then three sections in this article, corresponding to each of these three themes and concepts. The first section will look at the idea of a public sphere, a subject that has received a great deal of attention since the translation into English of Jurgen Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). The second section will look at the problem of understanding and conceptualising the group. The third section will look at the concept of equality and what is specifically problematic about the idea of liberal equality.

The Public Sphere

The advantage in using the concept of the public sphere, as Nancy Fraser points out, is that ‘it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theatre for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling’ (2003: 84–85). It is this distance or remove from the capitalist market that is being used in this article as an opportunity to look at the public sphere as more advantageous than another related concept, that of civil society. The concept of civil society has, in certain versions of its theoretical development, become more and more integrated and linked with the capitalist market. Indeed, the very understanding of civil society as an arena outside of and distinct from the state, has been considered by many to have paved the way for neo-liberal economic projects that undermine the welfare role of the state.

This conceptual remove from the market and the critical discursive element that pervades the public sphere facilitate a renewed look at the market and the possibility of contesting its operations. This article argues that a reconceptualisation of the public sphere is possible by linking the concept with a more vigorous notion of socio-economic equality (in sharp contrast to the weak, and rather effete notion of liberal equality). Such a revitalised public sphere can also contest the centrality that has been given to the economic market, in much recent political theory. By taking advantage of the conceptual remove of the public sphere from the market, referred to above, this article seeks to attack and contest the domination of and the centrality accorded to the idea of the market in much recent political theory,
especially the manner in which equality itself has been linked to the idea of the market.¹

Fraser argues that the public sphere, in order to be able to guarantee inclusiveness and facilitate contestation needs to be premised on substantive equality. Her position with regard to equality is merely ‘that socio-economic equality is a pre-condition of participatory parity’ (Fraser 2003: 101). The position being taken in this article, however, is stronger, in the sense that the public sphere cannot merely be premised on the idea of socio-economic equality as a pre-condition for participating in the public sphere. It must actually be committed to guaranteeing greater socio-economic equality by actively eliminating deep-rooted social inequalities.

**Three Moments of the Public Sphere**

A modern democratic public sphere, when it emerges, is premised on the idea of equality. However, the formal equality on which the emergent public sphere is premised may not in itself be sufficient

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¹Colin M. Macleod in his extensive critique of Ronald Dworkin’s use of the ideal market as a theoretical device for articulating egalitarian distributive justice, makes the following opening remarks:

The perfectly competitive market of economic theory, where economic agents are fully informed and perfectly rational, is a fiction. It does not exist, nor is it even approximated, in the real economic world. Yet this fiction exerts enormous influence on modern political theory. The seductive power of the ideal market lies in its capacity to model elegant and disarmingly simple solutions to complex problems. We can come to understand, for instance, how the uncoordinated activity of economic agents can lead to socially desirable states of affairs. Similarly, the ideal market enters normative political philosophy partly because it can be represented as illuminating important values. Defenders of the market claim we can learn much about individual liberty, the promotion of mutual advantage, and efficiency in the distribution of goods by studying it. However, a principal limitation of the market for many theorists is its supposed insensitivity to the demands of egalitarian justice. This is in part because modern market societies exhibit a great deal of social and economic inequality. However, egalitarians have also been inclined to think that there is an inherent flaw in the ideal of a free market society. In traditional left-wing critiques, the market has been characterised as the enemy of equality on various grounds: it generates exploitation; it creates alienation; it is hostile to genuine freedom; and it is corrosive to the bonds of community (Macleod 1998: 1).
Group Equality and the Public Sphere

and, therefore, needs to be supplemented by social and material equality (Mahajan 2002: 20). A public sphere that is premised on such a bourgeois conception of formal equality may resultantly be constricted and narrow. This article would like to suggest that in India there have been at least three moments with respect to the creation, recreation and reinvention of the public sphere. The first was at the stage of the national movement, where the emergent public sphere was inevitably bound up and linked with formal equality. This formal equality is a precondition for the emergence and creation of a modern democratic public sphere. However, the presence of this formal equality, even as a precondition to defining and constituting the public sphere, is not sufficient to prevent the public sphere from remaining narrow and constricted. As a result of which it can and does serve to exclude.

The second moment is associated with a more cultural notion of equality, where contestation takes place over how to define, characterise and constitute the public sphere. In this second moment, the public sphere becomes a discursive arena for competing conceptions of how to define the nation. Whether this should be done in majoritarian terms of — Hindutva or Hindu nationalism; Dalit contestations, which in a spirited manner seek to stamp the public sphere with their own distinctive symbols (on this point see Omvedt 2003: 142); or appeals to more inclusive secular and liberal nationalisms. At this second level of contestation in the public sphere, multiculturalism, with its emphasis on symbolic recognition and affirmation of minority cultural identities, does play an important role.

The third moment, that this article seeks to very cautiously suggest, happens after the high tide of the Hindutva or the Hindu nationalist movement. In this third moment of the reinvention of the public sphere, access to it has to be ensured through the guaranteeing of substantial material or socio-economic equality. It is at the level of this third moment that the Sachar Committee and its findings would have to be located. At its height, the Hindu nationalist movement had been able to effectively and viciously target the Muslim community, thus raising serious concerns over the security of Muslims. This concern over security was most pronounced during the Gujarat carnage in 2002. The SCR has mentioned three areas with regard to the consideration of the Muslim community. These are identity, security and equity. It can, with some optimism, be noted, that the SCR, which appeared almost five years after the Gujarat carnage, has talked
mostly about issues linked to equity, emphasising inclusiveness and the mainstreaming of Muslims. This indicates that there certainly is some measure of forward movement. The SCR points in the direction of a public sphere that has to be made diverse, and constituted not just on the lines of a formal and cultural equality but a more substantive material equality.

At the level of this third moment, the inherent limitations of multiculturalism should be obvious. To recap then, associated with the three moments — the first initial creation, second recreation and third subsequent reinvention of the public sphere, are three different notions of equality. The first notion is of formal equality, on which the emergent modern public sphere is premised; the second notion is of cultural equality, upon which contestation in the public sphere takes place at a discursive level; and the third is a more material notion of a socio-economic equality that would have the capability of taking the public sphere away from the confines of a mere discursive domain to a more materialist domain. This would lead it in the direction, to use Nancy Fraser’s words, of a ‘post-bourgeois model of the public sphere’ (2003: 85), which, she argues, Habermas stops short of developing.

Groups in the Public Sphere

There is one further aspect of the public sphere that has to be kept in mind and this point is especially relevant to the nature of the antecedent colonial public sphere as it developed in India. The participation of individuals in the public sphere can be conceptualised in various ways. In a strictly liberal–individualist sense it can be understood as an individual’s participation in the public sphere to further/secure his or her individual self interests, by revealing individual preferences, for example. On the other hand, the public sphere can also be conceptualised in a civic republican fashion, as an arena where individuals participate to transcend narrow, individual self-interests and instead achieve a wider common interest. It can further be understood, as Neeladri Bhattacharya has pointed out, as a space where communities are forced to come together, to connect as it were, as a result of which they reconstitute themselves as a public (see Bhattacharya 2005: 139). It is specifically this aspect of the colonial public sphere that must be kept in mind while considering such a sphere in India. One has to understand the public sphere as a site
where communities and groups have been brought together, as re-
sult of which there is significant inter-group contestation. It further
needs to be noted that this activity of inter-group contestation in the
public sphere is what constitutes communalism as a phenomenon of
group conflict in India (on this point see especially Freitag 1990).

The SCR has bestowed legitimacy upon the socio-religious group
and the need to view it as a viable unit of analysis of socio-economic
development. As Rowena Robinson has quite pertinently noted:
‘It is indeed possible that, with respect to Muslims, the ghost of
the “communal” hung so much over politics that sanction for such
documentation was not available’ (2007: 839). The SCR has pointed
out in a forthright manner that socio-religious communities (SRCs)
need to be taken into account and that public policy cannot continue
to be indifferent to their existence. An observation that can be made
here is that the Sachar Committee has at least exorcised the ghost
of a denial of religious group identities in the public domain. This
factoring in and taking into account of religious groups itself in-
volves a recognition and acknowledgment of the role that religious
groups can and will play.

Recognition and acknowledgment by the state needs to be of a
qualitatively different kind than that which is accorded by multi-
cultural policies. This recognition/acknowledgment of the role that
religious groups play has to come at the level of the state, which then
must proceed to ensure inter-group equality. This might involve
formulating policies that bear resemblance to the kind of ‘external
protections’ that Kymlicka (1995) has talked about. However, to
reiterate, state recognition would have to be of a qualitatively distinct
nature from the marking out and identifying that was done by the
liberal welfare state through liberal multicultural policies.

This brings us to another aspect in the consideration of groups.
How are they to be conceptualised? Surely, these groups must not be
considered to be completely externally bounded, with these bound-
daries being fixed and rigid. On the contrary, religious groups need
to be understood as being constructed and contingent. Their ex-
ternal boundaries being porous and semi-permeable, these external

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2 See also Kalam (2007); Shah (2007); Wilkinson (2007).
boundaries themselves are in a state of flux, expanding to incorporate hitherto excluded elements and sometimes shrinking to exclude once incorporated elements. At this level the question of intra-group equality gains significance.

Here again one has to register one’s dissatisfaction with multiculturalism. The reason is that in the multicultural framework, there has been a very uncritical acceptance of what can be termed a ‘realist ontology’ of the group, which assumes that groups are entities that are bound, with these outer limits or boundaries being rigid and fixed. Such a view of groups further assumes that they are solid, homogeneous blocks and that, moreover, they are mutually exclusive. Multicultural theory fails to recognise that groups are in fact constructed and contingent, rather than being fixed and given. They can never be homogeneous, and, on the contrary, are internally differentiated. To not recognise this would be doing a great deal of injustice to sub-groups within them, the ‘minorities within minorities’, women being the most obvious example of such sub-groups (see Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev 2005). In short, if one is to take into consideration the role and importance of groups in social theory and at the level of public policy, it requires a more refined, nuanced and sophisticated understanding of groups. The failure to understand the need for such analytical clarity, theoretical refinement and conceptual sophistication would involve falling into the trap of realism as a social ontology of the group, resulting in the essentialisation and further reification of the group.

**Equality**

In this section I will focus on what is wrong with the concept of equality as it has been formulated by mainstream liberal political theory. The story of liberal-equality has been the same as another similarly hyphenated liberal concept, that of liberal-democracy. The equality part of liberal-equality has been subsumed, contained, dominated, hegemonised, and thereby thoroughly eviscerated by the liberal component, owing to the privileging of the economic market by liberal theory. To understand how equality has been managed and controlled one has to look at the ways in which liberal theory has formulated a very thin liberal-egalitarianism, best seen in the writings of theorists like Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls. This liberal egalitarianism contains at best a very weak commitment, or at worst absolutely no commitment, to substantive ‘transformative’ change. The result then
has been an equality that is remarkably status quoist and an apologia for all sorts of inequalities.

If one looks at the rationale for state action justifying the preferential treatment of groups, this is usually done with the logic of a free market in mind. Thus, if one looks at debates in the US, where a colour conscious state policy has replaced earlier colour blind policies, one finds that the reliance on state action to bring about group equality, though welcome to the extent that at least it has recognised the existence of groups that, historically speaking, have been oppressed, has been understood as having been necessitated by a market failure or distortion. The fundamental or background assumption is that of the operation of a free market. Distortions that creep into this market owing to various historical reasons are then sought to be eliminated, the reason being that such distortions interfere with uninhibited social choice. Thus, the background assumption of a free market is not seen to be the problem at all. It is the distortions that set into this market that are considered a problem, as a result of which state initiated affirmative action and policies of preferential treatment are seen as being justified.³

³To illustrate what is meant regarding the rationale of state intervention to correct group inequality the quotation that follows might be helpful. This is a very grudging, almost reluctant, acceptance that state intervention may be required and the effect of this reluctance is to limit as much as possible state intervention, to be confined only to the extent of the group inequality that is sought to be neutralised. It is, to use another term, a ‘minimalist’ case for state intervention:

There are two points I wish to stress about this ‘minimalist’s’ argument. First, it rests quite specifically on a conception of group differences in the transmission of status across generations, and thus points to those state interventions which are intended to neutralise such disparities. That is, racial preference is not defended here in the abstract, as a generalised remedy for racial inequality of repayment for past wrong. Rather, a specific mechanism which passes on from past to present to future the consequences of wrongful acts has been explicated. It is to neutralise that mechanism that ‘taking colour into account’ is legitimated. And, I would argue, any alternative justification for racial preference should be similarly grounded on an explicit delineation of the ‘fine structure’ of social life which causes the need for such extraordinary state action to arise (Loury 1994: 257).
What is wrong with the kind of equality that Dworkin, for instance, tries to formulate? There is one central problematic in Dworkin’s formulation, his contention ‘that the idea of an economic market, as a device for setting prices for a vast variety of goods and services, must be at the center of any attractive theoretical development of equality of resources’ (1981: 284).

Immediately before making this contention, Dworkin does concede that the economic market has, since the time that it has been accepted as a vital and central part of political and economic theory, ‘come to be regarded as the enemy of equality, largely because the forms of economic market systems developed and enforced in industrial countries have permitted and indeed encouraged vast inequality in property’ (ibid.). As a result of this, Dworkin further accepts that political philosophers and ordinary citizens have tended to look at equality as the ‘antagonist or victim of the values of efficiency and liberty supposedly served by the market’ (ibid.).

Despite this, Dworkin makes the statement referred to above, where he stoutly defends and upholds the market as being at the core of any ‘attractive theoretical development of equality of resources’. What follows is the invocation of a strange and rather far-fetched example of a number of immigrants being shipwrecked on an island, the resources of which are doled out in equal bundles to each of the immigrants and an equal distribution according to Dworkin would be arrived at when each of the bundles would be able to pass the ‘envy test’, which means that no individual would covet the bundle that belongs to someone else. There are a series of adjustments and modifications that are then made in this initial depiction of the situation. There are modifications such as the introduction of clamshells that act as a medium of exchange, the auction by means of which individuals are able to effectively bid for whatever they feel the need for the most, and the system of the insurance market whereby individuals are able to protect themselves from ‘brute luck’, the circumstances that one is just unfortunate enough to be part of for no fault of that person other than the reason that the person just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Throughout the argument the one rather convenient assumption that Dworkin clings to is that when the immigrants arrive on the island, they are all on the same footing as far as material possessions are concerned:
Of course it is sovereign in this argument, and in this connection between the market and equality of resources, that people enter the market on equal terms. The desert island auction would not have avoided envy, and would have no appeal as a solution to the problem of dividing the resources equally, if the immigrants had struggled ashore with different amounts of money in their pocket, which they were free to use in the auction, or if some had stolen clamshells from others (Dworkin 1981: 289).

Dworkin’s arguments, and the numerous modifications referred to above, give the impression that every single argument that he makes regarding equality of resources is tailored to meet the requirements of the market which, to reiterate, is the centrepiece of his theoretical construction.

Thus, all the arguments, and the idea of equality itself, seem to be subordinated to the imperatives of the market. Remarkably, after these long, winding modifications to the initial situation of the immigrants on the island through numerous market devices like clamshells acting as a medium of exchange, auctions for revealing preferences, insurance policies for protecting oneself against brute luck, we have Dworkin going on the defensive by saying that in his theory the market has a more ‘servile’ role to play in contrast to Robert Nozick’s theory. In fact, towards the end of his essay, Dworkin argues that the relationship between the market and his theory is different from the relationship with the market in Nozick’s theory, where, Dworkin argues, ‘the role of the market in justifying distributions is both negative and contingent’ (1981: 337). In his own theory, on the other hand, ‘the market, when it enters, enters in a more positive but also more servile way’ (ibid.: 338). He also argues that the market enters because it is ‘endorsed by equality’, and further that the market must be ‘abandoned or constrained’ when it has failed in the task of apportioning equal shares of resources (ibid.).

These are indeed remarkable things to say at the end of a long essay that begins by making the market the core of his theoretical arguments and during the course of which all sorts of assumptions are made and market modifications effected in order to protect this favoured, privileged centrepiece. The ideological role that Dworkin’s theoretical position on equality and its linkage with the market plays has been effectively brought out by Colin Macleod (1998). Referring to the recent successes of the New Right in advancing unfettered market
Macleod notes with concern that Dworkin’s theoretical position, combined with his stature as one of America’s leading public philosophers ‘may contribute to the growing hegemony of the Market ideology’ (1998: 3).

**Multiculturalism and Egalitarianism**

Brian Barry, who attempts an ‘egalitarian critique of multiculturalism’, argues that the very issues raised by multiculturalists themselves have been the problem, in the sense that they detract attention away from the more important and pressing issues that minorities and oppressed groups face. Barry vehemently criticises the ‘endemic tendency to assume that distinctive cultural attributes are the defining feature of all groups. This assumption leads to the conclusion that whatever problems a group may face are bound to arise in some way from its distinctive cultural attributes’ (Barry 2001: 305). Barry is without doubt making an important point in saying that multiculturalists tend to come up with the same diagnosis for all group-related problems where the problem is seen as stemming from culture. As a consequence, the diagnoses that they offer are by now familiar, tired and clichéd multicultural strategies revolving around symbolic cultural equality. This ‘culturalisation’ of group identities, as Barry calls it, results in the ‘systematic neglect of alternative causes of group disadvantage’ (*ibid*).

Barry brings up the issue of ghettoisation, one of the most pressing issues faced by an oppressed group, to argue that the multiple problems faced by the residents of a ghetto, issues like the lack of education, employment, proper housing, and transportation facilities, are the real issues. Hence, taking recourse to the politics of cultural identity would be to tragically miss the whole point. Barry notes:

>This is yet another instance in which the invocation of ‘culture’ would lead to a misdiagnosis of the problem. It is true that we could loosely describe the educational disadvantage of black children as arising from ‘cultural deprivation’. But this has almost nothing to do with the cultural differences that drive the multiculturalist agenda (Barry 2001: 322–23).

In the closing lines of his book Barry makes the point that multiculturalism is more a problem than a solution for the issues that it seeks to address. With obvious reference to the increasing inequalities that are being experienced under late capitalism, especially in the US
and UK, which also happen to coincide with the rise to prominence of multiculturalism, Barry argues that multiculturalism cannot ‘address the huge inequalities in opportunities and resources that disfigure — and increasingly dominate — societies such as those of Britain and the United States’ (ibid.: 328).

Barry has certainly identified a problem about which theorists of multiculturalism seem to be blissfully unaware — the growing material disparity and widening inequalities being witnessed in most societies of the world. At the start of his book Barry refers to the difference in the salary of an average CEO and an average worker in the US in 1980, which was in the ratio of 1: 40. More recently, the full-blown effects of Thatcherite and Reaganite governments and their successors can be seen from the fact that the ratio now stands at 1: 419. He rightly observes that ‘the massive increase in the extent of inequality in Britain and the United States in the last twenty years is largely the result of the anti-egalitarian policies deliberately pursued by Thatcherite and Reaganite governments and maintained (even in some respects intensified) by their nominally distinctive successors, Blair and Clinton’ (Barry 2001: 8). Barry’s egalitarian concerns are of course sufficient to allow him to take note of this growing disparity. It is a result of this concern that he sets out to critique multiculturalism, which, he believes, interferes with the politics of redistribution.

It is interesting to contrast Barry’s position with that of Fraser, who has written on the themes of ‘redistribution’ and ‘recognition’ as well. Rather than taking Barry’s position, that the cultural ‘recognition’ politics of multiculturalism undermines the ‘redistribution’ concerns of the liberal welfare state, Fraser argues that multiculturalism is the ‘cultural analogue’ of the liberal welfare state. She further argues that the ‘recognition’ claims of mainstream multiculturalism and the ‘redistribution’ claims of the liberal welfare state form two mutually interconnected but distinct and irreducible paradigms of justice. The claims that are made by recognition and redistribution are of a qualitatively distinct nature — the recognition paradigm focuses on injustice that is cultural, whereas the redistribution paradigm focuses on socio-economic injustices, such as exploitation, marginalisation and deprivation.

However, there exists a similarity between the liberal welfare state and mainstream multiculturalism. This similarity arises from the fact that they are both ‘affirmative’ rather than ‘transformative’, to borrow two more terms from Fraser. They are ‘affirmative’ because both
attempt superficial, surface-level changes in outcome, without committing themselves to deeper, more radical ‘transformative’ changes of the underlying structures that may lead to outcomes not considered desirable (Fraser 1995, 2000). The difference between Barry’s and Fraser’s arguments needs to be kept in mind in order to understand the anomalous culmination of Barry’s own arguments, which will be brought out a little later.

Barry’s vehemence in his critique of multiculturalism stems from his concern for egalitarianism. What is surprising though is that the egalitarian solution that he takes recourse to is the one set out by John Rawls in 1971 in his book *A Theory of Justice*. It is surprising that Barry should do this as there appears to be a mismatch between his level of commitment to egalitarianism, especially in the contemporary conjuncture characterised by the vast inequalities that Barry has done well to bring out, and the commitment to redistribution that is found in Rawls’ work, especially in his much celebrated and widely discussed Difference Principle.

However, for the moment let us focus on what Barry has to say about Rawls and the appearance of his much discussed work, *A Theory of Justice*. Barry quotes Hegel to the effect that the Owl of Minerva, which brings wisdom, flies at dusk. He is of course referring to the timing of the publication of Rawls’ works and he has rightly argued that this was a philosophical defence and justification of a liberal welfare state that flourished in the post-Second World War era until the 1970s. Economic and political developments which took place in the 1970s, facilitated and paved the way for the political ascendance of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. These developments have made the sustainability of such a liberal welfare state suspect, to say the least. Yet, the remarkable thing is that Barry’s book is very much a defence of liberal principles and liberal-egalitarianism, which he himself conceded may have been more applicable in the post-War decades, until the 1970s.

The anomaly in Barry’s position can be seen in his vehement denunciation of Fraser, despite of the fact that she appeals to a ‘transformative’ agenda that argues in favour of overcoming and transcending the liberal welfare state and making the transition to some nebulous form of socialism, which she does not say too much about (Fraser 1995; see also Benhabib 2002: 112–14). One suspects that the reason behind Barry critiquing Fraser in this manner is that she commits herself to the politics of ‘recognition’, something that Barry cannot
seem to countenance. Inspite of a promising beginning, Barry’s work ends up becoming a rehash and defence of standard liberal principles. In other words, not withstanding some of his very incisive insights regarding the prevailing extent of inequality, he ends with a stout but rather insipid defence of liberal principles4 and the venerable liberal welfare state. Fraser, on the other hand, is able to make a bold leap and transcend the liberal welfare state to talk about a form of socialism. What seems to plague the work of Barry is his taking recourse to the liberal-egalitarianism of Rawls, in which the radical promise of equality has once again been eviscerated by its subordination to the dominant and hegemonic liberal component.

To conclude this section, there are two important things that can be said with regard to Rawlsian liberalism. First, the theory is extremely important, as can be measured from the fact that subsequent theories of justice have had to position themselves with respect and reference to Rawls, either in an antagonistic fashion or in a more appreciative manner. The second point is that Rawls’ much discussed Difference Principle contains at least a gesture of egalitarianism. This seems remarkable, especially when considered from the standpoint of the contemporary political context, which has systematically created, perpetuated and encouraged greater levels of inequality. The third and final point is that the system of lexical ordering to be found between the first principle and the second difference principle, and also within the difference principle, re-emphasises the point about the subordination, containment and ultimate evisceration of the idea of equality in liberal egalitarianism.

4 The extent of Barry’s defence of liberalism can be gauged from the following remark made at the beginning of his book:

Until then, I shall focus on criticisms of the liberal paradigm as misconceived in principle. As a political philosopher, I shall direct most of my attention to the forms in which the thesis is presented in the work of other political philosophers. But I am pretty sure that these ideas also have a considerable resonance beyond the ranks of those whose academic speciality they fall under (Barry 2001: 8).

Barry’s position turns out to be a rather insipid rights-based left-liberalism that one doubts has the potential or the ability to counter the levels of inequality that seem to disturb him.
Conclusion

This article has attempted to look at the question of group equality in the context of the SCR’s findings and recommendations. The principal argument is that since the Sachar Committee talks about group inequalities that are more material in nature rather than being only cultural, it is appropriate that we try to move beyond the limited framework of multiculturalism that confines itself to inequalities whose content and basis is cultural. While trying to highlight the limitations of multiculturalism this article tries to bring out the fact that the protection the multicultural framework affords may have been useful at a particular moment of contestation in the public sphere. This was a moment in which the idea of equality associated with the public sphere was that of cultural equality. At this time, the multicultural discourse can and did play an important and vital role in preventing the public sphere from being hegemonised, dominated and appropriated by majoritarian impulses. This is especially evident in the high-tide period of Hindutva, which would broadly be the 1990s. Many would argue that it is premature to conclude that the high-tide of Hindutva has receded. Indeed, this view may have some degree of truth in it. This article, however, argues that the SCR and the debate that it has prompted can be seen as a way to reconceptualise and reinvent the public sphere, not merely as a discursive domain but one in which access would ensure group equality of a material socio-economic kind. If one talks about graduating to this different kind of equality, and a public sphere which has been reconceptualised and reinvented according to this notion of equality understood in more material terms, then one is also able to register one’s discontent with the narrowness of the multicultural framework.

References


The Hindu Right in India, for long, had been devotedly disseminating a hegemonic discourse on communalism, creating an impression as if it is devoid of any other discourse. In fact, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the champion of the Hindu Right, claiming India to be a Hindu nation, always had other discourses as well, including one on development; however, these remained either subsumed or dormant under the dominant communal discourse. During its tryst with state power, particularly when it arrived at the centre-stage of Indian politics in the 1990s, the period coinciding with intense debates on competing economic models, it became compelling for the RSS to spell out its discourse on development — Swadeshi — thereby appending an economic agenda to its core agenda which was exclusively communal/political — Ram Mandir, Article 370 and Common Civil Code. When its political affiliate, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) succeeded in capturing state power it had to have an agenda regarding development as an integral part of governance.

This article has three sections: the first section distinguishes ‘Hindu’ economics from ‘Hindutva’ economics; the second analyses Hindutva’s discourse on development by critically reflecting upon its origins and evolution, ideological and programmatic contents, coherence and contradictions; and the third section attempts to understand how Hindutva’s economic nationalism, unlike the political, failed to make its distinct mark because of the lack of clarity and conviction.

Hindutva’s Discourse on Development
Pralay Kanungo

Hinduism and Economy
The relationship between religion and economy is quite complex. Max Weber has shown how religious ideas, particularly the ethic of Calvinism, created the moral and political conditions that propelled capitalism (see Munshi 1988). For him, Hinduism is incompatible
with modern industrial capitalism as it devalues the material world and regards renunciation as the highest value of life. Similarly, for Talcot Parsons, oriental civilisations did not develop capitalism and individualism on the modern Western model since their religions were world-denying rather than world-affirming. While these observations may have had a sound rationale, the relationship between Hinduism and economy has always remained a contested terrain.

Whereas scholars like Gunnar Myrdal\(^1\) recognise Hinduism’s energy in generating social and economic momentum, others find it responsible for perpetuating poverty, economic backwardness and underdevelopment. As the argument runs, first of all, Hinduism, based on the principles of inequality, hierarchy and exclusion, did not allow free competition and economic mobility. Second, Hinduism’s obsession with *karma* and reincarnation, underlining the ultimate attainment of detachment and renunciation, made Hindus accept the existing socio-economic order obediently, thereby restricting social and economic mobility. On the contrary, Milton Singer (1972) and M.D. Morris (1967) reject the thesis that Hindu values acted as obstacles to economic development. As M.S.A. Rao (1969) rightly observes, more empirical investigations rather than a hypothetico-deductive approach would help us understand better the actual relationship between Hinduism and economic development.

Hinduism’s prescription for economic organisation and activities can very well be seen in Hindu customary and personal laws, which lay down guidelines on how resources are to be accumulated, distributed/divided and gendered by inheritance, marriage alliances and family division. Thus, Hindu laws affect the working of the economy in various ways — from determining the role of cattle as a factor of production to setting the terms of economic participation of a business family.\(^2\) A study by John Harris on ‘high caste’ industrial leaders shows three developments in south India: first, an upsurge of belief in godmen and miracles; second, a notable selective reworking

\(^1\)Myrdal, however, identifies two kinds of Hinduism, one that is ‘higher’ and ‘reformed’ compatible with modernization and the second constituting a ballast of irrational beliefs and superstitions of the majority that has been partly responsible for their poverty; as both the forms cannot be isolated from each other both need ‘reform’. See Myrdal (1968: 103).

\(^2\)Hindu laws and customs in a way violate the principle of the state’s neutral distance from all religions. See White (2005: chapter titled ‘India’s Religions and the Economy’).
of Vedantic scriptures to assert the superiority of Hinduism; and third, ostentatious investment in the restoration of temples (see White 2005: 209). Thus, Hinduism does influence economy.

Hindu thinkers such as Vivekanand, Tilak, Bankim, and Aurobindo, from whom the RSS claims its lineage, were not only invested in the spiritual and national regeneration of Hinduism but also had deep concerns over material development. True, ‘Hindu economics’ did not follow a single trajectory; it invariably rejected crass material progress in favour of more holistic development. However, Vivekananda, for instance, underplayed his otherworldliness (mokshamarga), urged Hindus to indulge in intense economic activity and emphasised on science and technology as being indispensable to any attempt to raise the standard of living (see Basu 1997: 4). He applauded Tata’s scheme for the promotion of science education and favoured large-scale industries. At the same time, he also expressed his disgust against slavery to money. That is why, while emphasising the study of science and technology, he simultaneously urged the people of India to be conscious of their great and glorious spiritual heritage. While Vivekananda agreed that man’s control over physical nature is necessary for material prosperity, he was also convinced that control of man’s internal nature only could ensure personal happiness. Development, for him, was therefore both material as well as spiritual.

Besides Vivekananda there were many other strands within Hinduism with their own distinct economic prescriptions. Some Hindu revivalists propounded that during the Vedic period the mode of production was communal and resources/property belonged to the entire society — a system that later gave rise to the four varnas. A few of them therefore championed an economic model based on the domination of Brahmanical Hinduism; for them, Hindu economics ought to be governed by Vedic guidelines (see Saha 2001).

Hindu revivalism eventually gave way to the emergence of Hindu communalism in the early twentieth century. Crude communal politics prevented the intellectual development of a systematic Hindu economic doctrine. Hindu communal groups and parties were guided by a narrow political outlook and they lacked a long-term vision. They were unable, therefore, to construct a rational economic model of their own. For instance, the Hindu Mahasabha argued that ‘emotion and not economics is the real integrating force’ in Hindu society (see Banerjee 1980: 265). The revivalist Ram Rajya Parishad (RRP), swearing by Lord Ram, favoured the barter system, a ban
on cow slaughter and the introduction of Ayurveda; RRP leader Swami Karapatri offered an economic model based on the traditional jajmani system. Thus, Hindu-revivalist economic thinking was conditioned by a combination of factors: anti-utilitarian values, market economics, nationalism, and populism. Some even call this economic order neo-Gandhian, as it prefers a decentralised, small-scale production system to the large-scale, mechanised, industrial system of production (Lakha 1996).

**Hindutva Economics**

Hindu economic visions and practices should not be confused with Hindutva’s economic nationalism. At the outset some preliminary points need to be spelt out before moving to the details of Hindutva economics. First, although it was V.D. Savarkar who propounded the concept of Hindutva, it is the RSS and its family (the Sangh Parivar), that became its robust champion in contemporary India. For Savarkar, Hindutva was not be confused with Hinduism; the latter is a more of a faith, while the former is an ideology (see Nandy et al. 1995). But the Sangh Parivar has been conflating Hinduism with Hindutva so neatly that even the Supreme Court of India failed to make a distinction between the two by defining Hindutva as a way of life.³ Hindutva, in fact, is a political ideology that propagates the idea that India is a Hindu nation.

Second, though the RSS’s developmental discourse is very much an integral part of its overarching communalist/Hindu nationalist discourse, it appears, at times, to be straying from its orbit, manifesting a degree of flexibility and elasticity. Thus, within the Sangh Parivar, one comes across different voices on the subject of development, occasionally appearing to be contradictory and even mutually antagonistic. However, these multiple voices although they do not always emanate from a calibrated strategy, nonetheless remain within the confines of Hindutva ideology.

Third, the RSS is neither a revivalist Hindu organisation nor does its economic agenda represent a reversion to an archaic and antediluvian form of economic thinking, despite the fact that Hindutva has a fascination for using traditional nomenclature and jargon in its

³See the Supreme Court judgement in Manohar Joshi vs Nitin Bhauroo Patil, and eleven others (collectively known as the Hindutva Cases), AIR 1996 SC 796.
discourses, including the economic. While it is true that a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader like Ashok Singhal predicts that ‘cow urine would be the best medicine and the gas generated by cow-dung would be the biggest source of energy in the country’ in the near future, and a Sangh Parivar ally like Baba Ramdev prescribes yoga and ayurveda as the only remedy for all diseases, from coronary ailments to cancer, but in reality, it represents a rational and an intellectually cogent modern economic argument.

Fourth, though for the RSS Hindus are not a community but a nation (a decisive shift from Hindu Mahasabha’s ‘Hindu Raj’ to its ‘Hindu Rashtra’), the core of its discourse still stresses primarily on the victimhood of the Hindu community. It has manufactured a constant fear — more imaginary than real — of being ‘swamped’ demographically, swayed away culturally and subjugated economically by other communities/nations and hence the need for protection, preservation, promotion, and development of the Hindus. Thus, Hindutva’s agenda of national development continues to be exclusionary so far as the other communities are concerned.

Finally, confronted with the assertion of identities within the Hindu community and the compulsions of democratic politics, Hindutva has been slowly moving from its upper-caste and middle-class oriented developmental economic agenda towards a more inclusionary framework that incorporates the socio-economic interests of women, Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalised sections of Hindu society. However, so far, this has been done more by way of tokenism and rhetoric; its economic agenda for the marginalised is therefore fraught with ambivalence rather than clarity.

Hindutva Economics: Evolution and Issues

Any concept of a nation must necessarily include the economic path it would pursue. Subscribing to Savarkar’s Hindutva the RSS was born in the midst of the Hindu–Muslim communal clashes of 1925, to unite Hindus and propound the idea of India as a Hindu Rashtra (nation). K.B. Hedgewar, its founder, had a limited objective in the beginning — ‘man-making’ — by imparting rigorous physical and intellectual training to Hindu boys. The RSS prarthana (prayer)

4His mission may be called ‘Human/Hindutva Resource Development’ as it built a reservoir of swayamsevaks with single-minded devotion to a Hindu Rashtra.
mentioned two important points in the concluding stanza — ‘param vaibhavam netumetat swarashtram’ and ‘ajaïyanch cha vishwasya dehsa shaktim’ suggesting that Hindutva’s objective is to achieve ‘supreme prosperity and invincibility of the nation’ (Mishra 2004). However, Hedgewar’s disciples equated this invincibility with military prowess, largely ignoring questions of economic prosperity.

M.S. Golwalkar, the second chief of the RSS, who sharpened the ideological foundation of Hindu Rashtra in his treatises We or Our Nationhood Defined (1939) and Bunch of Thoughts (1966), paid little attention to its economic philosophy. Reflecting on some elementary economics he stated that the desire and lust for unrestrained economic gain which characterised the ‘materialism of the West’, should be abhorred. Consumption must be regulated and every man should act as a trustee. All these features would ensure that every citizen conforms to the culture of the Hindu nation and identifies with it completely. For Golwalkar, ‘all wealth belongs to God and man was just a trustee….At the same time he was opposed to the present statist tendency. He was an advocate of a selfless polity and decentralized economy’ (Vajpayee 1973: 14). Golwalkar favoured the idea that the designing of India’s economic policy should be consistent with the spiritual values of this ancient nation and advocated the harmonisation of material pursuits with spiritual and moral values so as to create an integral person. For him, ‘swadeshi (self-reliance) and vikendrikaran (decentralisation) are the two concepts which can summarise the economic policy suitable for our times’ (Swamy 2007: 22).

**Integral Humanism: ‘A Third Way’?**

Hindutva’s first political front, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) subscribed broadly to Golwalkar’s nascent economic philosophy. In the first policy statement of the Jana Sangh in 1951 it was stated that the ‘spirit of Swadeshi’ should be revived in order to avoid ‘reckless imitation, unnecessary dependence on foreign capital and to create in us a tendency for restraint and avoidance of conspicuous consumption’ (BJP 1995: 1). During the 1950s and 1960s, the party was vehemently opposed to the planning regime of the Nehru government⁵ and

⁵Jana Sangh leader Balraj Madhok’s idea of Jan-Kalyan-vad (welfare for all) was vehemently opposed to state control.
pleaded for the cause of the petty traders and small industrialists of north India, who constituted its political base and financial strength. Thus, being a northern and urban-oriented party of Banias (traders) and Brahmins, the BJS favoured an economic policy that was described as corporatist and conservative (Hansen 1996: 611), favouring small- and middle-sized interests in trade and industry.

In 1965, Hindutva ideologue Deendayal Upadhyaya came out with some innovative economic ideas in his ideological treatise *Integral Humanism*, which the BJS adopted as its guiding principle. He sketched the economic philosophy of the Hindu nation and outlined a new economic blueprint that would suit the ‘national genius’ of Bharat.

Upadhyaya rejected both Marxism and capitalism, because while the former denies individual freedom, the latter encourages profit motives and aggrandisement. Centralisation of power — economic and political — is implied in both. Therefore both result in dehumanisation. As an alternative, Upadhyaya provided a third way — Integral Humanism, which keeps human beings at the centre. Upadhyaya observed:

> Both these systems, capitalist and communist, have failed to take account of the Integral Man, his true and complete personality, and his aspirations. One (system) considers him as mere selfish being, lingering after money, having only one law, the law of fierce competition, in essence the law of the jungle; whereas the other has viewed him as a feeble lifeless cog in the whole scheme of things regulated by rigid rules, and incapable of any good unless directed. The centralisation of power, economic and political, is implied in both. Both therefore result in dehumanization of man (1965: 76).

He also rejected Nehruvian socialism as it did not conform with Bharat’s cultural and spiritual heritage. This analysis confirmed Golwalkar’s view that class struggle as a concept embedded in socialism is anti-human, and instead, class harmony and conflict resolution are the basic instincts of the human.6

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6 Golwalkar stated that the communist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was nothing but ‘the dictatorship of the dictator of a dictatorial party’ ([1966] 1980: 13).
The term ‘Third Way’ was first popularised by German ‘conservative revolutionaries’ after 1918. In particular, the emphasis was on making man less money-centred, more co-operative (Eatwell 1994: 178). Later, many Fascist regimes attempted to steer a ‘Third Way’ in economic policy. For instance, Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera stated in 1935: ‘We will impose a new order of things...Neither right, nor left! Neither Communism nor Capitalism! A National Regime. The nationalist syndicalist regime! Long Live Spain!’ (Davies and Lynch 2002: 21). The economic policies pursued by Hitler and Mussolini were described as a compound of pragmatism and mysticism. In the post-1945 period different neo-fascist groups showed loyalty to the ‘Third Way’, which was allegedly different from and superior to both Capitalism and Communism, because it was capable of avoiding their shortcomings: extreme individualism in one case and out-and-out state control in the other. Both Golwalkar’s as well as Deendayal’s formulation is very close to this understanding.

Atal Behari Vajpayee, the then BJS leader, emphasised the need to evolve a technology to suit Indian conditions, by using which the majority of the people could be freed from scarcity, ignorance and disease; a technology which should ensure ‘not only mass production but also production by the masses’ (Ananth 2002). The RSS–BJS had opposed, with a certain amount of consistency, the concept of a public sector and planning. While Nehru, influenced by the Soviet model, emphasised on building large industrial enterprises for mass production, the BJS and Gandhian socialists insisted on ‘appropriate technology’, which would ensure not just mass production, but more importantly, production by the masses. This division between the ruling Congress and the non-Congress opposition was reflected in the politics of this period: whereas the Congress, under Nehru and later Indira Gandhi, backed by the communists, opted for big industries, the Gandhian socialists and the RSS opposed such policies. The Sangh Parivar thus found a political space in non-Marxist economic platforms, and collaborated with the socialists and even succeeded later in co-opting some of them to its fold (see Ananth 2001, 2002).

**Gandhian Socialism and Social Engineering**

Golwalkar’s successor Balasaheb Deoras undertook a daring experiment by plunging the RSS directly into politics by making an alliance with Jayaprakash Narayan against Indira Gandhi’s Emergency. Thus, in the post-Emergency period, the RSS emerged a key player...
in Indian politics. As the Gandhi vs Nehru debate dominated the discourse of development during the Janata regime, the RSS, shedding its anti-Gandhi image, strategically opted for the Gandhian model. While the other constituents of the Janata Party were fighting on trivial matters, Deoras directed his cadre to undertake rural reconstruction programmes, adult education, etc., facilitating thereby the RSS’ penetration into new areas and in rural settings. Even after the break up of the Janata Party, the RSS continued to flirt with Gandhi for a couple of years; its new political front, the BJP, adopted Gandhian socialism as one of its guiding principles.

True, Deendayal and Deoras, like Gandhi, emphasised on Swadeshi, Sarvodaya and Vikendrikaran, but all these at best conform to Gandhian economics only at idiomatic level; the more radical dimensions of Gandhian thought had been conveniently ignored. Moreover, in contrast to Gandhi, Hindutva makes individuals and groups subservient to the nation as a corporate whole (Fox 1987).

The political marginalisation of the BJP in the 1984 parliamentary elections compelled the RSS to go for more militant mass mobilisation and thus began the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. To counter ‘Mandal’ politics, which had checkmated Hindutva’s growing influence among the backward castes in north India, the RSS initiated ‘social engineering’. This was a major shift from Golwalkar’s traditionalist perspective which preferred ‘Sanskritisation’ as the ideal instrument of social change. Besides approaching the backward castes, the RSS also speeded up its work among Adivasis and Dalits through its affiliates like the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram and Seva Bharati. The RSS also talked of samajik samarasta (social harmony) and launched a new programme called samarasya sangama (confluence for harmony) that directed the cadre to adopt villages in order to contribute to their development and promote ‘social harmony’ between various sections of the community. All these efforts are primarily directed at attracting the marginalised sections towards its political project rather than offering them any substantive economic alternative. The stress was more on ‘compassion, fellow-feeling and social harmony’ rather than on a concrete developmental alternative.

Hindutva’s Swadeshi Agenda

Though the RSS, since its inception, always had some kind of concern for Swadeshi it never presented it as a serious economic agenda till the early 1990s. Some national and international developments made
it imperative for the RSS to give shape to this vague concern into a concrete economic agenda. Not only did the collapse of the socialist/communist Soviet Union bring great jubilation to the Hindu Right, but also the Congress government’s interrogation of the Nehruvian model and introduction of an economic liberalisation agenda amused it further. Besides, the mass support it mobilised during the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation had already boosted its political confidence. Thus, the RSS thought the time quite right to introduce Swadeshi as its economic plank. Sensing a bright political future, it perhaps thought that Swadeshi would help dilute the BJP’s ‘hardline image as an ideologically driven, single issue party of aggressive hindutva assertion’ (Gillan 2001: 47).

The RSS’ version of Swadeshi does not really follow the conventional Gandhian outline, it actually borrows more from the writings of its own ideologues — Golwalkar and Deendayal. Again it is not the same anti-imperialist, economic nationalism the Congress had fervently pursued after the partition of Bengal in the beginning of the nineteenth century, but vaguely subscribes to the broader nationalist content of the Japanese model. The Sangh Parivar always adored Japan for being able to emerge as a powerful nation on the basis of its inner strengths — cultural and economic; and RSS’s economic nationalism aspired to emulate that same model. Thus, Swadeshi economics had to become an integral part of its ‘cultural nationalism’ or Hindu nationalism.

In order to pursue this objective the RSS launched a new affiliate, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) in 1991 to campaign against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and economic globalisation. Sangh Parivar organisations like the SJM, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKS) and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) started a massive campaign initiating a debate on Swadeshi vs. globalisation. The SJM opposed the Enron deal, deep-sea fishing, the mechanised abattoir at Al Kabir, and salt agitation, etc. The RSS published a pamphlet listing the names of 326 consumer products manufactured by multinationals and mentioned an Indian produce that could be used as an alternative to each. The pamphlet called for a popular movement against multinationals, and urged all its members and supporters to divert their consumption patterns away from the products of ‘exploitative multinational companies’ and towards Indian manufactured goods. It argued that the consumerism induced by foreign companies had been eroding and undermining the
cultural ethos of India and weakening the economic foundations of the Indian economy.

Swadeshi espoused national capitalism and nationalist consumption patterns, opposed multinational investments and stressed on Swablamban or self-reliance. Deoras compared multinationals to the East India Company and called upon people to shun everything foreign and opt for everything Swadeshi. Employing metaphors of purity and pollution the RSS also called for de-purification of culture and values that unleashed ‘modern consumerism’. The RSS hoped to put the breaks on economic globalisation by mobilising ‘national will’, ‘national pride’, ‘the character of individuals’ and so on.

**Swadeshi Economics and the BJP**

The Swadeshi campaign of the RSS put the BJP in a somewhat awkward position. Since its Jana Sangh days the party has been advocating economic de-regulation and the abandonment of ‘license–permit raj’, espousing private initiative, investment and internal economic competition. Hence, it had initially welcomed the economic reform plans of the Congress government, a move which had caused discomfort among older RSS leaders. As a result the BJP had to soon go in for course correction by adopting a nationalistic economic agenda that was highly critical of the externally driven liberalisation of the Indian economy which it equated with globalisation. The agents of globalisation, like the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and transnational corporations were viewed with considerable suspicion for undermining India’s national sovereignty. Instead of external economic liberalisation, the BJP emphasised the promotion of Swadeshi, small-scale industries and internal economic liberalisation along with the philosophy of Integral Humanism. Swadeshi literally means of one’s own country. In the larger context of the BJP’s economic agenda, it refers to protection of the Indian market and industry, and the promotion of domestic economic interests against the forces of economic globalisation (Lakha 2007: 106).

During the early 1990s, BJP’s economic agenda favoured assistance to local small-scale industries because they were labour intensive and accounted for a substantial part of India’s exports. BJP’s agenda, however, did not sufficiently account for the structural context of
global economic forces; rather it was defined in terms of the national unit (Lakha 1996: 273–74). BJP’s ‘Economic Policy Statement, 1992’ argued in favour of internal economic liberalisation — freer play of market forces within India, which it believed would strengthen Indian industry. Its approach to the involvement of foreign capital was cautious. Though it did not altogether reject foreign investment, it refused to give foreign investors preferential treatment against Indian-owned companies. It permitted foreign investment in the capital goods sector and in hi-tech industries, but discouraged it from low-technology areas like consumer goods, where Indian companies had a strong presence (BJP 1992: 10–11). Importantly, the party emphasised Swadeshi, which was defined as the pursuit of economic growth primarily through reliance on internal capital and human resources. Swadeshi was not viewed as isolation from the world economy, and the party argued that ‘integration into global economy should not mean obliteration of national identity’ (ibid.: 2) or subordination to external economic forces.

The policy document not only reflected the agenda of the ‘cultural purists’ in the Sangh Parivar, it also attacked the liberalisation agenda of the Congress party. It emphasised that the ‘answers to the new challenges were to be found neither in the world market nor in unbridled capitalist growth but in developing an “Indian model”; in “self-confidence and capability in consonance with our cultural mores and ethos”, and in a “Swadeshi of a self-confident, hard-working modern nation that can deal with the world on terms of equality”’ (quoted in Hansen 2005: 379). To Hansen, this document showed a remarkable contradiction: while on the one hand, it expressed a desire ‘to achieve national strength as fast as possible through strong, high-technological capitalist growth’, on the other hand, it demonstrated ‘an equally powerful desire to control and check the consequences of such a development within a vision that elevated “cultural harmony” to be the main component of the economic strategy’ (ibid.).

Swadeshi also reflected the re-emergence of a culture–politics divide within the Sangh Parivar. While the older generations of RSS Pracharaks were highly critical towards liberalisation and globalisation, the BJP regarded liberalisation and integration in the world market as a viable course. Party leaders such as L.K. Advani tried to defend a moderate version of Swadeshi as the right of the country to decide its own policies, and carefully kept a distance from some of the
more radical proponents of Swadeshi in the party and in the RSS. In 1993–94, opposition against the so-called ‘Dunkel Draft’, outlining reforms of GATT and its subsequent transformation into the World Trade Organization (WTO), figured prominently on the agenda of the BJP and other branches of the Sangh Parivar.

BJP’s strong line on the protection of domestic markets and indigenous capital has attracted support from different segments of Indian industry. Thus, the BJP did not remain a representative only of the small-scale sector, it also made an entry into the Congress domain of ‘big capital’ by courting the Bombay Club and cultivating a cosy relationship with some prominent Indian capitalists.

From Swadeshi to Globalisation: BJP’s Changing Trajectory

The BJP toned down its rhetoric against globalisation after forming the government at New Delhi in 1998; it changed its strategy from resisting globalisation to accommodating it through critical collaboration. Significantly, it has recognised the importance of high-tech industries, such as computer software, and provided it significant support. The Vajpayee government started reviewing earlier policies and went in for a bureaucratic shuffle; Jay Dubashi and Jagdish Shettigar were thus excluded from the policy-making bodies because of their enthusiasm for economic nationalism. Also ignored was Rahul Bajaj, leader of the Bombay Club. There was, therefore, a remarkable somersault in the BJP’s position on globalisation. Rather than resisting external economic liberalisation, the BJP government adopted measures that facilitated the globalisation of the Indian economy. Thus, Baldev Raj Nayar does not find much distinction between ‘the BJP governance’ of the economy and the previous Congress government (2001: 224).

The BJP government paved the way for the participation of foreign capital in a key sector like insurance. In 1999, the passage of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Act (IRDA) permitted the involvement of both private Indian and foreign companies in the insurance sector, although foreign capital was restricted to a 26 per cent share within a joint venture set-up. L.K. Advani observed that no economic philosophy should become a dogma. The BJP believed in Swadeshi, which in essence meant that India had to develop on its own, but it did not mean xenophobia or a belief that everything foreign was bad. Yashwant Sinha, Sudarshan’s nominee in the Vajpayee
cabinet, who was applauded by the Parivar for presenting a Swadeshi budget, soon changed his line as well. He suddenly realised that there was a big difference between being the government and being outside it. Swadeshi was therefore given a new interpretation, in order to make it consistent with globalisation. Taking a U-turn on the subject, Sinha now maintained that Swadeshi actually meant competition, going out into the world and winning. This was not acceptable to the Sangh Parivar. The SJM came down heavily on the government and the RSS talked about the Congressisation of the BJP. But Prime Minister Vajpayee stood firm. Representing a major shift from the BJP’s earlier position of protecting the consumer goods sector from imports, the government lifted quantitative restrictions on the import of almost all products — ranging from consumer items to agricultural and capital goods. Sudarshan reacted strongly by calling for a ‘second independence movement’ to overcome the domination of economic superpowers (Deccan Herald, 24 April 2000). But the BJP, undeterred under Vajpayee, continued with the agenda of liberalisation with much vigour, thereby sacrificing Hindutva’s Swadeshi at the altar of globalisation. Vajpayee went to the 2004 general elections riding high on the slogan of ‘India Shining’.

**BJP’s Development Strategy under the RSS Scanner**

Soon after the Vajpayee government was voted out of power in 2004, the Sangh Parivar came out with a strong critique of the BJP government’s developmental agenda. The SJM, which had always had an uneasy relationship with the BJP, was quick to react as well. It blamed the BJP for following the same strategy which had been conceived and followed since 1991 by every political regime and regretted that the BJP’s economic agenda excluded a large number of deprived and downtrodden sections of society focusing only on a microscopic minority which has a global linkage. Instead of protecting the interest of the masses, relying on the domestic economy to create employment opportunities and ensuring equitable development, the BJP, it observed, put a high premium either on foreign investment or on the large-scale industrial sector, thereby neglecting agriculture and the small-scale manufacturing sector.

The Parivar itself was soft on issue of globalisation, however. It recognised that a major section of the Indian population is linked to the global economy and that their aspirations could not be ignored; India could not afford to follow a policy of isolation and must
have global interests. On the question of disinvestment it defended the BJP government arguing that what it had done was to promote the interest of the nation. The RSS was not opposed to the selling of hotels but to the manner in which this was done; not against disinvestment as such, but the way in which the disinvestment strategy had been implemented. The RSS also applauded the BJP government’s uncompromising stand at WTO. The RSS, therefore, did not have much difference with the BJP government’s agenda; its critique was mostly fraternal.

The RSS was also quick to respond to the crisis emerging around the question of special economic zones (SEZs) and the retail sector. Taking a tough stand it described SEZs as a land-grab project of land developers and multinational corporations, executed at the cost of thousands of small and marginal farmers. On the retail sector, which is the largest employment provider after agriculture, and contributes 13 per cent of the country’s gross domestic product, the RSS questioned the wisdom of opening up this sector to foreign direct investment (FDI). As the SJM argued, this would distort the delicate organic nature of trade by allowing foreign monopolistic power to exploit the market and the masses. The SJM also expressed its concern about growing economic disparities.

**Hindutva Developmental Discourse: A Critique**

Hindutva’s discourse on development seems to be logically incoherent, exhibiting serious contradictions. While it denounces both capitalism and communism, it also borrows heavily from each of them. It rejects the statist model, yet it favours state regulation and protection. No doubt it talks of sustainable development, yet Narendra Modi champions the construction of large dams like the Sardar Sarovar Project. Despite RSS chief K.S. Sudarshan’s rhetoric that communism has perished and that it is now the turn of capitalism, Hindutva has never really discouraged the accumulation of capital. These contradictions are further manifested when Hindutva’s developmental model attempts to accommodate the growing aspirations of the marginalised sections and classes of Hindus; this accommodation seems to be more strategic than substantive.

Despite all these contradictions Hindutva has no confusion about its mission — the construction of a strong and powerful, Hindu India — economically, politically and militarily. Not just, therefore,
an economic superpower but, more importantly, a military superpower equipped with nuclear bombs. The ‘Hindu Bomb’, it believes, will elevate India’s global power ranking. In this masculine and prosperous Hindu India any talk of the amelioration of the poor minorities is branded ‘appeasement’. The Sangh Parivar calls Manmohan Singh’s allocation of 15 per cent of the Eleventh Plan Fund for minorities the politics of minorityism (Balashankar 2008).

Ignoring the developmental needs of the minorities is one thing, but crushing their economic base is another. Though the generally held belief is that communal riots usually erupt spontaneously, due to cultural and religious antagonisms among communities, the violence invariably targets property and business. Local economic competition turns into a communal conflagration as one community calculates its economic advantage by eliminating competition through riots. It is interesting to note that riots do not occur everywhere, they are witnessed wherever capitalist/entrepreneurial development has occurred among Muslims — in Muradabad, Aligarh and Bhiwandi, for instance. Thus, riots are ‘more likely in urban sites where Muslims have visibly accumulated or benefited from remittances, where Hindu social or physical space is being asserted or reclaimed, and where state’s regulatory and repressive capacities are weak or have been captured by a religious group’ (White 2005: 182).

Even in Gujarat, which was communalised in a big way, violence occurred at selective sites. In eastern Gujarat, tribals were made to fight a proxy war against Muslim moneylenders on behalf of Hindu Baniyas. For the latter, communal revenge was thus fused with economic competition and market control. This trend is not confined to north India alone; a similar trend has been noticed in parts of south India as well.

With globalisation there is growing informalisation of labour. A study on Kanpur’s textile industry has shown how young casual labour is prone to communal manipulation and is eager to enter into patron–client relations. Less spending in the social sectors also helps the RSS to grow. Despite certain differences, neo-liberalism and the Hindu Right share similar conceptions of society and represent common class interests (see Gopalakrishnan 2006).

Conclusion

Hindutva’s obsession with its communal agenda has not left any scope for the elucidation of its discourse on development. Gradually it has
formulated a distinct view on each and every issue on development — from agriculture to nuclear energy, and from climate change to e-governance. Though it claims its developmental model to be holistic and inclusive, with viable economic packages for all classes/castes/strata of Hindu society, it does not have enough credibility and substantiation. True, Hindutva does not merely represent petty traders and it has successfully roped in the support of many big capitalists; BJP-led State governments court big industrialists and invite FDI. But it would be erroneous also to suggest that Hindutva’s economic agenda has the support of the upper classes/castes alone. A large number of the intermediary as well as the working classes have become its ardent followers; the Hindutva affiliate BMS has become the largest trade union in the country. BJP State governments have made social welfare, not Hindutva, the major plank of their governance. While Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh, popularly referred to as Chawal Baba, distributes cheap rice to the poor Adivasis, his Madhya Pradesh counterpart Shivraj Singh Chouhan talks less about Hindutva and more about development (bijli, sadak, pani — electricity, roads, water) and women’s empowerment. Undeniably, vis-à-vis Hindus, Hindutva’s developmental agenda has become more inclusive than ever before. However, it remains exclusionary with respect to non-Hindus and its discourse on development still contains a communal code.

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Seva, Sangathanas and Gurus: Service and The Making of the Hindu Nation

Sujata Patel

The religious right movement in India, Hindutva has redefined the relationship between the nation, religion and the state. It has challenged the principles of liberal secular ideology, prevalent till recently, that affirmed democratic practices, formal separation of the state from religion, and a policy of development for the economically deprived groups. Though scholarly interest in this movement is new, the movement itself has a long history. Scholarly research has traced its manifold aspects, its historical roots and political character, and uneven growth across the country. In discussing these issues, scholars have focused on major cross-national political movements manifested in such organisations and political parties as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiv Sena (Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 1996; Kanungo 2002; Katju 2003; Zavos 2000).

In this article I discuss and compare the ideology, organisational structure and mobilisation strategies of two organisations — the first is a local political affiliate of the RSS family, the Patit Pawan Sanghathana (PPS), with its headquarters in Pune. The second is the Hindu cultural/spiritual organisation Sadhu Vaswani Mission (SVM).

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The reason for comparing these two organisations in the context of the Hindutva project needs an explanation.

Generally scholars have made a distinction between Hindu political vs Hindu cultural/spiritual organisations, asserting that organisations that promote spiritual identity should not and cannot be confused with those that assert a political-religious identity. The latter intervenes in the political arena while the former remains a ‘civil society’ (in the Gramscian sense) institution. Also, not all who identify themselves as Hindus support the Hindutva project. Additionally, the lack of such a distinction elides a clear understanding of the specificity of the Hindutva project. Though this argument has relevance, this article suggests that it is important to explore both kinds of formations and compare them, because there is an organic relationship between the two.

These two types of organisations have evolved different forms of mobilisation and strategies of asserting Hindu identity. However, both draw their inspiration from similar ideas and discourses. Their activities are organised through the concept of seva (service) and are associated with two other ideas and institutions — sangathanas (organisations) and gurus (leaders). These institutions originated during the colonial period, when pluralistic Hindu traditions were transformed into an organised religion in order to promote the political project of creating a Hindu nation. The contemporary creation of a Hindu identity is as much a political project as Hindutva, the two being different manifestations of the same theme. I also make a general argument that Hindu nationalism is a much broader ideology than is represented by the actual components of the Sangh Parivar. It incorporates a matrix of ideas, activities and practices, elaborated through the concept of seva, that facilitates the construction of a Hindutva identity in radically new ways.

The Hindu/Hindutva project organises and mobilises the populace, across classes, castes, ethnic groups, and gender, through myriad ways and it is important to explore, assess and understand its differential manifestations, not just spatially but also ideologically, culturally and socially. This article explores how these projects manifest themselves in local spaces, where groups located therein use Hindu/Hindutva projects to express their identities. These spaces are, therefore, important sites for the mobilisation and circulation of such ideas, done by intervening in the ‘political’ and/or the public sphere as well as by organising everyday activities at the cultural and...
social levels. This is how Hindu political projects find legitimacy in different ways within one place.

PPS, a member of the Sangh Parivar, mobilises youths from the lower and backward castes in the city and the State to destabilise the secular state and its policies, which it declares are pro-minority. Its project is to produce sevaks (volunteers) who use vigilante actions to build awareness in order to organise the Hindu nation. It operates in a grey zone that distinguishes political parties from ‘underground’ or banned organisations. On the other hand, SVM is a registered charitable organisation under the Societies Registration Act and Public Charities Act and considers itself a spiritual organisation. It also provides services in health and education to more than 1.5 million of its members through its 35 international centres. Its constituency comprises mainly upper-class urban Hindus, of whom more than 90 per cent are Sindhis. SVM states that it has no political affiliations, rather it uses the route of cultural spiritualism to create a global Hindu community. These organisations are dissimilar also in terms of their scale of operation and levels of mobilisation. PPS mobilises male youth in the city and the State of Maharashtra, while the SVM organises families across the city, in the country and globally.

This article argues that such formal differences apart there is a shared history and a political project that these two organisations have in common. Though they organise different sets of activities, have varied forms of mobilisation as also organisational structures, they are linked together through the concepts of seva, sangathanas and gurus. Differences among organisations’ activities and practices are customary and ubiquitous in the Indian subcontinent, which is characterised by the complex interface of class, caste, ethnic, and gender identities with religious practices and wherein both formal and institutional forms of political activity interlace with performative ones.

In what follows I begin by examining the genealogy of the concepts of seva, sangathanas and guru and show how these are linked to Swami Vivekananda’s reformulation of Hinduism (Patel 2007). I trace the history of these concepts across the twentieth century and show how they have been articulated in the activities of the PPS and SVM respectively.

In conclusion I briefly outline the recent initiatives of the global religious right and the US state under the Bush administration to involve Christian religious organisations in development programmes on the assumption that they incorporate a service dimension (Kramer
Drawing on this argument, some development theorists have suggested that because seva implies service, Hindu religious organisations can also be mobilised for a similar initiative (Benn 2004). In this article, I have shown that seva does not merely connote service, it is also a political project of constituting a Hindu community. In these circumstances, development theorists should be wary of associating with projects that deliberately obfuscate words and meanings to promote rightist religious activities and confine the reach of development activities and poverty alleviation programmes to one religious group.

Vivekananda, Seva and the Making of a Majority

Historians such as Romila Thapar have argued that Hinduism was ‘a juxtaposition of flexible religious sects’ before colonialism attempted to homogenise these diverse traditions (1996: 3–4). Hinduism did not affirm a single God, prophet, founder, church, holy book, religious symbol or centre. These diversities were reorganised in the colonial period when, for the first time, new religious groups were formed and came to be organised as sangathanas around the figures of gurus, who framed their objectives in terms of the narrative of the nation. The goal of these organisations was to constitute a new community of believers of Hinduism, termed the majority, to query the role of the colonial state on one hand and its dominant religion, Christianity, on the other. This phase saw a movement akin to proselytisation within Hinduism through the elaboration of the concept of seva, the creation of a set of practices, together with allegiance to gurus who led these sangathanas (Beckerlegge 2000, 2003, 2004; Copley 2000, 2003; Sharma 2003).

These sangathanas emulated the Christian tradition of building a congregation around the church and were sometimes named as missions. One of the first such sangathanas, the Ramakrishna Mission. The gurus who led these sangathanas were considered the authentic interpreters of Hindu religion and organised the congregation around various activities called seva. Seva was defined to mean the acquisition and pride of the individual sevak (volunteer) for a new religio-political identity, that of an imagined Hindu nation, as detailed by the gurus of the sangathanas. The activities included discourses by the gurus, called pravachanas (religious discourses) and/or satsangs (prayer meetings) and organising the sevaks around activities such as teaching
and disaster relief. Some sangathanas also started medical centres and in recent times hospitals, colleges and even universities.

The gurus that emerged during the colonial period were distinctive. Not only were they from savarna (upper caste) groups, but were educated in English and had been at some time teachers and educators. No wonder they wrote mainly in English, and oriented their discourses to the emerging upper and middle classes in India. Gurus encouraged complete obedience and loyalty, were elitist and authoritarian, and developed a personality-based hierarchical structure to organise the sangathanas (Copley 2000: 6).

The key figure in the reformulation of nineteenth-century Hinduism was Swami Vivekananda, who was the first to use the concept of seva when he gave it a new meaning and declared it as ‘organised service to humankind’ (Beckerlegge 2000: 60). This reformulation was related to Vivekananda’s quest to understand the reasons for India’s subjugation to the colonial masters. His project was unique in that it had both a social and a political component — a social project to reform Hinduism and a political project to displace colonial suppression by mobilising new groups into the institutionalised structure of Hinduism. In order to create this constituency, he reconfigured the principles defining Hinduism by creating a blend of three distinct traditions: the orthodox principles of Hinduism as represented in the Vedas; the contemporary socially sensitive and reformist aspects of Hinduism, which highlighted the plight of the untouchables; and the principles of charity and service as embodied in Christianity (Farquhar 1977; Radice 1998).

Seva, it was argued, would forge a new Hindu community of all castes integrated around a common principle, that of selfless social duty. The strength of this community would lie in its spiritual strength and physical fitness, and its objective was to ameliorate the lot of the downtrodden. Seva would improve their material conditions and position in Hindu society. Simultaneously, another kind of seva, that of spreading the social awareness and spiritual enlightenment of the economically stronger sections would help to connect them to the lesser fortunate.

Some commentators have argued that Vivekananda’s criticism of mindless ritualism and efforts to include the untouchables in a new reading of Hinduism make him a radical social thinker (Raghuramraju 2006). I contend that Vivekananda offered a savarna reading of seva and was the first to conceive a majoritarian Hinduism. Vivekananda
emphasised the role of the *sevaks* as being critical to *seva*. These *sevaks*, he argued, needed to train themselves to be pure, noble and discerning souls who could rise above superstitions and appreciate the true character of Hinduism, no matter how dogmatic it may have become in recent times. He also put emphasis on developing physical strength and capabilities. For, he suggested, when one builds the body, the individual *sevak* becomes a fit person, and then he can withstand any challenge. A nation cannot be made up of weak people. If there were weak people, then nation’s boundaries, both spiritual and physical, would be infiltrated and controlled by outsiders. Vivekananda argued that *seva* should become *sadhana* (meditation) as it spread awareness through education. The latter would help to overcome the ignorance that has brought poverty and subjugation to the Hindus in India (Sarkar 1997).

The *seva* that Vivekananda discusses is the *seva* that is to be performed by the *sevaks*. It is the *sevak* who is to understand what Hinduism represents and cleanse it of its ritualism. It is the Vedas that the *sevak* has to appreciate in order to comprehend Hinduism. It is the *sevaks* whose salvation Vivekananda is interested in and not that of the masses. To this end he organised the *sangathana* as a hierarchical organisation in which the word of the *guru* is supreme.

I would reiterate Sumit Sarkar’s contention that Vivekananda’s reconstitution of Hinduism distilled it not only of the many diverse traditions of Hinduism, including some associated with non-Brahmin sects that Ramkrishna had attempted to synthesise in his writings, but it also diluted in many ways the appeal that the latter’s persona had for various underprivileged groups in contemporary society. By asserting the Vedic orientation of Hinduism and addressing himself mainly to a literate, English-educated, upper caste and class audience, Vivekananda asserted distinctions between the *savarnas* and the rest of Hindu society, as also between males and females, in new and subtle ways and yet preached for their reform.¹ No wonder communal organisations such as the RSS trace their majoritarian ideologies to

¹While on one hand Vivekananda spoke for the amelioration of caste and gender distinctions, his speeches also show some ambiguity regarding these issues. Sarkar (1997) refers to these as ‘tensions’ and argues that he resolved them by promoting the cult of ‘Divine Mother’, wherein he exalted one kind of womanhood, that of the traditional discourse that projected women as widows, desexualised individuals oriented to service activities.
Vivekananda’s notion of seva and to his dream of making Hinduism a world religion (Beckerlegge 2003, 2004; Copley 2000, 2003; Sarkar 1997; Sharma 2003).

**The Contemporary Hindutva Movement**

A new formulation of Hinduism and seva emerged with the establishment and growth of the RSS in 1925. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh literally meant ‘a national organisation of (self-motivated) volunteers’ and was started as a cultural organisation to counter the growing influence of Muslims in the Indian National Congress and the nationalist movement, and in opposition to the colonial state’s interventions against Hindus wishing to celebrate their cultural and religious festivals. Dr Keshav B. Hedgewar, who set up the RSS, was influenced by the ideas of Vivekananda and Dayanand Saraswati (who had earlier founded the Arya Samaj in 1875) and had given a territorial notion to seva, and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who wrote the book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1969) and is credited with the elaboration of the idea of the Hindutva (Anderson and Damle 1987; Malkani 1980).

Savarkar’s ideas on Hindu nationalism resonated with those of Dayanand, but were distinctive and connected two narrative strategies. The first is the narrative of subjugation — that of an overwhelming sense of injury that the Hindus have been forced to feel as a result of their enslavement, first by Islam and later by the colonial rulers. The second is the assertion of a pure Hindu culture, which purportedly existed in the Golden Age of Hinduism, the Vedic period, which needed to be revived in order to give Hinduism its due. Savarkar conceived India as the original motherland of Hindus and argued for the need to reclaim it from its enslavement by foreign powers through the instrument of cultural force (Sharma 2003).

Hedgewar shared with Vivekananda the need to use education, discipline, organisation, and the strategy of instilling pride in Hinduism by creating a band of (celibate) sevaks. Vivekananda had argued for the need to create a ‘pure and fit self’ and the need for sevaks to relate to the ‘served’ (the oppressed groups) through humanitarian seva. Hedgewar shifted this emphasis to the creation of a male volunteer group organised around a physical regimen of character building in order to combat the ‘apathy’ and ‘emasculating’ that was undermining Hindus and Hinduism. For him the RSS was to be a band of volunteers, from all castes, who would be organised
and trained to fight to protect Hinduism from being enslaved. The paradigm of ‘asceticism’ in Vivekananda’s thought and the emphasis on elite males was now shifted to create a more aggressive masculine position. Hedgewar’s belief that seva can be best practised through the shakha (branch) training and rituals appears completely different from the views institutionalised in Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Mission. In 1940, the RSS had 500 shakhas and a structure in which the head had absolute power and complete control over all decision-making.²

Many commentators (see, for instance, Damle and Anderson 1987; Kanungo 2002; Malkani 1980) have stated that the growth and expansion of the RSS took place under the leadership of Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, who after Hedgewar’s death in 1940, integrated his notions of creating a ‘band of self-disciplined male volunteers’ with doing humanitarian service and elaborated the many kinds of ways of doing seva. Seva was redefined both in terms of the volunteers and their work. Golwalkar borrowed and expanded upon the idea of seva as practised in the Ramakrishna Mission, such as the establishment of schools for oppressed groups, special activities for women and the setting up of health facilities and the integration of seva with social ‘service’. Golwalkar asked the Hindus ‘to worship God through serving society’. This became the motto that holds the RSS and its parivar (family) together even today.³

**Majoritarianism in the Post-Independence State**

I have argued that there were various nuances to the construction of seva, as gurus and sangathanas envisioned and institutionalised varying practices, reflecting in turn the cultural pluralism inherited from pre-colonial structures. However, I have also argued that there was an attempt to standardise and homogenise seva and its definitions during the colonial period. Seva implied the creation of a band of volunteers to spread the message of Hinduism and the construction

²Many contemporary commentators have written about the fascist character and nature of these shakhas. See, Basu et al. (1993), Casolari (2000), Hansen (1999), and Kanungo (2002).

³Beckerlegge (2003: 36) notes that in 1997, the RSS recorded 2,866 sevakaryas (units of seva activity) operating across the various organisations aligned to the RSS. This covered 7 per cent of India’s population.
of a Hindu self. This could be done in two ways: one by those who could initiate organised, vigilante political actions to question state power and to target minorities. The other was to educate oneself on Vedic precepts, participate in *pravachanas* and *satsangs*, and help in providing voluntary services in schools, hospitals and during disaster relief operations for Hindus.

I have also shown that the distinction between the two kinds of *seva* emerged in the late 1930s, when the RSS was set up to promote a more militant and aggressive masculine connotation of *seva*, at the precise historical juncture when the nationalist movement had become inclusive, elaborating a secular project for the making of the Indian nation and when democratic political processes were at the very doorstep of the Indian state. As the independent Indian state affirmed its secular and democratic credentials and its commitment to integrating the deprived into the national developmental agenda, Hindu *sangathanas* found themselves being pushed to the margins and excluded from the mainstream of economic and political life. But they remained alive, now within the realm of the social and cultural lives of the Hindu community. And in the late 1960s and early 1970s they found a new role for themselves as the communal Hindu project was revived by a reinvigorated RSS.

The late 1960s and early 1970s are ‘interesting times’ in Indian political history. As the democratic and developmental state went into an economic and a legitimacy crisis with the breakdown of the ‘Congress system’, various peoples’ movements emerged across India. In eastern India, the Naxalite rebellion forced open the land question hitherto not resolved by the development state, and in western India the Dalit movement emerged to raise the issue of continuing caste exploitation. Language, caste and regional identities confronted each other as upper-caste elites mediated these competing and exclusive demands and floundered in finding political and economic solutions that could address them. In the process, their secularist ideology showed its true colours, that of being a *savarna*/upper-caste, majoritarian ideology (Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Khilnani 1997; Patel 1996).

Not surprisingly, it is in the same period, the late 1960s, that the RSS leaders chalked out a new strategy to strengthen their organisation and revive their political agenda of creating a Hindu society in India using Savarkar’s Hindutva principles. The Hindutva project of *seva* incorporated six principal characteristics: an attempt to transform
Hinduism into a homogenised, rigid, codified, and monochromatic identity; the belief that Hinduism is the most ancient, perfect and evolved religion, as against other existing religions; an attempt to create clear boundaries identifying the believers from infidels; a belief in the significance of the Vedas, the text that elaborates practices, as an infallible authority that defines Hinduism; a belief that Hindus are victims of threats to itself and to the nation; and lastly, as a set of ideas that are insular, that is, ideas which are not willing to be engaged in a dialogue, discussion or debate with other visions, projects and ideologies (Katju 2003; Ludden 1996; Sharma 2003).

In 1966, the RSS called a meeting of Hindu religious gurus in Allahabad and established the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organisation of Hindu sangathanas to rejuvenate and spread the Hindutva ideology, not only in India but across the world (Katju 2003). It wanted to acquire a public voice and legitimacy and ultimately extend its influence through its various newly established fronts (Anderson and Damle 1987; Basu et al. 1993; Jaffrelot 2005). The creation of this block led to a slow polarisation of politics, as events and political processes crystallised into two main tendencies. On the one hand, were those groups that supported development and secular ideologies, and on the other were those that sponsored savarna-oriented Hindu majoritarianism. The latter could be further divided into two groups: one that was openly communal and led by the RSS through its parivar, and the other which consisted of sangathanas that were latently communal, that is, they did not actively and openly participate in communal activities but shared an interest with the RSS in building a Hindu national and, increasingly, global community. The Patit Pavan Sangathana and the Sadhu Vaswani Mission represent these two kinds of organisations.

The Patit Pavan Sangathana (PPS) was one of the three youth and student organisations that the RSS set up in the late 1960s. The other two were the student bodies called the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, and an umbrella organisation called Vidya Bharati. Through these organisations the RSS tried to mobilise the youth, in many ways the most important section of contemporary Indian and world society, from different strata of society, so that they could train and discipline them psychologically and physically to form the Hindu nation that they had conceived. In addition, the RSS also established organisations that catered to other strata, such as tribals (the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram) and industrial labourers (Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh),
and also set up an organisation for women called the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. The long-term objective of the RSS was to strengthen their *shakha* networks, replacing informal organisations and hierarchies with more well-defined, formal structures and thereby expand the base of the Hindutva movement (Kanungo 2002).

PPS, founded in 1964, mobilises backward-caste Hindu youths in the State of Maharashtra, who dream of opportunities and rewards in the urban arena. Most of these people are migrants from rural areas, convinced that cities can offer not only employment but also assets. Oftentimes these hopes and aspirations remain unfulfilled wishes, and the cruelties and exclusions of city life turn them into anger and rage. The PPS organised its *seva* to project this fury and direct this rage to target the state and the minority communities of Muslims and Christians, who, they argue, have taken away opportunities from the Hindu youth.

The growth of the PPS should be seen against the background of developments in Maharashtra, a State characterised by a high rate of urbanisation (44 per cent urban population in 2001), growing immigration from underdeveloped and poor States, burgeoning cities characterised by the lack of employment opportunities for unskilled workers, except in the informal sector, together with little or no access to housing and other infrastructure (26 per cent of Maharashtra’s urban population lives in slums). Most PPS activists are angry about these inequalities, arguing that these have been perpetrated against Hindus by the contemporary state and by secular parties. The PPS activists cultivate a sense of humiliation among the Maharashtrian youths, that is later turned into rage.

The Sadhu Vaswani Mission (SVM) presents a distinct contrast to PPS in terms of membership and structure. Its membership is concentrated among the upper-class, urban-based Hindu Sindhi community. Falzon (2005) describes the Sindhis as a traditional group of Indian traders who have a long history of participating in cross-country trade. However, colonialism and the Partition and its aftermath have made the Sindhis one of the subcontinent’s largest displaced communities, whose land and culture are preserved only in their memories.5

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4 Some members say it was founded in 1959, yet others suggest 1965. However, 1964 seems the most widely accepted date.

5 Today Sindh province, from where Sindhis migrated, is located in the north-east part of Pakistan.
Colonialism provided opportunities to the Sindhi Hindu traders. It opened up intensive trade linkages in the nineteenth century, allowing this trading community to find a new foothold for themselves as middlemen in the world of international trade. As a result many Sindhis voluntarily emigrated to settle in various parts of the British Empire, such as Hong Kong, East Africa and the Caribbean Islands, and later migrated to England, Canada and the US. However, colonialism also led to the partition of India and Pakistan. Most of the Hindu Sindhis who were still based in Sindh became victims of the religious violence that occurred during the partition, coming to India as refugees and settling in and around Mumbai. For these displaced individuals, SVM became a refuge, a secure space where their identity was nurtured, preserved and promoted. SVM addressed this identity crisis and promoted seva to help assuage this loss. It provided the Sindhi Hindus with pride in their present status as Hindus as well as a positive identity and a cultural space that they could call their own (Falzon 2005). Today, the SVM’s most important constituency are Sindhi non-resident Indians who support and give huge donations to SVM.

This is the context in which I analyse the two different kinds of seva being practised in PPS and SVM.

Seva in PPS

PPS, as mentioned earlier, is a Pune-based Hindu nationalist organisation that is a part of the Sangh Parivar or the ‘family’ of the RSS. PPS is a product of times when broader organisational changes were taking place within the RSS, as it slowly graduated from the elitist sangathan methodology of Hedgewar and the cultural activism and ‘character building project’ of Golwalkar to the mass mobilisations of agitational politics suggested by Savarkar (Hansen 1999; Kanungo 2002).
PPS was formed to mobilise the youth who were understood as being part of a subculture of humiliation. The word ‘Patit Pavan’ literally means ‘purification of the fallen’ — an expression that dates back to Veer Savarkar.7 PPS trains and teaches these youth to have an identity of a grandiose self, organised around the superior and well-nourished Hindu spirit of the swayamsevak. Today, apart from its stronghold in Pune, it also enjoys a presence in some towns of western and northern Maharashtra, more particularly Malegaon, which has been the site of continuous communal clashes.

PPS emerged as a Hindu youth group looking to counter the political dominance of the Youth Congress on one hand, the Shiv Sena in Mumbai and the growing Muslim youth activities in Pune on the other. The PPS exhorts the Hindu youth to do seva and to bring justice to Hindus. Seva in this framework emphasised an aggressive masculinity and patriotism. Most of its leaders and activists have police records and several criminal cases are pending against them for stabbing and other forms of violence. The PPS has two leaders; the first is considered the formal head, and is from within the organisation and is normally a youth leader. The second is a senior swayamsevak of the RSS and is usually called the pracharak (full-time organiser). He helps in strategising the activities of PPS and actor as the mediator between the RSS and the PPS. Today PPS has more than 10,000 members, with shakhas in 30 colleges and mandals (branches) and in almost every slum in Pune. It is the largest organiser (in terms of numbers) of Ganesh festivals in Pune.

Organisationally, PPS works on the principle of informality. As a deliberate policy it ensures that there is no organisational structure. It does not keep any records and functions from rented offices, which are changed periodically.8 However, in practice the organisation functions through a system of hierarchy. Only the accepted leaders, few in number, take decisions. All the members are meant to support these decisions.

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7 Initially the organisation was called Hindu Jajvalaya Sangathana, formed with the aim of unifying young Hindus in Pune, to organise them to do ‘social work’ and to police the way state and other religions were corrupting Hindu culture and ethos.
8 The present office in Wagh building is a rented premises although some workers say it was donated by some wealthy PPS well wisher.
PPS actively promotes a ‘shakha culture’ that is targeted at the youth in slums. It is also an organisation that can come to the aid of the RSS when the latter needs help. From the outset, the organisation has come to be identified with a certain aggressive and violent quality for which it draws its inspiration from Savarkar’s militant and confrontational style and owes an ideological debt to the erstwhile Hindu Mahasabha. It conducts demonstrations or morchas against various organised urban crimes like the illicit country liquor trade, gambling, and is also involved in organising students protests against examination paper leaks and other such local problems.

It propagates a simplistic and highly communal version of Hindutva that can appeal to poverty stricken and deprived youths so as to organise them against threats to Hinduism. It campaigns against corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and the police force. Among its more direct political and symbolic actions are assaults on anti-Hindu politicians and media persons. It also participates in all the agitational campaigns of the Sangh Parivar in Maharashtra and especially Pune city. Its eclectic concerns are a product of its extremely localised base and home constituency and its religious and ‘moral’ understanding of the rights of the Hindu community.

Like the RSS, PPS promotes the Hindu identity by developing an allegiance to a set of symbols. The most important symbol is the bhagwa dhwaj or saffron flag, which is revered deeply. In addition, there are some localised symbols such as, Kalubai Devi, goddess of the bahujan samaj (backward society). The saffron flag is worshipped on Gurupurnima day and also on the occasion of other Hindu festivals and national celebrations, such as Dussera, Gudi Padwa (Maharashtrian new year), Independence Day and Republic Day, and on Shiv Jayanti. On Janmashtami day, young members carry out the dahi handi ritual with great enthusiasm, which actually reinforces the idiom of able-bodied masculinity.

Hansen has argued that democracy in India has produced,

[A] culture of politics that is incredibly fluid, situational and dynamic — where stable constituencies, alliances, equations and ideological

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9 According to Mangesh Karmakar, an activist with PPS, there were 65 shakhas or branches of PPS in Pune city in late 2005. These are concentrated in the middle class areas of the old city and around Deccan Gymkhana and other areas that constitute the urban fringe of the city (Interview, 13 March 2005).
principles are in constant flux and redefinition. In such a culture it is those who can create a collective mood, or the illusion of a collectivity driven by a mood — both highly ephemeral phenomena that can set political agendas at least for some time. They can generate demands and the illusions of their ‘power’ — an equally ephemeral phenomenon. To perform this type of politics depends, therefore, on the ability to stage performances, to use and employ a range of registers that can generate authority, and to put the power of rumours, myth and other cultural registers to effective use (2004: 21).

It is in this context that one has to examine the activities of PPS. Its approach is to take prompt action, execute quick interventions and tackle issues head-on. It does not believe in conducting a dialogue or having discussions. No wonder its leaders claim that whenever they want, they can gather 5,000 young men on the streets of Pune, ready to take action. Dhananjay Lele, a Brahmin activist, legitimises this political style by giving a culturalist explanation for it, suggesting that it represents ‘the vagabond style of the Marathas’,11 contrasted to the calm, suave, patient attitude of Brahmins’ (Interview, 10 March 2005).

The PPS regards itself as a ‘rapid task force’ that can assuage the feelings of discrimination suffered by the Hindu community. It sees itself as a militant organisation providing justice to all Hindus who are otherwise deprived of it in a hostile secular establishment. It organises itself to participate in agitations, in ‘street fights’, and ensures prompt action on big and small issues. No wonder most commentators have argued that the PPS have started many communal riots, especially in the small and big towns of Maharashtra, such as Malegaon, where it has a strong base. Many of its activists also have a police record as a result.12

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10 What Hansen does not note is that with the establishment of the PPS the Brahmins were trying to build a new strategy of lower caste mobilisation that could use their anger, physical prowess, aggressiveness, and militancy to build the Hindutva project while continuing to use Brahminic machiavellian strategies within the RSS.

11 Implying thereby the style of backward castes (Brahmins still think of the Marathas as backward).

12 The PPS makes a radical critique of the state and its institutions, and does not have faith in the police system. With this goal in mind it has recruited many policemen (especially those from the lower castes) as sympathisers to its cause in Pune and in other cities of Maharashtra.
The PPS draws its understanding of seva from its parent organisation, the RSS, for whom seva means not only doing voluntary work but also creating a volunteer force that will construct the Hindu nation. These volunteers are expected to develop Hinduism as a cultural force and ensure that it not be degenerated by foreign and Indian secular and cultural powers (Malkani 1980). In the case of the PPS, the notion of seva is more political — incorporating both militant self-articulation and communalism. Two kinds of seva can be discerned in their programme: seva to protect and promote Hinduism and its culture, and seva that is aimed at the youth and at students.

The seva required to protect Hindu culture and religion involves the following activities: to resist the conversion of Dalits to Christianity, initiate the construction of new temples, oppose the construction of new mosques, organise Ganapati festivals, organise protests against cultural activities such as plays and movies that hurt Hindu sentiments, and organise communal confrontations.

PPS members are proud to acknowledge their involvement in violence against Muslims in Pune and several other districts of North Maharashtra as part of their work and seva. They have also been involved in other kinds protests, such as against the circulation of a text on Shivaji written by James Lain, a US-based historian of religion. Various organisations, including the PPS, protested against the government’s apathy towards banning the book and objected to various passages on Shivaji. On 4 January 2004, together with the Sambhaji Brigade, the PPS ransacked the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, manhandled scholars and destroyed many rare books and manuscripts preserved in the library.

Second, they participate in campaigns against eve teasing and have even threatened to physically injure the miscreants involved in such incidents. These campaigns, however, are restricted to certain targets, especially those that are considered modern and Western. No wonder it conducted protests against the screening of films like Deepa Mehta’s ‘Fire’, and dramas like the ‘Vagina Monologues’. Lastly, as mentioned above, many PPS activists are drawn from the ‘underclasses’ and live in relative poverty. For such people the PPS ensures access to certain ‘rights’, such as ration cards, water and electricity connections. It has also started giving seva for obtaining loans.

Some of the PPS’ seva is related to the concerns of students, such as protesting against fee hikes and the low marks awarded to backward-caste students. It also donates books, uniforms and stationary and
securities tuition fee waivers for them. It organises functions to distribute prizes to successful school students area-wise. It acts as career counsellors to college students and helps them secure jobs through informal contacts in the Pune Municipal Corporation.

PPS’s *seva* for youth is organised around cultural activities, establishing clubs and procuring loans. It also organises ‘Samskar Shibirs’ (cultural camps) for youths in slum areas. In these camps lectures are given about Hindu religion, focusing mainly on Hindu rites, rituals and beliefs. Picnics and trips are organised to the forts of Maharashtra to instil a sense of pride on being a Hindu and make them conversant with Hindu history and culture. Cultural programmes and youth meets are organised on a monthly basis. In addition, the PPS organises blood donation camps; donating blood becomes metaphor of the ‘sacrifice’ that the organisation demands of its youth members.

Apart from the above, the PPS also organises violent protests and roadblocks to expressing their sentiments on a variety of contemporary issues, such as protests against the content of school history textbooks or the imposition of a rule regarding the use of helmets for those driving two-wheelers in Maharashtra. It uses terrorising tactics like blackening the faces of officials and *gheraos* (picketing) to make its point more vehemently. The PPS thus has the ability to sustain a high-profile performative presence in the popular imagination of Pune.

Just like RSS, the PPS’ notion of *seva* represents an assertive, aggressive and violent form of masculinity. It is organised around a feeling of deprivation not as a caste but as a Hindu community and is mobilised against an imaginary threat of the demonised ‘other’. Muslims are thus represented as power hungry and covert usurpers of political and cultural power and public spaces.

The PPS is unique in its carefully and consciously created style of volatility and spontaneity. This organisation deliberately has not evolved a coherent set of practices or a set of ideological principles that could become a guiding force for its members. It argues that it works for the greater common good of the Hindu community, however, it is difficult to understand clearly the definition of this ‘common

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13 A similar organisation is the Shiv Sena, whose main base is in Mumbai (Eckert 2003; Purandare 1999).
good’. Thus it associates itself with activities such as temple restorations, Ganesh festivals and protesting against the construction of new mosques. Additionally, it involves itself in protesting the defiling of the ideal chaste Hindu women as it takes place in films and in the print media. It has a unique political style that is individualistic and masculine, incorporating notions of toughness and male aggression, based on an embittered sense of victimhood.

The PPS’ interventions are intermittent, not sustained over long periods of time. They are spectacular, sudden and violent, and capture the imagination of the populace. The attempt is to gain power immediately. No wonder, therefore, that it is both revered and feared. The element of violence accords to PPS all the characteristics of an underground organisation. However, its activities remain arbitrary, based on the individual caprices of the leaders. It is an organisation that is much feared for its power and therefore remains significant.

Seva in SVM

The SVM was established in 1931 by Sadhu T.L. Vaswani, to provide a platform to Hindu Sindhi women to partake in religio-nationalist activities and thereby involve themselves in the public domain, outside the confines of their homes. Vaswani’s vision of Hinduism was syncretic; it combined the experiences of the Ramkrishna Mission, of Christianity and its notion of service, with traditions in Sindh that had historically integrated Sikh and Islamic principles. For Vaswani modern times demanded a new and critical role for women. Their innate quality of selflessness needed to be released from the confines of the household and projected into society.

The SVM’s idea of seva incorporates notions of tenderness and individual care. Members can give seva in the sphere of education,
healthcare and spiritualism. The SVM also upholds vegetarianism and animal rights. In fact, the Mission defines seva as doing charity and promoting subsidised educational and medical services. It runs schools and colleges, a state-of-the-art hospital, numerous smaller clinics, printing presses and a publishing house. It is listed in several business directories as a business enterprise in spite of its legal status as a charitable trust.

Though the Mission remains woman-orientated, in terms of its membership, presence in the governing bodies and its definition of seva as a set of care-giving practices, there is an exception. Its leader is a man, Dada J.P. Vaswani. Dada J.P. Vaswani is Sadhu Vaswani’s nephew. Under his leadership, the Mission has grown and extended its activities not just outside Pune (in the States of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and New Delhi), but also all over North America, where its has 20 centres and other parts of the world where the Sindhi community lives.16

The Mission is known as one of the most prominent Hindu sangathanas in the world and embodies many of the characteristics of sangathanas defined earlier: its authoritarian structure, lack of transparency and accountability, and is completely controlled by Dada Vaswani and his family, most of whom are life members.17 They hold all the key posts in the organisation.18 Thus, though all the day-to-day decisions are left to the branches, policies are stipulated by the Mission section heads.

The growth of seva in SVM can be seen as having taken place in three separate stages. In its early years, seva was embedded with deep nationalist aspirations; it was organised to mobilise women to become part of a congregation, have satsangs (fellowship meetings comprised largely of women, hence called sakhi19 satsang), an ashram in Rajpur, a Sindhi journal (called Sant Mala, which carried accounts of the lives

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16 There are five centers in South America, five in Europe, two in Africa, another five in the Middle East, and at least twenty-five in other Asian countries.

17 The mission has 10 lifelong members, including members of his family, who usually purchase membership for a fee.

18 An executive committee of 13–15 heads the various sections, such as finance and treasury, education, hospitals and polyclinics, publication, programme committees, daily seva and public relations, and runs the Mission.

19 Means ‘female companion’ in many Indian languages, including Sindhi.
and teachings of saints from every religion), and a store that sold *swadeshi* goods. The initial impetus of the ‘Sakhi Conference’ was patriotism, protest against social evils (notably *deti-leti* or dowry, and meat-eating) and attempts to create a new conception of *seva* (service, not just to one’s own family but to the whole society). Hari P. Vaswani, one of Sadhu Vaswani’s nieces’ states:

This was something new, strange and unheard of in the whole of Hyderabad. Conferences had been held before but they were organised by men folk and were meant mostly for men folk. This Sakhi conference, which was held in the year 1931, was unique in that it was meant for women only. It was a challenge to the men folk who regarded themselves as superior to women. Girls and women of course welcomed the idea and did their best to make the conference a success. Long had they remained in the background. Now that they got the opportunity to give vent to their pent up feelings and emotions, they did so with great relish and enthusiasm… (Vaswani 1980: 155).  

*Seva*, as envisioned by Sadhu Vaswani, consisted of ‘acts of loving service’ or ‘compassionate service’, and was directed at one’s fellow living beings (Vaswani 1980). *Seva* was a lifelong spiritual mission, whose rationale, for Vaswani, could be found in the syncretic and panoramic version of Hinduism. Like the *gurus* of the late nineteenth century, including Vivekananda and Dayanand Saraswati, Vaswani borrowed from Islam, Sikhism and Christianity. Additionally, he drew from the Bhakti movement and *Sufi*. Constant use of *bhajans* and *dhoonis*, collective chanting and instrumental music made the experience of religion a sensual experience at the Mission. The concept of *bhakti* (wholehearted devotion) to the Gods was stressed and Mirabai was chosen to represent this philosophy.  

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20 This store was operated by women and was called Sakhi Stores. Groups of women formed social service groups calling themselves ‘Mangal Sabha’, ‘Nari Shala’, and ‘Seva Ashram’, and published journals, *Mira, East and West* and *Sant Mala*.  

21 All of Sadhu Vaswani’s unpublished manuscripts were brought together and published in 1970 on the occasion of his 91st birthday. Titled *Noori Granth*, it contains the entire collection of his poems composed in Sindhi. Since then, this text has become a bible for his followers. Vaswani died on 16 January 1966.
Sujata Patel

Vaswani was convinced about the need for women to enter the public domain and be educated to become spiritually strong. He thus started the Mira School for girls in Hyderabad, thereby launching the Mira Education Movement. Here students were taught about Indian culture and ‘pupils were inculcated with the wisdom of sages, by readings and recitations from scriptures, by songs and speeches’ (Vaswani 1980). With the Mira education movement, the concept of providing education was permanently linked with seva (Vaswani n.d.: 2).

Vaswani’s audience comprised the mobile upper classes of Sindh and, no wonder, as the seva activities under his leadership expanded, more and more men, mainly local merchants got involved in the finance and management of various events. Vaswani addressed the women and men members as ‘sisters’ and ‘brothers’ respectively, as he tried to create an ascetic community in the mould articulated by Vivekananda.

The second stage of the growth of the movement took place just before the partition of the subcontinent. When the acts of violence on Hindus in Pakistan escalated, Sindhi Hindu families began to migrate to India in large numbers. The Mission catered mainly to these refugees, giving solace to them and also helping them through seva activities. In Bombay, where Sadhu Vaswani first set up camp, he established the Brotherhood Association (it is interesting that Vaswani named his organisation a brotherhood when most of the members were women). Members of the SVM justify this naming by arguing that Vaswani thereby emphasised the spirit of cooperation and fraternity, which is basic to men. Later he shifted base to Pune, where the Mira School was restarted together with a charitable dispensary. In the premises of this building, satsangs and Gita classes began to be held.

In 1978, 12 years after Sadhu Vaswani’s death, the Brotherhood Association was renamed Sadhu Vaswani Mission. The Mission also redefined its tasks to doing seva to create a worldwide Hindu community. For ‘the hands that serve are holier than the hands that turn the beads of the rosary’ (SVM n.d.: 4). This started the third phase of the movement and with it the Mission’s slow corporatisation, its expansion into an international organisation and a trend towards promoting a subtle Hindutva.

As mentioned above, Sadhu Vaswani attempted to build a syncretic tradition of seva. He also encouraged his disciples to read the Quran
and the Guru Granth Sahib. In *Young India* Sadhu Vaswani had asked his disciples to inculcate the strong service orientation present in Islam. He suggested that the cultural heritage of India is constituted as much by the Hindu as the Islamic culture. However, today, in the *satsangs* and religious discourses, J.P. Vaswani and others do not refer to the Quran or to Sufi philosophy. Instead, in their speeches, activities and practices, there is a perceptible shift towards Vedic Hinduism and *Sanatana Dharma* (understood as traditional Hindu religion). Books in which Sadhu Vaswani extolled the wisdom contained in the Quran and narrated the lives of Fakirs and Sufi saints are today out of print. Obviously, many in the Mission do not share this viewpoint.

No wonder then that, many of the branches of SVM outside India have started Hindu religion classes and study circles as a way to reaffirm Sindhi identity and its rich heritage. Unlike the earlier vision of Sadhu Vaswani, this heritage is increasingly being projected as solely ‘Hindu’. In the Mission day-care centres, children are introduced to Hindu prayers and mythologies to incorporate religion and culture in teaching the very young. Vegetarianism is preached fanatically, and non-vegetarians (such as Muslims) are represented as ‘hot-headed’, ‘unkind’ and somewhat irrational individuals.

The Mission has also incorporated other symbols of performative politics that are characteristic of the RSS’s Hindutva project. SVM now organises a *ratha yatra* on the eve of Sadhu Vaswani’s birthday, to spread the message of peace and love. It also conducts processions to promote vegetarianism. Over the last two decades it has self-consciously used practices such as *yagnas*, *pujas* and other rituals associated with sanatani (orthodox) Hinduism and the Hindutva project. These practices have spread across all the branches of SVM.

The Mission today is a large and visible organisation that promotes and delivers systematic and relevant religious services. Its foray into the services sector, offering state-of-the-art facilities in education and healthcare has made it a household name in Pune as well as in the rest of India. It has branches all over the world and also promotes other organisations, such as the Bridge Builders of India (a youth organisation) and Stop All Killing Association (a group that promotes vegetarianism).

The Mission uses modern technology to promote and disseminate services and to carry out fund-raising activities. It is extremely media
savvy, and is constantly advertising itself through huge and attractive press ads, TV commercials, banners and hoardings, and has an aesthetically designed and well-maintained website. The administrative section of the SVM is based in Pune, and with its numerous cubicles and fully automated systems (computers, EPABX, fax, and photocopying) resembles the office floor of a medium-sized corporate concern. About 250 people work in this office and thereby contribute to seva. They work for the Mission as honoraries, as a result of which, the Mission saves substantial sums of money in salaries, and as all premises are its own, overhead costs like rents and taxes are also saved. Whatever surplus is generated (although all its institutions are said to be non-profit) is ploughed back into finance the activities of the Mission.

The Mission’s target audience are diasporic, urban and affluent Sindhis, and their need to form a community. No wonder then that the headquarters of SVM in Pune have become a haven for Sindhis visiting India, providing them with a sense of ‘rooted communityness’. The Mission’s smart corporate structure and the service ethic appeals to both rich business groups and to sentimental and emotional individuals, as also the poorer but devoted followers. These groups are socialised in the social, cultural and spiritual attributes of the Mission (seva as the creation of the Hindu self) and, simultaneously, can help those who do not have enough for education and health (seva as humanitarian service). Thus, the first seva is paid seva and the second is charity. In the last decade the Mission had acquired extensive infrastructure to carry out these goals.

Thus Mr Gajnani from London and a visitor to the Mission every year states:

…it gives a sense of great satisfaction to donate money for the cause of seva; that is the second best thing than giving time, something that is at premium for most of us NRI businessmen. It makes one feel that there is more meaning to life than the convoluted business deals and cut-throat competition, and that there is a spiritual side to life too (Interview, 25 November 2004).

Conclusion

In this article I have described and analysed two distinct kinds of seva as practiced in two sangathanas, the Sadhu Vaswani Mission and

\footnote{2292 per cent of Sindhis in India are based in urban areas (Falson 2005).}
Pati Pavan Sangathana, and shown their moorings in the overarching political project of creating a Hindu community. Though there are vast differences between the ways in which the SVM and PPS have defined \textit{seva} and organised their activities and practices within their \textit{sangathanas}, this larger political project bridges the apparent contradictions between them. This project excludes individuals, groups and organisations of other denominations, as well as those individuals and groups that have a secular identity.

The expansive, unrestrained and unfettered character of the Hindutva project is best understood if we analyse the Hindu spiritual and political organisations that structure their activities and practices in terms of \textit{seva}. Such a theorisation also helps in assessing how this particular project links itself to other Rightist projects. In the rest of the article I briefly discuss a new trend sponsored by the right in the US, supported by the Bush regime, including a section of the Indian diasporic community. These groups seek to emphasise religious identities and use religious organisations for ‘doing’ development, arguing that this may be the only solution to the ‘crisis’ afflicting the states in poor countries.

The key concept in the global rightist project is service and some organisations and scholars have argued that the Hindu notion of \textit{seva} can be translated to mean service. They also argue that Hindu religious organisations be considered faith-based organisations (FBOs) — a euphemism for all religious organisations, irrespective of their ideological and political orientation. Thus, for instance, DFID and USAID argue that given the strong tradition within faiths and/or religions towards a service orientation, they can be used to disburse development aid. FBOs can not only become the building blocks to organise development-oriented service delivery but can also add value to existing development work (Benn 2004).

Aid agencies in the US and the UK perceive the project to connect ‘faith communities’ to the development agenda as being related to the globalisation of development policy initiatives. Their interest in FBOs is also related to an increasing belief that states in underdeveloped countries have been failing and are in a state of ‘crisis’. This is particularly true of those underdeveloped countries in Africa, where

\textsuperscript{23} Crisis states are those that generally cannot provide welfare and security for their citizens, or their territory, and that are corrupt and illegitimate in the eyes of their citizens. Widespread poverty and/or insurgency are typical features of such states.
the state has remained weak and thus cannot initiate new development projects and deliver aid to the poor. In such cases FBOs can play a significant role in substituting the state to ensure the ‘service delivery’ of development. Given this new perspective, aid agencies, development research institutes and universities conducting research on development, have launched new research projects on FBOs to assess and evaluate how these can orient themselves to service delivery in difference parts of the world.

Some aid organisations have argued that basic education and healthcare are the focus areas of FBOs, and that these organisations are apolitical bodies and may partner with the government and other funding agencies’ development initiatives in the area of poverty alleviation programmes. They suggest that such organisations are registered bodies (like NGOs) associated with the United Nations or national governments, and are often the charity and social work wings of places of worship and congregation, like churches, mosques, temples, and gurudwaras.

In this article, I have argued that meanings given to concepts such as FBOs and service delivery cannot be applied without specific qualifications that pertain to Hinduism and Hindu religious traditions. Though Hindu religious organisations work in the arenas of health and education, their work is related also to a political agenda. This agenda is defined in terms of seva, the meanings of which are deeply entrenched in the political project of creating a Hindu nation — a project that was initiated during the colonial period.

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Development as Liberation: An Indian Christian Perspective*

Rudolf C. Heredia

Contextualising Development

Since the Enlightenment, religion has been viewed as a matter of faith and it is in this form juxtaposed to development and scientific rationality. There is no doubt that each religion presents a system of beliefs and embodies an element of faith, but it also offers a world view using which its practitioners engage with the social and empirical reality around them.

Social reality forms the larger context in which questions of faith and belief are continuously challenged, redefined and reasserted in new ways. Enlightenment rationality challenged the Church and its claim to possess the monopoly of knowledge. It designated the knowledge claimed by the Church as ‘faith’ and distinguished it from ‘science’. But the Industrial Revolution, rooted in the Enlightenment, engendered gross inequalities in society. If the scientific enlightenment temperament marginalised religion, the social world created by the Industrial Revolution allowed the Church to re-articulate its identity and relevance. The Christian ethic, premised on neighbourly compassion and altruistic love, provided an alternative to the ideology of social Darwinism that applied to human society the biologist’s notion of natural selection for the survival of the fittest. The work of the Church, relating to charity and helping the poor, provided much needed relief to the vulnerable sections of society.

The continuous need to address the concerns of the social world in which the Church is placed has compelled Christianity in India to

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reinvent itself and engage with issues of social justice and equality. This article takes a quick look at the trajectory of Christianity in India in order to understand the idea of development as it has emerged and evolved within the community and the religious tradition. Before we speak of the development of a community, it may be necessary to understand just what the issues of development are and how religious liturgy has engaged with them. This is the perspective with which the present article analyses and addresses the issue of development and the Christian community.

Two Discourses, Three Contexts

The response of the Church to modernisation in Europe was contextualised by two pressing concerns: the ‘critical question’, related to the encounter of religion and science; and the ‘social question’, concerned with issues of faith and justice. The Christian understanding of development evolved in relation to these two crucial questions, precipitated by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in Europe.

In the West, this ‘critical question’ revived more acutely the old controversy between faith and reason, which was now seen as traditional religion vs. modern science. A philosophical resolution was attempted by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) with his *Critique of Pure Reason* ([1787] 1999) that justified modern science, and then by his *Critique of Practical Reason* ([1788] 1999) that founded his ethics. But this still left religion and faith open to a rationalist critique.

The Christian response to this challenge was at first mostly defensive and cautious, especially among the mainstream churches; but at times the reaction was assertive and aggressive too, as with the more evangelical and fundamentalist ones. Eventually, liberal theology attempted an understanding of faith that would be compatible with modernity and human progress. It was premised on a de-mythologisation of religious beliefs and a reinterpretation of religious essentials with a more critical hermeneutics.

This began an intra-religious debate and dialogue in the churches, and liberal theology represented the Christian response to this. It soon found a place in mainstream Protestant churches as represented in the World Council of Churches (WCC), which culminated an ecumenical movement among Protestant denominations that began in the nineteenth century. The Catholic Church too, after the first ambiguities in its response to modernism, opened a window to the
world with its Second Vatican Council (1963–65), called by Pope John
XXIII, who wanted the Council fathers to read the sign of the times
and update (aggiornamneto) ‘the Church of all and especially of the

However, liberal theology was not a radical political theology. It
was very much within the framework of liberal capitalism and
the welfare state. Hence, the understanding of development in this
perspective was that of facilitating and sharing economic growth
within a capitalist system. But very soon this was found to be grossly
inadequate in the struggles of the developing world.

The social question was taken up first by the socialists, the more
radical of whom challenged the status quo to propose a funda-
mental restructuring of society. Karl Marx was foremost among
these theoreticians on the left of the political spectrum. With the
Enlightenment rationalists, Marxists too privileged reason and sci-
ence over faith and religion and perceived religious institutions as
being imbedded in the alienating and oppressive capitalist system.

Towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twen-
tieth century, in the Protestant churches, the ‘social gospel’ propagated
a radical understanding of the New Testament that found in early
Christianity the roots of a primitive socialism and called for a return
to its communitarian values (Acts 4: 32–35). The Catholic response
was elaborated in the periodic social encyclicals, from Leo XIII’s
Rerum Novarum (‘On the Condition of Workers’), in 1891 to John
Paul II’s Centesimus Annus (‘The Hundredth Year’), commemorating
its centenary in 1991, eight major documents that set out the Church’s
thinking and policy.

However, for Christians in the developing world, liberal theology
was soon seen as being inadequate to a Marxist analysis of social in-
justice and oppression, as being structurally rooted in the class system.
Development was perceived to be a structural problem, demanding
a class struggle to restructure society. Hence, Christians sought to
theologise their faith more contextually, in their own life situation.
Here the issue was not the compatibility of faith and reason, and by
extension, that of religion and science; the more pressing concern was
the relationship of faith and justice, and its extension to structural
change and the status quo. For in the developing world, of the two,
the ‘social’ question was far more compelling than the ‘critical’ one.

This was the basis of liberation theology, first developed in Latin
America. Its standpoint is as different from liberal theology as liberal
capitalism is from radical socialism. For Christians then, development is an ethical issue and therefore a religious one too, for religious belief systems inevitably influence social relations and so necessarily impact developmental processes. The history of a religious tradition, as a necessary part of a society, is therefore inevitably implicated in its social development. Gandhi and Ambedkar were very aware of, and sensitive to this.

The colonial powers brought the European Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution to their colonies and this could not but bring about radical change in these traditional societies. In spite of some commonalities, the local contexts were very different, and so was the response. In countries like India, the response to the Enlightenment was at times defensive and revivalist, but more predominantly it was reformist and progressive, beginning in Bengal and Maharashtra with Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotiba Phule, and culminating in the struggle for independence led by men like Gandhi and Nehru.

Once the colonies gained independence the emphasis shifted to development. Of the two social paradigms prevalent at the time, the capitalist and the socialist, India chose a mixed one: planned socialism, where the commanding heights of the economy would be controlled by the state, as a secular, democratic polity, with universal suffrage and neutrality towards all religions. The development model premised on this was essentially modernist, based on industrialisation and driven by science and technology. The goal was ‘growth with equity’. However, as growth floundered at the Hindu rate of 2 per cent, even as inequalities increased, the response to the resultant crisis was to open the country to a market economy. The crisis of real structural changed was thus postponed rather than being confronted. With the new economic liberalisation, begun towards the end of the last century, economic growth has now jumped almost fourfold to over 7 per cent per annum. But inequalities have further increased, and the crisis has deepened rather than moved any nearer to resolution.

In so far as the Indian context was that of a developing country closer to Latin America than the developed West, the Christian understanding of development here drew more on the liberationist than the liberal discourse. But, because these societies differ, the Indian articulation of this theology is specific to its own context and the concern for Dalits and tribals here.

For the history of a faith tradition follows a dialectic encounter between experience grounded in history and belief based on faith.
Theology is the articulation of this discourse. Theology ‘emerges at the intersection between “a space of experience” and “a horizon of expectation”’ (Koselleck 1985). This is the religious framework within a theological praxis that is articulated and in which the Christian understanding of development will be circumscribed.

In sum then, these two theological discourses ground the Christian understanding of, and the church’s response to the challenge of development today. The first makes the second possible: the liberal in response to the critical question, and the liberationist in response to the social one. Both discourses are differently concretised in three diverse contexts: the liberal discourse was articulated in the situation of the developed West; the liberationist one was elaborated more in the stark circumstances of development in Latin America. However, in India, the context of development was not just one of gross inequality and injustice, but also a multicultural, pluri-religious scenario, peculiar to South Asia.

**The Ethics of Charity and Justice**

Christianity originated in Palestine as a persecuted Jewish sect. Soon it spread through the Roman Empire in spite of much persecution for its refusal to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor. As a subaltern religion in its early centuries of oppression, the Church’s preoccupation was more with survival than power. In this situation, concern for the neighbour was a matter of charity, expressed as caring and sharing, following the commandment of Jesus:

> A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 12: 34, 35).

This ‘agape’ or selfless love, as distinct from ‘eros’ or erotic love, would distinguish Christians. St. Luke describes the first community of believers in somewhat idealised terms:

> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had….there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need (Acts 4: 32, 34).
Tertullian in the third century (155–230 BC) reports this as the distinguishing characteristic of these Christians as perceived by others: ‘See how they love one another’ (Apologia 39: 7).

As the Christian community made the transition from a persecuted ‘sect’ to a powerful ‘church’ in the Middle Ages, the scholastic theologians conceptualised charity, as distinguished from justice, in the seven corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, harbour the harbourless, visit the sick, ransom the captives, and bury the dead; and the seven spiritual ones: instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, admonish sinners, bear wrongs patiently, forgive offences willingly, comfort the afflicted, and pray for the living and the dead. But this was rather a personal approach that did not cut to the heart of the issue of deprivation in society, as was sensed even then. St. Augustine in the fourth century approved giving bread to the hungry but he also said ‘it would be better there were no hungry’ (cited in Gutierrez 199: 53, n. 16).

As distinct from such works of mercy the medieval scholastics defined justice as ‘giving unto each his due’. This was primarily understood as ‘commutative justice’ between individuals. The complement of this was ‘distributive justice’, defined as the proportionate distribution of the common goods of society in terms of the needs and merits of individuals (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologia, Pt. II.II. Q. 61). However, fairness here was in the context of the given social order, which was not as yet incisively interrogated by the ‘social question’ precipitated by the Industrial Revolution or by a structural analysis of society.

There were social upheavals and natural and manmade disasters in the Middle Ages: famines, floods, peasant uprisings, plagues, the ‘black death’, and the like. The Christian response was in terms of charity and compassion, almsgiving and works of mercy. In today’s development terminology this would be termed relief work and aid. The injustices of society were addressed not in terms of planned social change, or ‘social engineering’, but with an appeal to live by, and be witness to, moral values inspired by the Gospel message. Injustice was an evil rooted in the human heart rather than in the structures of society, and it was to be addressed with a change of heart. The great religious orders, like the Franciscans, were as much social as they were religious reform movements, witnessing to Gospel values (Boff 1980).

With the Industrial Revolution, the social changes precipitated by laissez-faire capitalism developed a powerful dynamic of their own.
This demanded an in-depth analysis of society and a more radical response to its structures of injustice. Thus, Karl Marx in *Das Capital* (1867) argued that the evolving modes of production precipitate an inevitable class struggle that will end only with a classless society. Religion was an alienating ‘opiate of the people’; it would wither away with other oppressive social institutions, like the capitalist state. Max Weber was less sanguine about the irrelevance of religion for he saw an affinity between religious traditions and their societies, most notably in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05). In the aftermath of the devastation of the Second World War in Europe, L.J. Lebret pioneered a development ethics to humanise socialism and establish the compatibility of both efficiency and humanisation (see Goulet 2006: 35). The emerging social analysis from such studies sharpened and focused the social question for the churches and demanded a more adequate response.

Consequently, the concept of justice necessarily acquired a compelling social dimension, beyond the individual morality of commutative justice and the proportionality of distributive justice based on the status quo of a society. The response to the social question now, demanded an understanding of ‘social justice’ as a reconstruction of the social and political order in view of a more equitable distribution of common goods through the reform of a society’s institutions. It had to include equity and equality, fundamental rights and civic duties, human dignity and cultural identity. This was the challenge that liberation theology addressed.

**The Liberationist Response**

The Enlightenment posed a twofold challenge: liberation from blind faith in any unexamined social tradition and from all oppressive social structures. The first corresponded to the ‘critical question’, the second to the ‘social’ one. Western liberalism focused on the first, i.e., promoting secularism and rationalism, rather than the second, i.e., addressing equity and equality in society. Capitalist society with its social Darwinism rationalised this, but then the Enlightenment’s promise of progress would be only for the fittest who survived. It took the challenge of the socialist alternative to bring the social question to urgent public concern.

Liberal theology was premised on reason and freewill as privileged in the Enlightenment, with its demythologisation of religious
beliefs and its critical interpretation of sacred texts, it did address the
‘critical question’, which Christian fundamentalists either rejected or
denied. However, it was inadequate as a politically engaged theology.
It lacked an effective social praxis and critique with which to address
the ‘social question’ effectively, and as such became increasingly
unsatisfactory for Christians in the unprecedented upheavals of the
twentieth century in the West. Some attempt to break out of this
constraint was made with the political theology of Johannes B. Metz
(1969) and the theology of hope of Jurgen Moltmann (1967), which
can be seen as a transition to liberation theology, but still within the
liberal theological structure.

In Latin America the understanding of development was premised
on an incisive social analysis derived more from Marxist premises
than those of liberal capitalism. Moreover, with the prevalence of
dependency theory by the 1960s, its perspective was international as
much as national. From its first inspiration with Paul Baran (1957)
to a more elaborate articulation by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974),
‘dependency’, in the capitalist social order, was seen as structural —
reproducing ‘unequal exchange’ and thus stymieing both growth and
equity in spite of an abundance of natural resources. For

unequal exchange is the elementary transfer mechanism.... It enables
the advanced countries to begin and regularly to give new impetus
to the unevenness of development that sets in motion all the other
mechanisms of exploitation and fully explains the way that wealth is
distributed (Emmanuel 1972: 265).

Hence, liberation from such dependency called for structural
change in the status quo. A reformist approach to development could
not achieve such a breakthrough. Development was now no longer
seen as a process of modernising traditional society but as liberation
from this dependency. For the social analysis on which dependency
theory was premised, the central concern was structural injustice. In
this understanding, Western capitalism was the cause and therefore
could not be a model for redressing such injustice, neither in the
process to, nor as the goal of true liberation. On the contrary,

there can be authentic development for Latin America only if there
is liberation from the domination exercised by the great capitalist
countries, and especially the most powerful, the United States of
America. This liberation also implies a confrontation with these
groups’ natural allies, their compatriots who control the national power structure (Gutierrez 1973: 88).

This is the starting point of liberation theology in its faith-reflection on the social situation. One of the first liberation theologians, Gustavo Gutierrez, defines ‘liberation’ thus:

In the first place, liberation expresses the aspiration of oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasising the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes...

At a deeper level, liberation can be applied to an understanding of history. Man is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for his own destiny (Gutierrez 1973: 36).

In the first place then, such liberation requires an unmasking of this exploitative dependency. For this, ‘only a class analysis will enable us to see what is really involved in the opposition between oppressed countries and dominant peoples’ (ibid.: 87). Dependency theory would be wrong and misleading if it ‘is not put within the framework of worldwide class struggle’ (ibid.). In the second place, if the poor were to become agents of their own history, any genuine participation in their liberative struggle must be in solidarity with them. Hence, the ‘promotion of justice’ demanded a ‘solidarity with the poor’, not to be against the rich but in order that this liberation be more universal for all. For, as Marx recognised, the rich too are alienated from their true humanity by the exploiting hegemony of their own class.

Thus, liberation theology is premised on a radical left-of-centre social analysis and its faith-reflection proposes an equally radical ‘praxis’, i.e., an action–reflection–action process, in which liberation is the central theme of the Christian mystery and ‘the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history’ (ibid.: 169). Moreover, ‘the option for the poor’ is an essential aspect of this struggle for justice. Hence, as Gutierrez sums up:

The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors (ibid.: 307).
Latin American Churches

Very soon liberation theology was, by and large, espoused by Latin American bishops, and later spread to Catholic churches elsewhere. The Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) in 1968 at Medellin, Columbia, and then in 1974, at the World Synod of Catholic Bishops on ‘Justice in the World’ in Rome, were both inspired by liberation theology. This was confirmed again by CELAM in its conference in 1979, at Puebla, Mexico, and again in 1992 at Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic.

Though liberation theology began with Catholic theologians, it soon spread to other mainstream Christian denominations. In 1976, the first Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, rejected an academic theology divorced from action in favour of one committed to a critical reflection on the reality of the Third World. The prophetic edge of good news must not be blunted by academic analysis and interpretation. Liberation theology thus began to be rooted in the Christian churches in the developing world as well.

Secular Marxists too began taking stock of liberation theology. In the summer of 1984 the *Monthly Review* discussed its merits and its implications for the churches in North America (Tabb 1986). Some felt that its understanding of society was not based on a scientific analysis as Marxism was (Currier 1987), while still others urged a deeper and more critical dialogue (Boger 1988). Not unexpectedly, the religious right, did not take kindly to liberation theology. Christian conservatives and fundamentalists, evangelical and extremist denominations, accused it of turning from Jesus to Marx. Religious nationalists and dogmatic Communists stigmatised it as another attempt to convert the poor after having failed with the rich.

The response of the WCC was less ambiguous than the Roman Catholic one. Already its influence can be seen in the WCC’s Melbourne conference of 1980. In its first assembly in Latin America in Porto Alegre, Brazil, it took cognisance of this new approach:

This particular consideration for the poor, the marginalised and the excluded in different societies throughout history has been at the origins of the particular theological approach known as Liberation Theology. Strongly incarnated in the social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, more recently it has expanded its foci towards the economic,
ecological, gender and inter-religious dimensions. Therefore, nurtured in this theological methodology rooted in a deep spiritual experience, Latin American Christianity has become deeply involved in defending, caring and celebrating life in its multiple manifestations, recognising God’s presence in every life expression and especially in human life. This experience has been a gift of God to the whole Church (WCC 2006).

While the Latin American bishops’ conferences were enthusiastic about liberation theology, the Vatican was more hesitant. It was not completely comfortable with the radical challenge to the status quo as represented by this theology, particularly with the volatile social inequalities of Latin America and the authoritarian regimes there, which at the time were not unfavourable to the institutional Catholic Church. Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, ‘On Evangelisation in the Modern World’ in 1974 (para. 25–39) insisted on an integration of spiritual salvation from sin and evil with human liberation in terms of rights and liberty, peace and development.

However in 1984, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine and of the Faith issued a more cautionary instruction, ‘On Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology’, against the use of Marxist ideological assumptions and social analysis in liberation theology. But its later ‘Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation’ in 1986, was more positive, affirming the importance of experience and scientific analysis. John Paul II was himself critical of liberation theology, insisting that it conform to Papal social teaching, but on its main themes of dependency and exploitation, he was more in agreement on it than with capitalism as is evident from his three major social encyclicals: *Laborem Excercens*, ‘On Human Labour’ in 1981; *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, ‘On Social Concern’ in 1987; and *Centesimus Annus*, ‘The Hundredth Year’ in 1991.

**Liberation Theology in Asia**

By the mid-1970s liberation theology had begun to make an impact on Asian churches. It inspired a new movement in the Indian Church among its development workers. In 1981 the Communist Party of India (Marxist) politburo resolution took notice of this and cautioned its cadres about Christian activists for fear of a reactionary plot (Fernandes 1999: 83). The RSS journal *Manthan* saw liberation theology as ‘just another strategy or politics of conversion’ (Singhal
Traditionally, in colonial India, Christian churches by and large had been involved in running schools and hospitals, and similar charitable works. After Independence this continued and expanded into developmental projects, which were considered to be non-political in intent and impact. But with the inevitable similarities between developing societies, liberation theology soon arrived and now posed a new challenge, inspiring a new mission. Obviously, the approach seemed out of joint in a society not used to such religious activism from Christians, who were only too conscious of their minority status. Yet, Gandhi’s seva marg (the way of service) and Ambedkar’s Navayana (new vehicle) Buddhism were also religiously inspired social and political action-commitments.

However, if liberation theology was to take root in the Asian churches, it would require Asian theologians to contextualise this theology in the particularities of their own continent. For borrowing uncritically from a rather similar politico-economic but very different religio-cultural context in Latin America would not substitute for authentic Asian theologising. Moreover, this challenge could not be met in religious libraries or seminary classrooms. It had to be met in the context of a concrete social praxis. Latin American liberation theology had to be creatively thought through and inculturated in the Asian scenario. Thus, in the Philippines this happened with the basic ecclesial community movement adapted from Latin America. In South Korea it was indigenised in Minjung theology, literally theology of the people. Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris was one of the first to creatively recast An Asian Theology of Liberation for the South Asian context (1988), while George Soares-Prabhu’s Dharma of Jesus (2003), a collection of essays, explores the meaning of Jesus in contemporary India.

Liberation theology did find proponents in the other major religious traditions of India as well: in Islam with Asghar Ali Engineer’s Centre for Islamic Studies and his Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam (1990), and with the Arya Samaj’s Swami Agnivesh and his Adhayatma Jagaran Manch with its A New Agenda for Humanity (2003), a movement for spiritual awakening for regeneration.

The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) at its First Plenary in Taipei in 1974 on ‘Evangelisation in Modern Day Asia’
declared: ‘Since millions in Asia are poor, the Church in Asia must be the Church of the poor. One element in holiness, here, is the practice of justice’. In its Sixth Plenary in 1995 in Manila, it recognised the specificities of the Asian churches and called for a movement toward a triple dialogue with other faiths, with the poor and with cultures (FABC 1995, ‘The Final Statement of the Plenary Assembly’). Over this period the FABC documents reveal a struggle, not always clear cut but discernible all the same, of a Church coming of age, liberating itself from its colonial past, in its desire to be an authentic Asian Church, not just a Church in Asia. Peter Hai traces the evolution of its contextual theology across five of its major characteristics, which complement and enrich each other: (1) a synthetic contextual character, (2) a similarity between the FABC’s theological methodology and that of Latin American liberation theologies, (3) a faith seeking dialogue, (4) an approach that encourages theological pluralism and aims to achieve harmony, and (5) a development that constitutes a paradigm shift in theology (Hai 2006).

Corresponding to developments in the Catholic Church, there is a parallel movement in the mainstream Protestant Churches from M.M. Thomas’s Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed (1981) to Sathianathan Clarke’s Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India (1998). EATWOT attempts to bring the two streams together.

Inevitably, such a theology would interrogate the development interventions of the churches. The earliest focus was on charitable aid, then on economic growth, but not so much on human rights and social justice, which was considered to be a secular task that was more in the domain of political and civic institutions and not to be directly engaged in by religious ones. This was the context in which liberation theology would have to address the concrete Asian reality in its own distinctiveness (Pieris 1988).

**A Paradigm Shift**

The developments in the Asian Church could not but affect the Indian one and this eventually precipitated a paradigm shift in the Church’s approach to its interventions in society. The Indian social reality is one of overwhelming poverty, deep religiosity and bewildering plurality,
both cultural and religious. How adequate would an exclusive class analysis be for this situation, where voluntary poverty was a positive cultural value, where people’s worldview was still dominated by popular religion, where civic identities were subservient to cultural and religious ones? An uncritical use of Marxist class analysis left out more than it explained. Besides class, there was caste, ethnicity, religion, and numerous other collective identities impacting social change. Asia was a whole world apart in its complex diversity, demanding an equally holistic and comprehensive sociocultural analysis.

In coming to terms with liberation theology and its impact on the church, the Plenary Assemblies of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) in their ‘Final Statements’ also reveals a trajectory similar to the FABC’s. In New Delhi in 1966 after the Vatican II (1962–65), they called for a campaign against hunger and disease (De Souza, n.d.: 5). By 1972 in Chennai, they affirmed the ‘right to development’ (ibid.: 15). In Mangalore, among the specific areas of concern was the transition from formal to non-formal education and from high-end hospitals to primary health centres for the rural and urban poor. The empowering of Dalits and tribals was specifically recommended to the social apostolate in Trivandrum (ibid.: 162). While regretting communal violence in their meeting in March 2002 in Jalandhar, they urged ‘dialogue with the followers of other religions’ (ibid.: 180).

Protestant Christians, the Church of North India (CNI), set up a Synodical Board of Social Service (SBSS) in 1970, which during its Forward Plan for 1996–98 made a shift ‘from social service and economic development’ to ‘empowerment through a rights-based approach’, which was confirmed at its Synod held in Ranchi in 2005. The larger Church of South India (CSI), 75 per cent of whose members are of Dalit origin, has from its earliest constitution made a commitment to Dalits and the oppressed. Since the 1980s, this has begun to be increasingly expressed in a Dalit theology, which regards liberation as the essence of the Church’s mission (Samartha 1997). Finally the Quadrennial Assembly of the National Council of Churches in Tirunelveli in 2004, recognised Dalit and tribal concerns and adopted the recommendations of the National Bishops’ Conference and of the Global Conference related to Dalit liberation ‘as the agenda of the Church as a visible and active preferential ministry’.
Development Approaches

The Christian concept of development has evolved towards a holistic understanding in which three broad approaches to social intervention can be distinguished but not separated. Relief work is the response to human need motivated by Christian charity; this addressed the symptoms more than the disease. The development approach uses modern technologies to target upstream causes rather than the downstream effects with ad hoc projects and programmes. These were mainly interventions for economic growth or for human resource development, and not deliberate political strategies. With a more refined analysis of social structures a ‘rights-based approach’ was used to conscientise people for their empowerment and for structural change.

Historically, the evolution has been from ‘charity’ to ‘development’ to ‘justice’, but these are complementary not exclusive approaches. For charity cannot replace the demand for justice or the need for development, but it can bring a measure of compassion to justice and of inclusiveness to development. Moreover, development must be humanised with charity and moderated by justice, for without these it would be insensitive and inequitable. Further, justice can never be so comprehensive as to replace charity, neither does it substitute for development; rather it must be the enabling condition, not a limiting one for both, or else it will be regressive and eventually repressive as well.

These approaches taken together add up to a holistic approach for a fuller humanisation than each would imply singly. The motivation for charity comes from traditional theology’s ‘works of mercy’; the rationale for development is legitimated by liberal theology; the demand for justice is inspired by liberation theology. This ‘development as humanisation’ must be contextualised in the stark poverty, deep religiosity and bewildering pluralism of Asia with the triple dialogue that liberation theology calls for: with the poor, with cultures and with religions (FABC 1995).

The dialogue with the poor is thus premised on solidarity with them. Such an ‘option for the poor’, and for the ‘promotion of justice’, privileges a bottom-up approach over a top-down one. The dialogue with cultures must make development initiatives sensitive to popular religiosity and transform it into a liberating faith that is conscientised
to local hierarchies. It must not allow religion to be the opium of the people. The dialogue with religions must bring an appreciation of religious pluralism and the imperative of a secularism that respects all religious traditions and seeks common ground for collective action. The Christian understanding of development in Asia, therefore, would be premised on a down-up, periphery-to-centre approach, sensitive to indigenous cultures and local hierarchies, appreciative of religious pluralism and committed to political secularism. Together this threefold dialogue precipitates a paradigm shift in the Church’s approach to its interventions in society as well.

The Indian Scenario

In colonial times the churches were seen as being too close to Western religious and political powers, and Christian themselves as too Westernised. However, a more careful reading would establish that such perceptions were too stereotypical. The real relationships between Christianity and colonialism in the subcontinent were far more ambiguous, ranging from subservience and patronage to opposition and critique. However, by and large the independence of the churches was seldom uncompromised.

As the freedom movement gained momentum the churches began to recover a more independent identity and with Independence in 1947, Christians too began to find their space in the new India. However, they have not quite overcome their minority consciousness and are still under suspicion from right-wing religious groups, and left-leaning nationalist ones. This affects their engagement in the development process. Relief work, education and medical aid interventions that did not challenge the status quo but brought a measure of ethical sensitivity to civic life were welcomed. Mother Teresa is not just the best known Christian in India, she is among the best known Indians in the country.

By the 1960s, as Christians began to find their voice in Independent India and with it greater self-confidence, they began to venture into development work, supported by foreign contributions. Though this work did benefit a large number of people, they did not directly address the structural causes of poverty. In fact, rather than empowering the people, it often resulted in ‘strengthening the power of the clergy, who are the initiators and managers of most of these developmental projects’ (Hourtart and Lemecinier 1982: 196).
Such social and economic ventures did generate a certain awareness in the churches and among Christians. In the 1970s, with the impact of liberation theology and the more incisive social analysis that went with it, issues of justice and human rights were foregrounded. Contextualising this in the Indian scenario demanded a rethinking by the churches and a new appropriation of their mission. The churches now decisively focused on the marginalised and oppressed, the dispossessed and disempowered. Concretely, these were represented by tribals and Dalits as the epitome of ‘preferential option for the poor’ in India. This option situated the ‘promotion of justice’ in an Indian liberation theology, and was further indigenised as Dalit and tribal theologies, which have begun to come of age. For a contextualised theology must be inculturated in the life-situations of the people.

Tribals in this country have been, and still are, so marginalised that the traditions they have evolved are markedly different from both Sanskritic and Dalit ones. A coherent and valid tribal theology will be correspondingly different from both mainstream Indian Christian and Dalit theologies, for it draws on tribal history and culture, myths and legends, symbols and rituals, in order to articulate a theology that integrates tribal communitarian values and eco-sensitivity into their quest for liberation. Moreover, building on the long history of tribal movements and the ‘Rebellious Prophets’ (Fuchs 1965) that led them, tribal theology cannot be apolitical.

For Dalit theology, ‘Pain or Pathos is the beginning of knowledge’, as symbolised in the crucifixion of Jesus (Nirmal, n.d.: 141) and premised on the Dalits’ lived experience of an oppressive and exploitative caste hierarchy that imprisons and crucifies them. Its articulation foregrounds the Biblical Exodus experience and their own oral traditions to construct a counter-cultural worldview that rejects caste hierarchy and the theory of karma in their struggle for liberation. This involves a process of

(i) the deconstruction of their identification with symbols given by the others, (ii) the reconstruction of their identification by reversing the meaning of the symbols, and (iii) the repossession of the transformed symbols and re-identification with them (Arun 2007: 284).

All this amounts to a subversion of mainstream Sanskritic religious discourses.

These two liberation theologies do have certain essential commonalities. Both require the integration of the cultural dimension into any
understanding of society. Hence the development model will demand a sociocultural analysis not just a political economy one. Both Dalits and tribals are repressively alienated from mainstream society, but insofar as they articulate different contexts, they will necessarily bring different nuances to the mainstream discourse, a bottom-up and a periphery–centre perspective respectively.

Tribal theology then is more a theology from the margins, but it also expresses and demands cultural autonomy, in which tribal identity and the respect this must command will be centred. Dalit theology is more a theology from below, in which the dignity and equality it demands must be central. However, these are not exclusive concerns but rather a matter of emphases, for one implies the other as an essential component of a counter-hegemonic movement for self-respect and social equality. Together, identity and dignity constitute the warp and weft, the very definition of liberation, in any understanding of development that these theologies inspire.

**Development as Liberation**

Amartya Sen convincingly argues that ‘the removal of unfreedoms, ... is constitutive of development’ (1999: xii) for freedom is ‘the Foundation of Justice’ (ibid.: 54–86). ‘The Perspective of Freedom’ (ibid.: 13–34) demands capacity building (ibid.: 87) and democratic participation (ibid.: 146–59) to create real opportunities and enable people to make free choices. This recent approach has an obvious affinity with the liberationist one. For in liberation theology, empowerment is also constitutive of liberation, which in turn defines development. Moreover, in this understanding a necessary implication is the ‘promotion of justice’, which is to be achieved as an option for and in solidarity with the poor. Now ‘justice’ as well as ‘liberation’ are integral concepts. Justice only for some and not for all is patently unjust, for any demand for justice must be inclusive, never exclusive. So too with liberation, deliberately targeting some of the oppressed for liberation and leaving the others to their fate is already illiberal. True liberation must be intended for all, not some.

This option for the poor, therefore, cannot be an option against the rich, but rather precisely to make the promotion of justice more universal. This is what Gandhi had in mind in choosing the least and last Indian as the criterion for authentic decision-making that he gave Nehru. For only when the poorest get justice can a society genuinely claim to be a truly just one. Therefore, the option for the poor demands
not an option against the rich, but a clear stand against the abuse of wealth and power. Solidarity with the poor is not alienation from the rich, but from their riches. Like Ambedkar, one can be against Brahminism without being against Brahmins.

There may well be a partial achievement of justice and liberation in the given circumstances, but then, to that extent injustice and oppression also prevail. A Christian understanding of holistic development — as a deeper, fuller and more complete humanisation — must then be brought to bear on such a situation. For holistic development requires overcoming the class–caste divide in favour of a classless and casteless egalitarian society, as also regional and the rural–urban inequalities for a more equitable exchange between these; in other words, transcending the divisions and inequalities of society for an equitable integration and fair exchange in a society that is free and participative. In today’s world this cannot but be a counter-cultural utopian vision. In Biblical terms it amounts to a prophetic witness, as it was that of the early Christians in ancient pagan Roman society: ‘See how they love one another’ (Tertullian, *Apopologia*, 39: 7).

So finally, development as liberation in the Christian perspective, as premised on a quest for human rights and social justice, does not end there; it must go beyond to come back to charity and compassion, without excluding growth and development, in a reiterated circular process towards a more comprehensive praxis for a fuller humanisation of persons and societies. The models of social praxis these theologies have inspired are correspondingly complementary and not exclusive. Liberal theology was the answer of the churches to the critical question, where traditional theology was not adequate. Liberation theology is their response to the social question, where liberal theology fell short. And both the critical and the social question are still relevant today.

### A Transforming Praxis

Jon Sobrino, a liberation theologian from San Salvador sees the European Enlightenment as a liberative movement that

has had two structurally distinct phases. One phase concentrated on the liberation of reason from dogmatic faith (Kant). The other phase championed the liberation of the whole person from a religious outlook that supported or at least permitted social, economic and political alienation (Marx). We might sum up the two phases as a general yearning for reasonableness and for transforming praxis (Salvador 1978: 348).
The Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution precipitated two compelling questions: the critical one concerned the challenge of reason and science to religion; the social one concerned the compatibility of industrialisation and progress with the imperative of social justice. The democratic revolution was the response of secular society to the first challenge, but this was incomplete without responding to the second. The socialist revolution was an attempt to complete the Enlightenment’s promise of progress for all. Thus authentic socialism extends democracy to constrain capitalism.

These were premised on a modernism that is now contested by a postmodernism, which rejects the ‘grand narratives’ and rationalism of the Enlightenment as a ‘tyranny of reason’, for a pluralism which easily falls into a subjective relativism that too readily compromises objective justice. However, if the compulsions of justice are gainsaid in a postmodern permissive relativism, then the libertative thrust of the Enlightenment surely stands betrayed.

Moreover, rationalist modernism and the energy intensive industrialism that went with it were not sensitive to environmental concerns. Today ecological constraints have reached critical proportions and compelled the development debate to consider and contest alternate models.

Liberation theology cannot be at home with a postmodernism that compromises justice in the name of relativism, but it can certainly take on board ecological concerns, for the poorest suffer the most deprivation in an ecological crisis or disaster. Thus, it privileges an open-ended transformative praxis for development as liberation, which in the Indian context foregrounds Gandhi’s option for the least and the last Indian, the marginal and oppressed, the tribal and the Dalit.

References


Indian Christians: Trajectories of Development
Rowena Robinson

The Sachar Committee Report is probably the first systematic attempt initiated by the Indian government to look at socio-economic development from the perspective of a religious community. Questions regarding religious groups and their development relative to each other have, however, been raised by scholars earlier. In this article, I will attempt to use the data available to try and construct a picture of the socio-economic development of Indian Christians. Christians constitute around 2.3 per cent of the Indian population. They appear to do better than some other communities, for instance Muslims or OBC Hindus, in the areas of literacy, education, employment and the like. Having said that, however, some issues need to be addressed when we discuss issues of development in relation to the Christian religious community. For instance, do we look at the Christian community as a whole, or do we need to further break it down in order to perceive the cumulative disabilities faced, for instance, by Dalits in the community? In other words, is the level of the religious group the right place to commence comparisons of development? I will argue that for certain purposes, it is necessary to look at group-level distinctions, for the social perceptions of a community might affect the aspirations and achievements of religious groups differently. On the other hand, for particular policy-making, intra-community differences may need to be highlighted.

Approaching the question of religious communities, particularly the Christian religious community, and development from this perspective, I will begin by speaking briefly about the history of the Indian Christian community, the ways in which Christianity spread and the different groups — castes and classes — that came under its
This will help in bringing out the regional and other intra-community differences that we should not forget when we speak of Indian Christians. Against this historical picture, I will construct a demographic profile of the community and will try and bring out a few of the aspects important for understanding its socio-economic development. I will also take up some of the separate concerns of Christian Dalits and discuss these in light of the development of the community as a whole. As indicated earlier, one of the primary issues before us is whether the level of the religious group is the right place to commence comparisons of development. This article will try to analyse the usefulness and the limitations of pitching the discussion of development at the level of inter-community comparisons.

It is true, as the material will show, that it is difficult to ascertain intra-community differences from the available statistical data. For instance, while it is clear that there must be differences in the developmental indices for Dalit and tribal Christians from the rest of the population of the community, there is no statistical evidence that enables us to show this. However, I have pointed out the importance of remembering these distinctions in order for researchers to think about ways to collect and document these in the future. Further, it is important to talk about the community as a whole, as I do in this article, for community identities are here to stay and have much political and social relevance.

Christians have been under attack over the last several years by right-wing Hindu forces. There have been many attacks on priests, pastors, nuns, and ordinary members of the faith. Several of these have been in tribal and rural areas, but urban areas have not been unaffected. These attacks have affected the sense of security of the community as a whole and have been a matter of concern for all Christians. In a way, these attacks have made Christians very aware of their minority status and their thinly spread-out presence in the population. Their vulnerability comes home to them very sharply. However, there is another side to such concerns, which should be pointed out even if it cannot be elaborated due to lack of relevant information. The stress on community identity and common concerns may sometimes lead to pushing to the back-burner other developmental issues, such as the problems of the poor, the Dalits or tribals. These may be seen as less pressing than the security concerns of the larger community as a whole. It is in the interest of the community and of society at large that ways be found to talk rationally and objectively about inter- and
intra-community concerns, without shelving one or the other. This project, hopefully, is part of such an attempt.

History

Historians agree that there was a Christian community in Kerala within a few hundred years of Christ’s birth. Though the community maintained links with Chaldea or Persia, it remained relatively isolated from Western Christianity at least till the sixteenth century. Christianity in Kerala was linked to West Asia, not western Europe. Catholicism in Goa is more than 450 years old. Even at the end of the eighteenth century, most Christians were to be found in the southern part of the country. The place where the Christian influence was embedded most strongly was the western coastal belt, including Goa, Mangalore and Kerala. Tamil Nadu had a large number of Christians and Christian groups had been established in parts of Kannada and Telugu-speaking areas. A number of Christians were also to be found in Bombay and its neighbouring districts and in Daman and Diu.

Most of these were Catholic communities and there were Orthodox Christians as well, as in Kerala, but Protestants had not till then made any great effort at conversion in the region. The first organised Protestant mission in the south was launched in 1706 at Tranquebar by two German Lutheran pastors, Ziegenbalg and Pluetschau. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century, during the period of the spread and consolidation of British rule, that the north of the country witnessed a significant growth in Christian mission activity. In the north-eastern region, where Protestantism dominates, Christianity is largely the product of nineteenth- and twentieth-century conversions (Robinson 2003).

Demographic Characteristics

According to the 2001 Census there are 24,080,016 (over 24 million) Christians in India, who constitute 2.3 per cent of the population. The uneven geographical spread of Christians is brought out by the available statistical data — 25.15 per cent of the Christians belong to Kerala, 15.71 per cent to Tamil Nadu, 4.19 per cent to Karnataka, and 4.9 per cent to Andhra Pradesh. These four states account for 54.34 per cent of the total Christian population. In the north-east,
the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Manipur together have 29.09 per cent of the Christians.

In Goa, Christians constitute 26.68 per cent of the population, elsewhere they are much more scattered. Just 0.56 per cent of Gujarat’s population is Christian, 0.13 per cent of Haryana’s and 0.13 per cent of Himachal’s. In terms of actual numbers, though, the population may well be quite significant. For instance, while they only constitute 0.64 per cent of West Bengal’s population, there are over 500,000 Christians in the State. Of the entire Christian population, thus, 90 per cent is found in three regional enclaves: south India, the north-east and the tribal belt in central India, consisting of Chotanagpur and contiguous areas. The northern Hindi-speaking belt, which is home to 40 per cent of India’s population, has only 10 per cent of India’s Christians.

Just over 66 per cent of the Christian population resides in rural areas; 34 per cent of the population is found in urban areas. While the popular image of Christians as descendants of low-caste, low-status converts stretches the reality, it is true that well over half of all Christians are from the former untouchable castes. Between 15 to 20 per cent are tribal in origin, while upper-caste Christians, largely from Kerala and the Konkan coast, constitute about a quarter of the total.

The 2001 Census shows, among other things, that Christians alone among all religious communities manifest a positive sex ratio (1,009 women for every 1,000 men). The 0–6 age group however shows a deficit of female children. The literacy rate for Christians is also very high (80.3 per cent for men and 76.2 per cent for women). Only Jains show higher rates. The work participation rate (WPR) for Christians (39.7 per cent) compares well with the figures for the whole of India (39.1 per cent). In fact, both in rural areas as well as urban, Christians have a higher WPR than the national average (42 per cent as opposed to the national average of 41.7 per cent in rural areas and 35.2 per cent as opposed to the national rate of 32.3 per cent in urban areas).

Denominationally, the range of Christianity available in India includes Syrian Christianity, Roman Catholicism and various forms of Protestantism and Evangelicalism. Catholics form the largest Christian group in India, nearly half of the total population. Another 40 per cent of the Christians are Protestants, while 7 per cent belong to Orthodox churches and 6 per cent belong to indigenous sects.
Christian Presence in Social Work and the Development Sector

While looking at religion and development, it may be useful to document some of the ways in which Christians have participated in the fields of social work and development. Apart from ecclesiastical work, the different Indian churches are responsible for running a whole range of educational institutions and social welfare activities. The Catholic Church, for instance, runs 3,785 kindergarten and nursery schools, 7,319 primary schools, 3,765 secondary schools and 240 colleges, apart from 28 colleges devoted to medicine and nursing and 5 to engineering. The total number of students catered up to the secondary level is 5,600,000. The colleges together have 511,500 students. The Church also runs over 1,500 technical training schools and over 1,700 hostels and boarding houses. It runs orphanages, crèches, homes for the destitute, the physically challenged and aged, dispensaries and rehabilitation centres. The Church is responsible for the running of 704 hospitals.

The Church of North India (CNI) runs several educational institutions and social service centres. Its social services wing, known as the Synodical Board of Social Services (CNI-SBSS), focuses on development issues and works for the poor and the marginalised, for justice and human rights. The issues it looks at include livelihood and food security, tribal identity and indigenous rights, land rights, gender and Dalit studies. The CNI runs 65 hospitals that are spread over eight regional divisions and are managed by the CNI-SBHS (Synodical Board of Health Services). It also runs nine nursing schools, 250 educational institutions and three technical training centres. The wide range of health, education and social work activities engaged in by the different Christian denominations has sometimes led to the theological description of the Indian church as a ‘servant church’, following the example of Christ on his knees washing the feet of the disciples. Indeed, the singular contribution of Christians in the social sector is well-recognised in the country.

Caste Inequalities and Christianity

Broadly, it may be argued that the conversions that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came about because of the converts’ desire to move out of the inegalitarian caste society of the Hindus into a religious community where they were treated
equally. Most of these conversions took place among Dalit groups. Conversions came about because of the decision of various groups to thus opt out of the indigenous social order — the order of caste in Hindu society. As this was a time when conversions took place within an atmosphere that emphasised individualism and egalitarian values, converts from this period showed relatively fewer traces of adherence to caste values, especially in places where individual conversions had taken place. With group conversions though one thing remains true, despite the attempts of convert groups to shed caste, society has refused to let them. Dalit Christian converts often face the same humiliating disabilities that they had intended, perhaps, to flee.

Catholic missionaries, by not discouraging group conversions, frequently ended up working within the framework of caste. Protestants, on the other hand, seem to have much more consistently regarded the caste system as an obstacle to evangelisation and attempted to foster individual conversions right from the time of their first entry into south India in the early eighteenth century (Hudson 1993). While it is certainly true that missionaries had to come to terms with the existence of caste under certain conditions, it should be remembered that the attitudes of different Christian denominations towards the caste system would change over time. The Catholic and Protestant missionaries played important roles in fighting against some of the most severe caste disabilities, even as Protestant evangelists struck a balance with caste when they entered the field of group conversions in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Oddie 1977).

In earlier periods, often the converts resisted attempts by missionaries to establish egalitarian relations inside the Christian community. There are telling instances of particular castes fighting to defend the maintenance of status distinctions, with or against missionary effort. Patrick Roche (1984) and Susan Bayly (1989) have shown how, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, conversion maintained and sometimes, paradoxically if you like, even reinforced corporate caste identities. Bayly argues with regard to Syrian Christianity and early Catholicism in south India that ‘Indian Christians did not opt out of the indigenous moral order; on the contrary, the behaviour and social organization of these converts continued to reflect perceptions of caste rank, honour and ritual precedence which were shared throughout the wider society’ (1989: 7–9).

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries conversion maintained and sometimes even reinforced corporate caste identities.
Low-caste converts have suffered in terms of receipt of pastoral care and they are still less visibly represented in positions of authority and power in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This may be less due to active discrimination than due to the configuration of circumstances that leads to the deprived and less-educated getting left out of the race for position and prestige. However, the unspoken preference that has prevailed for a long time for admitting only the high castes into priesthood cannot be denied. This was partly based on the apprehension of alienating the high castes and the recognition that a low-caste priest might face opposition from his high-caste parishioners.

Demographic and Developmental Profile

In the following sections, charts and graphs, sourced from the Census of India 2001, have been used to bring out some aspects of the Indian Christian community’s demographic and developmental profile.

In Figure 7.1, we see graphically the percentage of Christians with respect to other communities according to the 2001 Census report. Table 7.1 and Figure 7.2 show us the population changes from 1961
TABLE 7.1: Proportion and Growth Rate of Population by Religious Communities, 1961–2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<td>82.4</td>
<td>81.4</td>
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<td>2.4</td>
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<td>2.3</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
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<td>0.7</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
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<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adjusted*</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All religious communities</td>
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<td>26.0</td>
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<td>24.8</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>21.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>36.0</td>
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<td>26.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
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<td>111.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion not stated</td>
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<td>66.9</td>
<td>590.1</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>−65.7</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>573.5</td>
<td>76.3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Notes: 1. The Census 2001 population figures for India and Manipur exclude those of Mao Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district of Manipur.


3. Neg.- Negligible.
to 2001 and from 1981 to 2001 respectively. What we see is that the percentage of Indian Christians in terms of the population as a whole has remained relatively unchanged over this period. For Christians the figures have ranged between 2.3 to 2.6. However, the growth rate of the Christian community has increased somewhat over the last decade. It declined enormously from 36 per cent in 1961–71 to 19.2 per cent in 1971–81 (the biggest decline for any religious community) and came down further to 17 per cent in 1981–91. The last decade, however, the community has seen an increase to 22.1 per cent. It is difficult to assess right now whether this is due to a natural increase or due to other causes.

As mentioned earlier, when we look at the sex ratio, we see that Christians are the only community to show up a positive adult sex ratio of 1,009 (Figure 7.3). However, in the 0–6 age group there is a deficit of girls and the sex ratio goes down to 964. This still compares favourably
with 950 for Muslims, 925 for Hindus and 786 for Sikhs. This suggests that Christians may be engaging in sex-selective abortions as do other communities. There are also interesting regional differences (see Table 7.2). The northern states, such as Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, have the lowest 0–6 age group sex ratios at 834, 898 and 870 respectively. The southern, eastern and north-eastern states do significantly better. The adult sex ratio is positive in a number of states including Delhi, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Pondicherry. This compares favourably with the sex ratio for Muslims and Hindus in most of these states. In Kerala, the Muslims and Hindus do better at 1,082 and 1,058 respectively. Muslims have a positive sex ratio in Kerala, Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, and Lakshadweep.

In terms of their population in the 0–6 age group, Christians show a lower proportion (13.5) than the national average (15.9). This indicates a decline in fertility rates. Literacy rates among Christians are among the highest in the country. Female literacy is at 76.2 per cent and male at 80.3 per cent. Over 20 states and union territories have more
TABLE 7.2: State-wise Socio-economic Indicators for the Christian Community, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>State/Union territory</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Christian population</th>
<th>Proportion of Christian population</th>
<th>Sex ratio (0–6)</th>
<th>Proportion of child population in the age group 0–6 years</th>
<th>Literacy rate</th>
<th>Female literacy rate</th>
<th>Work participation rate</th>
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<td>00</td>
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<td>24,080,016</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1,009</td>
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<td>13.5</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>76.2</td>
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<td>898</td>
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<td>79.5</td>
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<td>Punjab</td>
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<td>893</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>47.0</td>
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<td>7,627</td>
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<td>932</td>
<td>939</td>
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<td>88.5</td>
<td>85.1</td>
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<td>85.3</td>
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<td>14.6</td>
<td>72.8</td>
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<td>Bihar</td>
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<td>918</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>66.4</td>
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<td>Sikkim</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>1,097,968</td>
<td>205,548</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>1,003</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>1,990,036</td>
<td>1,790,349</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Manipur*</td>
<td>2,166,788</td>
<td>737,578</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>888,573</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>93.1</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>51.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>3,199,203</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>2,318,822</td>
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<td>1,004</td>
<td>973</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>26,655,528</td>
<td>986,589</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>962</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>80,176,197</td>
<td>515,150</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1,002</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>26,945,829</td>
<td>1,093,382</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1,018</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>36,804,660</td>
<td>897,861</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1,026</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Chhattisgarh</td>
<td>20,833,803</td>
<td>401,035</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1,021</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>60,348,023</td>
<td>170,381</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>50,671,017</td>
<td>284,092</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>988</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Daman &amp; Diu</td>
<td>158,204</td>
<td>3,362</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Dadra &amp; Nagar Haveli</td>
<td>220,490</td>
<td>6,058</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>96,878,627</td>
<td>1,058,313</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>993</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>76,210,007</td>
<td>1,181,917</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1,037</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>52,850,562</td>
<td>1,009,164</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1,030</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Goa</td>
<td>1,347,668</td>
<td>359,568</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>1,107</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Lakshadweep</td>
<td>60,650</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>82.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>31,841,374</td>
<td>6,057,427</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>1,031</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>62,405,679</td>
<td>3,785,060</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1,031</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Pondicherry</td>
<td>974,345</td>
<td>67,688</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>1,101</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>87.3</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Andaman &amp; Nicobar Is.</td>
<td>356,152</td>
<td>77,178</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>904</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: * Excludes Mao-Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district of Manipur.
than 75 per cent of their Christian population as literate. Lakshadweep, Kerala, Delhi, Mizoram, and Maharashtra have a Christian literacy rate of over 90 per cent. It is only in Arunachal Pradesh that Christian literacy is below 50 per cent. Christian literacy is also lower than the national average of 64.8 per cent in Orissa (54.9 per cent), Punjab (54.6 per cent), Assam (56.4 per cent) and just marginally in Dadra and Nagar Haveli (64.6 per cent). The gap between male and female literacy among Jains and Christians is less than 10 percentage points. In contrast, Hindus show a gap between male and female literacy of 23 percentage points, followed by the Buddhists (21.4 percentage points) and Muslims (17.5 percentage points).

The Christian WPR is 39.7 per cent. Among Christians, 20.9 per cent of the total population is engaged in cultivation, behind 33.1 per cent of the Hindus and 32.4 per cent of the Sikhs. Also, 15.8 per cent of Christians are agricultural labourers, as opposed to 26.5 per cent at the
national level. Only 2.7 per cent Christians are engaged in household industry as opposed to 8.1 per cent Muslims in this category, and the national average is 4.2 per cent. And 81.7 per cent Jains followed by 52.8 per cent Christians are engaged in other work, i.e., in the non-agricultural, tertiary sector which includes the services, manufacturing, trade and commerce, and allied activities.

Some information is available regarding patterns of employment for Christians vis-à-vis other religious communities. Tables 7.3 and 7.4 show the distribution of persons by occupation and religion in rural and urban India. The figures show that a high percentage of Christians in urban areas are in regular waged or salaried employment (56.1 per cent), but there are still 12.3 per cent engaged in casual labour. A relatively smaller number of Christians, as compared to the numbers in other religious communities, are engaged in self-employed activities.
When it comes to rural India, there are more Hindus in agriculture than any other religious community. There are more Muslims and ‘Others’ in non-agricultural occupations, than Hindus or Christians, but over 28 per cent of Christians do engage in agricultural labour. Table 7.5 charts the percentage of households owning or having access to a variety of different types of assets and amenities, including cycles, television and radio sets, fans, scooters, kitchens, electricity, piped water, and toilets. At an all-India level, what is observable is that Christians have high household and per capita incomes and their literacy level surpasses that of any other group. Christians seem to be reasonably well-off with respect to access to amenities or assets as well. Significantly, over 50 per cent have access to toilets, as compared to only 13.2 per cent Hindus or 8.3 per cent Scheduled Castes (SCs). Only 27.8 per cent have access to piped water, but that figure compares well with other groups.

The Table 7.6 looks at households across religious communities in relation to their ownership of land and milch and draught animals. We see that Christians are among the smallest holders of land as well as of draught and milch animals. All other communities appear

**TABLE 7.3: Percentage Distribution of Persons by Household Type (Occupation) and Religion: Urban India**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
<th>Hindus</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular wage/salaried</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual labour</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** NSS (1987–88: S-57, Table 27U).

**TABLE 7.4: Percentage Distribution of Persons by Household Type (Occupation) and Religion: Rural India**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Hindus</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agricultural</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labour</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other labour</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other occupation</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** NSS (1987–88).

**Note:** Including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
### TABLE 7.5: Percentage of Households Owning Assets and Amenities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Households</th>
<th>Per capita</th>
<th>Literacy</th>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>Fan</th>
<th>Scooter</th>
<th>Kitchen</th>
<th>Electricity</th>
<th>Piped water</th>
<th>Toilet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>income</td>
<td>income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hin</td>
<td>25,713</td>
<td>4,514</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>17,465</td>
<td>3,237</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>19,556</td>
<td>3,504</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mus</td>
<td>22,807</td>
<td>3,678</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian</td>
<td>28,860</td>
<td>5,920</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Based on Human Development in India profile conducted by National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER). See Razzack and Gumber (2002).*
to do better than Christians in terms of agricultural landholdings. The source-wise percentage distribution of household income (Table 7.7) shows that 46.3 per cent Christians get their income from agriculture, while 23.5 per cent of them are in salaried employment. The second figure is the highest among the different groups and communities.

Table 7.6: Percentage of Households Owning Land, Draught Animals and Milch Animals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Land holdings</th>
<th>Draught animals</th>
<th>Milch animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avg. all households in acres</td>
<td>Avg. all households</td>
<td>Avg. all households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Human Development in India profile conducted by NCAER (Razzack and Gumber 2002).

Dalit Struggles

None of the figures above separate Dalit Christians from Christians in general. It is therefore difficult to ascertain how well Dalit Christians are doing in relation to the other Christians or in relation to non-Christian Dalits. The figures for Christians (in the above tables) may or may not include some Dalits. For this section, therefore, it is necessary to draw more on the practices and struggles of the Dalits; the relevant statistical data is not available.

Christian Dalits have been engaged in struggles both within and outside the Church. The Christian Dalit Liberation Movement, formed in the 1980s, is an important forum for the promotion and coordination of Dalit struggles on an all-India basis. The most significant demand that has been taken up by Dalit Christians and, in turn, has been endorsed by the mainstream Church is that Dalit Christians should be accorded the same reservation and welfare benefits that are granted to the SCs professing Hindu, Sikh and Neo-Buddhist religions under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 (as amended in 1956 and 1990). Dalit Christians
TABLE 7.7: Source-wise Percentage Distribution of Household Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Artisan</th>
<th>Pet. trad</th>
<th>Org. trad</th>
<th>Sal. emp</th>
<th>Qual. prof</th>
<th>Rent</th>
<th>Agri wage</th>
<th>Non-Agri wage</th>
<th>Other sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Based on Human Development in India profile conducted by NCAER (Razzack and Gumber 2002).*
should be given SC status and privileges so that they can enjoy the political rights and socio-economic benefits that have been extended to all other SCs.

While the Church has overtly supported this struggle of the Dalits, the latter continue to assert that it is in fact ambivalent about their problems. The Dalit Christian Liberation Movement has specific concerns with respect to marginalisation in admissions and appointments to Christian institutions, in vocations, and in the sharing of power and authority in the Church. It argues that the Church cannot leave it up to the government to solve all these problems. Regardless of whether or not the government acts in favour of Dalit Christians, the Church must do what it can through a policy of reservation in its own institutions. Dalits have received international support for their struggles. The World Council of Churches (WCC) — made up of 334 member churches and associate bodies throughout the world — announced in the 1990s a Dalit Solidarity Programme as part of its Ecumenical Action on Racism. The programme’s intent is to focus the attention of the WCC member churches on the Dalit cause and their struggles for justice in India.

The Dalit Christian Liberation Movement is not the only representative group of Dalits in India. There are said to be over 5,000 Dalit groups, not all of them solely Christian, across the country. Among the many associations is one that calls itself the Poor Christian Liberation Movement. Its president speaks out in RSS publications, such as the Organizer, leading some to believe that this organisation might have been floated by the Hindu right itself. The organisation opposes Dalit Christians receiving recognition as SCs and chastises the Church for allegedly misleading poor people by converting them with the promise of social and economic uplift. It asserts that the Church should give equality to Dalits in its own organisations, instead of looking to the government for benefits. The organisation is also opposed to the recourse taken by Dalits to international associations, such as the WCC, in its struggles. It argues that it is necessary to build a ‘Swadeshi church’ and to cease looking towards the Vatican or the WCC for assistance and support.

Church and the State

While the Church has for the most part either kept out of politics or stood on the side of the status quo, there have been struggles associated with
the Church that have been anti-state. In Goa, the Konkan Railway protests saw the Catholic Church firmly on the side of those opposing the railway. The Church also participated in the struggle to ensure that Goa was not merged with Maharashtra, after its independence. Insurgency movements in the north-east have been closely associated with Christianity. Christian clergy also supported the fishermen’s struggles on the south-west coast.

Since Independence, the peoples of north-east India have expressed their dissatisfaction with the governance of their region by the centre, known for the lack of development and rampant corruption. This discontent has led to many insurgency movements that are seeking statehood or the adjustment of state borders or, in some cases, separation from India. These nationalist or sub-nationalist movements played a decisive role in stimulating conversions in the second half of the twentieth century. Scholars have pointed out that conversions among the previously unconverted Nagas of Nagaland or adjacent areas in Burma and Arunachal Pradesh were closely linked with Naga nationalism. Becoming Christian was a political statement in the hills, reinforced by the targeting of churches and Christian leaders by the Indian security forces sent to suppress the insurgents (Downs 1994).

Under the influence of the South American Liberation Theology movement, some clergy in India, especially Jesuits, began to reassess their role in bringing about socio-economic change in the lives of people. The ferment created by the movement was in part responsible for the Jesuits’ new ‘option for the poor’, in which worldly matters were given as much import as spiritual ones. In a world of injustice and oppression, the Jesuits have been asked to stand up for social justice and become agents of social transformation. Jesuit organisations have turned to tribal social transformation, social research and even initiatives for communal peace, human rights and justice for ethnic minorities and those oppressed by caste disabilities.

The Jesuits, who are particularly prominent in the field of education, have made their central goal the playing of a constructive role in the shaping of public policies in favour of secularism, the alleviation of poverty, empowerment, of women, upliftment of the marginalised, the preservation of the environment, and the spread of literacy. In accordance with this, they have chosen to withdraw from the direct governance of some of the elite schools that they had started, such as the Campion School in Mumbai, and move more actively into an engagement with the marginalised. Some of these moves have brought
them into confrontation with the Papacy and have certainly led to conflicts with central and state governments at different points of time. To conclude, while it is useful to have information regarding the socio-economic indicators for the community as a whole, there are also crucial aspects of intra-community difference that need to be brought out. At a time when raging controversies over conversion in particular have brought Christianity in confrontation with Hindu right-wing forces, there is a need to realise that Christians, as a whole, face the increasing possibility of attack and violence. As a minority, the Christians have certain concerns that they share as a community in an increasingly communalised atmosphere. However, when we begin to look at other specifics of development, we also need to concern ourselves with differences of class, caste and tribal affiliation which divide the community and are responsible for producing varied patterns of social transformation and differing life chances.

References
Sikhs Today: Development, Disparity and Differences

Surinder S. Jodhka

The High Level Committee headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar on ‘Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community’ of India submitted its report to the Prime Minister of India in November 2006. Though the ‘terms of reference’ of the Committee and the contents of the report it produced deal with the ‘development deficit’ among the Indian Muslims, its publication and the debate that it generated at the national level have wide-ranging implications for the other religious minorities of India and also for the mainstream discourse on development, the way it has been framed conventionally in India. Notwithstanding the recognition of religious beliefs as a part of everyday social and economic life in India, and the possible special needs of minority groups by the Indian Constitution, the discourse of development has worked so far with economic categories, such as poverty, inequality or growth, where individual citizens identified through ‘secular variables’ are enumerated and targeted by policies and programmes for development. Publication of the Sachar Committee Report raised questions, for the first time, about development in terms of religious communities, hence making them a subject of the state’s discourse in a completely different language.

With a population proportion of a little less than 2 per cent, the Sikhs are a rather small minority group of India. Of the total Sikh population of around 20 million enumerated during the 2001 Census, nearly 76 per cent live in the state of Punjab, where they are a numerical majority, making up approximately 60 per cent of the total population. The remaining 24 per cent of Indian Sikhs live in different parts of the country, with major concentrations in the north-western states of Haryana, Rajasthan and Delhi. Even though
small in number, Sikhs have been among the most mobile communities of the subcontinent and a good number of them have migrated out of India, mostly to countries of the western world. Though there is no exact data available on the number of Sikhs living outside India, rough estimates put it somewhere around 1.5 to 2 million. The proportion of the Sikh population in the total population of world is also quite small. According to one source, Sikhs make for around 0.38 per cent of the total world population, a little more than the Jews (0.23 per cent).\(^1\) However, the symbolic headgear which a majority of the Sikhs wear and their geographical spread makes them a visible community. Also they are popularly viewed as a prosperous and enterprising people.

The Sikhs have been a very well-researched community. Beginning with the colonial administrators, who were the first to translate Sikh scriptures into the English language and write their history, theologians and historians of the contemporary university academia too have produced a great deal of literature on the community. With growing consolidation of the community in the diaspora and the sharpening of Sikh identity during the 1980s and 1990s, support for research on the community has grown considerably. Sikhs living in the western hemisphere support a large number of Chairs in different universities in the United States and elsewhere for research on the community and its religious traditions. Over the last 20 years a global community of scholars specialising in Sikh studies has thus emerged. Apart from researching different aspects of Sikh religion and history, these scholars organise conferences at frequent intervals and also publish academic journals. Currently two journals, *The Journal of Punjab Studies* and *The Sikh Formations* are being published from the United States of America.

Their historical past not being too old and the global visibility they enjoy makes them an active subject of research. Pashaura Singh has rightly pointed out that unlike some other religious traditions, the origin of Sikhism is not in a distant prehistory that can never be fully recovered, but in a period of rich historical sources. As a consequence scholars of Sikhism are able to explore issues of scriptural authority, social history, gender, diaspora, and national and religious identity from perspectives that scholars of other religions often lack (2004: 3).

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However, notwithstanding this vibrancy, the dominant narrative of the scholarship in Sikh studies has been historical and theological, focused mostly around questions of interpretations of the Sikh scriptural authority and the Sikh past. Occasionally, anthropologists have focused on the culture and symbolic aspects of the community. The rise of the Khalistan movement in the 1980s also generated a fair amount of research on the political sociology of the Sikh ethnicity. But the changing nature of the social and economic life of the Sikhs, their internal dynamics and divisions, their experience of development over the last five or six decades, or the effects of globalisation and migration on the social well-being of the community have mostly remained marginal concerns with the scholars of Sikhism. Even when subjects like caste and gender are discussed, they are either framed in a purely normative language or are studied in the regional context of Punjab. Sociologists and political scientists too have tended to look at the community in the context of regional political mobilisations and social movements emanating from Punjab. The social science image of the Sikhs has been predominantly Punjab-centric and, wittingly or unwittingly, has tended to reinforce stereotypes about the community. It is perhaps only in the diaspora that questions of social and economic life of the community have received some attention (see Basran and Bolaria 2003; Singh and Tatla 2007; Verma 2002).

Drawing mostly from the available primary and secondary sources, in this article, I try to deal with some aspects of Sikh social and economic life in India, focusing specifically on the internal differences and dynamics of the Sikh population in different parts of the country.

The Dynamics of Sikh Demography

As mentioned earlier, Sikhs constitute 1.9 per cent of the total population of India. Though in terms of absolute numbers their population has been growing, the pace of their growth has been slower than most other religious communities in India. In fact, between 1991 and 2001 the Sikh population’s growth rate was the lowest among all the major religious communities of India. While the Sikh community grew at a rate of 16.9 per cent, the Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities grew by 20, 29.3 and 22.1 per cent respectively.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Sikh demography is that unlike most other religious groups of India, a large majority of them are concentrated in a particular region of the country, in the northwestern State of Punjab. Over the years, the contemporary Indian State
of Punjab has also come to be seen as a land of the Sikhs. Interestingly, this synonymity of the Sikhs with Punjab is not very old and is a result of the recent political history of the region. As shown in Table 8.1 below the Sikhs were the smallest of the three major religious communities of Punjab during the colonial period, with a population of around 13 per cent only. The partition of the Punjab in 1947 was accompanied by a massive movement of populations across the newly-drawn international borders. This happened more swiftly and violently on the western border between India and Pakistan than it did on the eastern. Almost the entire Sikh and Hindu population of the western districts of the Punjab, which went to Pakistan, moved across to the Indian side. The Muslim population from the Indian side of the Punjab was also forced out of their homes, leading to a near-complete ethnic cleansing and population exchange between the two newly independent countries of South Asia.

**TABLE 8.1: Changing Religious Geography of Punjab**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sikh Population (%)</th>
<th>Hindu Population (%)</th>
<th>Muslim Population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Note:* These figures ought to be seen along with the geographical shrinkage of the region as discussed in the article. For details of Census figures, see Brass (1974: 295–300).

Besides the violence and the human tragedies that accompanied the ‘partition’, the migrations also transformed the regional demographics of the two Punjabs. While western Punjab became an almost exclusively Muslim region, Indian Punjab emerged as a Hindu majority region. The Sikh gain in demographic presence was also quite significant. However, the demographics of the region underwent further change during the post-Independence period. In an atmosphere of communal polarisation and divisions, the Hindu Punjabi elite chose to identify themselves with the new nation-state of India, foregrounding its nationalist identity over the regional and cultural moorings of Punjab. The Muslim Punjabi elite had anyway emerged as the dominant linguistic community of the new nation-state of Pakistan and it too did not lay claim to the identity of the Punjabi language.

The Sikh elite of the region aspired for a political space of their own but had hitherto been unable to lay claim over a territorial unit
thanks to the unfavorable demographics of the community. The post-
Partition scenario opened up new opportunities for them. They
demanded a new state of Punjab which would essentially be a Sikh
majority region. The influence of a communalized Hindu elite over the
Hindu Punjabi population of Punjab and their decision to enumerate
themselves as a Hindi-speaking population only helped the Sikh
elites in strengthening their case for a separate Punjabi Suba within
the linguistic framework that the Indian state had accepted for the
reorganisation of the provinces. After some resistance from the cen-
tral government, Indian Punjab was reorganised once again in 1966,
after which the Sikhs emerged as a majority religious population.

Unlike the Muslims and Hindus, Sikh identification with Punjab
is much stronger for various historical and demographic reasons.
Apart from their being demographically concentrated in the region
in large numbers, Punjab is also the land of the faith’s origin. With
the exception of a few small groups (and unlike most other religious
communities), almost the entire population of the Sikhs has its origin
in this region — the contemporary Indian state of Punjab and the
Punjab province in Pakistan.\textsuperscript{2} It was here that the Sikh movement
started and it was here that it was able to gain a following. In fact,
a large majority of the Sikhs who live outside Punjab are migrants
either from western Punjab at the time of Partition, or later from
Indian Punjab.

However, despite their overall numerical majority, the Sikhs in
Punjab are not a substantive majority in every sense of the term.
Historically, Sikhs have been in minority in almost all the urban
centres of the Punjab. These urban centres continue to be dominated
overwhelmingly by Hindus while the Sikhs are concentrated more
in rural areas. As shown in Table 8.2, the proportion of Sikhs in the
rural areas of Punjab in 1981 was nearly 71 per cent while the Hindu
population in the urban centres was 64 per cent. This concentration
of the Hindu population in urban centres was even higher in some of
the more prominent districts. In Jalandhar, for example, the propor-
tion of Hindus was as high as 76.46 per cent and in Gurdaspur it was

\textsuperscript{2}There are some Sikh communities which have emerged outside Punjab
also, in regions where the Sikh Gurus lived, such as Bihar and Maharashtra
in India or in some of Western countries where a small number of the native
white population was converted to Sikhism by Sikh preachers like Harbhajan
Singh Yogi.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Sikhs</th>
<th>Hindus</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
<th>Sikhs</th>
<th>Hindus</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gurdaspur</td>
<td>51.42</td>
<td>40.21</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>20.11</td>
<td>76.72</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amritsar</td>
<td>91.37</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>43.64</td>
<td>54.91</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firozpur</td>
<td>64.19</td>
<td>34.70</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>20.60</td>
<td>76.92</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludhiana</td>
<td>88.31</td>
<td>10.88</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>36.45</td>
<td>61.74</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalandhar</td>
<td>53.54</td>
<td>45.39</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>23.29</td>
<td>75.11</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapurthala</td>
<td>71.52</td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>33.70</td>
<td>65.24</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ropar</td>
<td>41.89</td>
<td>56.75</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>22.96</td>
<td>75.35</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoshiarpur</td>
<td>62.00</td>
<td>36.61</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>36.87</td>
<td>60.80</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patiala</td>
<td>64.69</td>
<td>33.34</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>35.14</td>
<td>63.64</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sangur</td>
<td>80.15</td>
<td>15.87</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>34.03</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>14.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhatinda</td>
<td>87.69</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>37.27</td>
<td>61.75</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faridkot</td>
<td>90.38</td>
<td>9.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>41.55</td>
<td>57.52</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab (T)</td>
<td>71.30</td>
<td>26.51</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>33.19</td>
<td>64.16</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: As calculated by Abbi and Singh (1997: Appendix 1).
76 per cent. On the other extreme, the Sikhs constitute 89 per cent of the rural population in Amritsar and nearly 87 per cent in Bhatinda.

This has changed only marginally over the years. In 2001, for example, Sikhs were 36.6 per cent of the total urban population of Punjab, and their proportion in the total rural population had remained, more or less, the same at 71.86 per cent, even after 30 years.

More importantly perhaps, as a community, the Sikhs of Punjab are much more rural than other communities of the State. As shown in Table 8.3, of all the Sikhs in Punjab, only around 21 per cent lived in urban centres in 2001, far below the average urban population for the state (34 per cent). Across different districts it varied from a mere 6.93 per cent in Taran Taran to 36.78 per cent in Amritsar. In contrast, nearly 55 per cent of the Hindus and 44 per cent of the Muslims of Indian Punjab lived in urban areas. Only the Christian population of Punjab was nearly as rural as the Sikhs (72 per cent). Thus, the Sikhs of Punjab are a predominantly rural community.

TABLE 8.3: Rural–Urban Distribution of Sikh Population in Indian Punjab in 2001 (Percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Population of Sikhs</th>
<th>Rural Sikh population</th>
<th>Urban Sikh population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gurdaspur</td>
<td>44.44</td>
<td>86.24</td>
<td>13.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amritsar</td>
<td>71.91</td>
<td>63.22</td>
<td>36.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taran Taran</td>
<td>88.66</td>
<td>93.07</td>
<td>6.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapurthala</td>
<td>59.46</td>
<td>80.07</td>
<td>19.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalandhar</td>
<td>37.75</td>
<td>68.86</td>
<td>31.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawat Sehar</td>
<td>37.42</td>
<td>93.55</td>
<td>8.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoshiarpur</td>
<td>38.82</td>
<td>87.84</td>
<td>12.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rupnagar</td>
<td>58.75</td>
<td>54.41</td>
<td>15.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.A.S. Nagar</td>
<td>54.95</td>
<td>71.16</td>
<td>28.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludhiana</td>
<td>57.52</td>
<td>64.53</td>
<td>33.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firozpur</td>
<td>51.35</td>
<td>88.16</td>
<td>11.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faridkot</td>
<td>77.53</td>
<td>78.16</td>
<td>21.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukatsar</td>
<td>74.11</td>
<td>87.60</td>
<td>12.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moga</td>
<td>85.80</td>
<td>87.12</td>
<td>12.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathinda</td>
<td>74.07</td>
<td>83.88</td>
<td>16.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansa</td>
<td>78.33</td>
<td>89.09</td>
<td>10.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sangrur</td>
<td>70.19</td>
<td>83.98</td>
<td>16.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnala</td>
<td>69.47</td>
<td>82.87</td>
<td>17.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patiala</td>
<td>55.52</td>
<td>73.27</td>
<td>26.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatehgarh Sahib</td>
<td>74.56</td>
<td>83.57</td>
<td>16.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Punjab**

14,592,387 (100%) 11,567,437 (79.27%) 3,024,950 (20.73%)

*Source: Census of India, 2001.*
As mentioned above, nearly a quarter of all the Indian Sikhs live outside Punjab. The Sikh population is present in virtually every part of India. In addition to Punjab, 13 states and union territories of India have more than 50,000 Sikhs and there are 17 states and union territories with more than 20,000 Sikhs. The lowest number of Sikhs recorded during the 2001 Census was in Lakshadweep where there were only six Sikhs.

As shown in the Appendix, the rural–urban distribution of the Sikh population at the national level is not very different from what is the case with the Sikh population in Punjab. However, a closer look at the numbers points to a different picture. Sikhs living outside Punjab are far more urbanised than those living in Punjab. While only 21 per cent of the Sikhs in Punjab are urban, the number outside Punjab is as high as 45 per cent. Of the 13 states and union territories with a Sikh population of more than 50,000, as many as seven have a majority of Sikh population living in urban centres.

This is also reflected in their educational status. For example, while the national average of Sikh literacy rate in 2001 was 69.4 per cent, it was 67.3 per cent for Punjab. In as many as 14 states of India, the Sikh literacy rate was above 90 per cent. However, quite like Punjab, in the other states with a high Sikh population, namely Haryana and Rajasthan, Sikh literacy is very similar to that seen in Punjab. However, Delhi, another state with a high Sikh population has a literacy rate of 92.1 per cent.

**Occupations and Economies**

Work participation rates among Sikh males (53.3 per cent) is a little higher than the national average (51.2 per cent) and the average for the Hindu majority (52.4 per cent). It is also significantly higher than the Muslims (47.5 per cent). However, a lower percentage of Sikh women were enumerated as regular workers (20.2 per cent against 27.5 per cent for Hindus and 28.7 per cent for Christians). Only Muslim women had a lower work participation rate (14.1 per cent) than the Sikhs.

What kinds of work or occupations did the Sikhs pursue? Interestingly, despite the popular stereotype of Sikhs being agriculturalists with a predominantly rural residence, they are not chiefly an agrarian community. As is evident from Table 8.4, only 32.41 per cent of the working Sikhs were cultivators, less than the national average for Hindus in the same category (33.1 per cent). In fact, in the 2001 Census a much larger proportion of the Sikhs were enumerated as
‘other workers’ (47.34 per cent against the national average of 37.59 per cent for the entire population of India). This pattern is more or less the same for the state of Punjab, where the proportion of their rural residence is larger than the national average.

TABLE 8.4: Proportion of Sikh Population engaged in Agriculture (Percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Cultivators</th>
<th>Agricultural workers</th>
<th>Household industry worker</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All India</td>
<td>32.41</td>
<td>16.83</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>47.34 (37.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Rural</td>
<td>40.54</td>
<td>20.67</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>35.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Urban</td>
<td>04.00</td>
<td>03.05</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>88.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>32.00</td>
<td>18.30</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>46.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab Rural</td>
<td>37.56</td>
<td>21.00</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>37.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab Urban</td>
<td>05.50</td>
<td>06.00</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>84.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Census of India, 2001.*

The proportion of Sikhs is also low in the category of ‘household industry workers’. While 8.1 per cent of Muslims are employed in this category, only 3.4 per cent Sikhs are listed as household industry workers. This can perhaps be seen as a positive indicator, pointing to the greater number of options available for employment to Sikhs when compared with the deprived minority group of Muslims. The Sikh proportion in this category is below the national average (4.2 per cent) and the average for the majority population of Hindus (3.8 per cent). This also reflects a significant occupational diversification among the Sikhs.

Poverty and Inequality

The relative economic strength of the Sikhs is also reflected in the data available on absolute poverty across different religious groups in India. Of the major religious communities of the country, the proportion of poor among the Sikhs is the lowest. As shown in Table 8.5, only 5 per cent of the rural Sikhs and around 6 per cent of the
urban Sikhs were recorded to be below the poverty line. This is in stark contrast not only to a relatively poor community of Buddhists but also to the majority community of Hindus and the largest minority group — of Indian Muslims. Another interesting aspect of the Sikh numbers on poverty as shown in Table 8.5 is that unlike all other communities, poverty levels among the Sikhs are nearly the same for rural and urban populations.

**TABLE 8.5: Levels of Poverty across Religious Communities (Percentage)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious group</th>
<th>Rural poverty</th>
<th>Urban poverty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>28.90</td>
<td>23.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>29.26</td>
<td>41.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>16.21</td>
<td>12.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>05.00</td>
<td>06.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>40.59</td>
<td>28.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Figures based on National Sample Survey 2004–05, Consumption Expenditure Round.*

The near absence of absolute poverty among the Sikhs of India does not mean, however, that there are no inequalities among the Sikhs. Low poverty levels can easily co-exist with high levels of economic inequality. Though there is no viable quantitative evidence on the subject, the available data on landholdings does point to significant inequalities among the Sikhs.

As is evident from Table 8.6, the lower proportion of Sikhs being in the category of agricultural workers (Table 8.4) does not imply an absence of landlessness. On the contrary, the proportion of the landless population among the rural Sikh households is quite large, in fact much larger than the national average or the averages for Hindus and Muslims. Only Indian Buddhists have larger proportions of landlessness. Why is the landlessness so high among rural Sikhs? Though I discuss this in greater detail when I deal with the caste question among the Sikhs, it may be relevant to make a brief mention here. First, for various historical reasons, the ex-untouchable communities of Punjab do not own agricultural land. Less than 5 per cent of all the Scheduled Castes (SCs) of Punjab are cultivating farmers. Second, the proportion of SCs (including among the Sikhs) in Punjab is the highest in the country (nearly 29 per cent). In other words, most of the rural landless households among the Sikhs are likely to be Dalit households.
Sikhs Today: Development, Disparity and Differences

TABLE 8.6: Land-holding Patterns across Religious Communities (Rural)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Landless</th>
<th>Marginal</th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Large</th>
<th>Very large</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>16.55</td>
<td>32.83</td>
<td>20.79</td>
<td>14.76</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>19.32</td>
<td>46.62</td>
<td>19.17</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>8.76</td>
<td>46.28</td>
<td>19.42</td>
<td>13.42</td>
<td>9.70</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>23.93</td>
<td>33.83</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>9.91</td>
<td>13.99</td>
<td>10.48</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>40.97</td>
<td>22.69</td>
<td>13.45</td>
<td>15.52</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16.96</td>
<td>34.57</td>
<td>20.32</td>
<td>14.02</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: As calculated by Amit Thorat (2008).

A closer reading of Table 8.6 also suggests that along with landlessness, inequality of holding sizes is also very high among the Sikhs. In the category of ‘large’ and ‘very large’ holdings, the proportion of Sikhs is much higher than any other religious community.

Caste and Gender

For a long time the mainstream discourse on development was pre-occupied with the issues of economic growth and individual income. Poverty and inequality were also seen from within this economics-centric perspective. However, over the years, the thinking on development has undergone major shifts. For example, from a simple notion of economic growth, development experts have evolved new parameters of ‘human development’ where, along with the question of individual incomes, the broader indicators of social and cultural wellbeing are also given due credit in determining the level of development of a given population. More recently, development experts have argued for the need to recognise those prevalent social structures that are exclusionary in nature and often lead to discriminatory practices against certain historically disadvantaged social groups and categories of population (see Sen 2001; Thorat 2006). Caste and gender are two such structures that have been identified as modes of institutionalised exclusion in contemporary India.

Gender and caste have been difficult questions in the case of Sikhism. Unlike Hinduism, Sikhism claims to advocate the equality of all human beings. For adherents of the faith, Sikhism is a modern

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3 See, for example, the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
religion. Even when hierarchy was seen as a natural mode of organising social relations, the Sikh Gurus preached equality of gender and caste. However, as McMullen points out in the context of his study of the beliefs and practices of Sikhism, it is necessary to make a distinction between ‘normative’ and ‘operational’ beliefs.

Normative beliefs and practices are those which are officially stated and prescribed or proscribed by the recognized religious authority, which can be person, organisation or an official statement. Operative beliefs and practices, on the other hand, are those actually held by people (McMullen 1989: 5).

It is in this framework that I discuss the questions of caste and gender in the Sikh community.

**Sikhism and the Caste Question**

The institution of caste and the practice of untouchability are widely believed to be the core defining features of the ‘traditional’ social structure of India. Caste has been viewed as an institution that distinguished traditional India from the West. It is believed to have been around for ages — existed everywhere in the sub-continent and everyone practiced it! While in Hinduism, the caste system and untouchability had ideological sanction, other communities also practiced it, even though it was not legitimised by their religious philosophies. However, despite this widely-held commonsensical notion about the pan-Indian nature of caste, there exists a considerable amount of variation in the manner in which the social relations among different groups have been structured in different regions. As is widely known, there are different sets of caste groups in different regions of India and ‘the preoccupation with purity and pollution was not equally marked in every part of the country’ (Beteille 2000: 172). The specific historical trajectory, the patterns of politico-economic change experienced during the post-Independence period and the composition of different ethnic communities determine the actual caste relations in a given region.

One of the distinguishing features of the Sikh movement during the fifteenth century was its opposition to Brahmanical orthodoxy and the caste system. In contrast to the hierarchical values of Brahmanical Hinduism, Guru Nanak and the later Sikh Gurus advocated equality
of all human beings in relation to God and the futility of caste divisions (see McLeod 1996: 85–86). For him, the aim of salvation was union with God, to transcend the cycle of birth and death. Since the divine presence was everywhere, it was available to everyone. He denounced ritualism, ascetic practices, idol worship, and the hermit life spent in the jungle. An important aspect of Guru Nanak’s philosophy was his emphasis on the values of everyday life, a ‘this worldliness’. He preached that one should attain God while being part of the social world and earning one’s living.

The teachings of the Sikh Gurus differed from the Brahminical worldview in yet another way. Against the caste exclusivism of Brahminical Hinduism, the Sikh Gurus underlined the need for sharing and communal living. Kirtan (the corporate singing) and the langar (the community kitchen and eating together) were among the new and important institutions introduced by the Gurus. The second Guru standardised the Gurumukhi script, which eventually became a vehicle for the Punjabi language and identity. Earlier Guru Nanak had consciously rejected Sanskrit in preference of the indigenous spoken language. The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan compiled the first canon of the faith, the Adi Granth, that eventually came to be worshiped as the eternal Guru by the Sikhs after the death of the tenth and the last of the living Gurus.

The Sikh holy book contains the writings of many saints and sufis of the Bhakti period. Some of those saints came from the Shudra (such as Kabir, a weaver; Dhanna, a Jat peasant; and Namdev, a tailor) and untouchable castes (such as Ravidas, a cobbler; Sadhan, a butcher; and Sain, a barber). The Sikh holy book also contains the writings of some Muslim sufis, such as Sheikh Farid and Bhikan. Of the ‘five beloved’ who were the first to be baptised as Khalsas on the day of Baisakhi in 1699 by the tenth Guru, four belonged to Shudra castes.

At the empirical level also, many have reported on the relatively weaker hold of caste on social relationships among Sikhs in particular and the Punjabis in general. This is reflected in the writings of colonial administrators as well as in social scientific studies. Reporting on the problems of the ‘low castes’ in the province, one of the colonial administrators viewed it more in terms of politico-economic disabilities rather than in terms of their being ‘untouchable’, as was the case with the rest of India. For example, a colonial government report from the 1920s observed:
It would be misleading to attach too great importance to the existence of caste in the Punjab. Not only is it the case that the Brahman has no practical pre-eminence among Hindus, but as between ‘caste’ and ‘non-caste’ Hindus the distinction is not so strongly marked as to create the political problem found elsewhere in India. The Problem in truth, if one exists, is rather of classes socially depressed than of ‘out-castes’ as such; while much remains to be done for the social uplift of some of these classes, they hardly present a separate political problem.

Another British author, contrasting Punjab with the rest of the sub-continent and comparing caste in Punjab with class in Europe wrote, ‘nowhere else in Hindu India does caste sit so lightly or approach so nearly to the social classes of Europe’ (Anderson in Nayar 1966: 20). Some Western observers went to the extent of saying that the Punjab was a ‘notable exception’ to the caste system in India (O’Malley in Nayar 1966: 20).

More recently, some anthropologists too have made similar claims and have argued that caste inequalities in the region were much lesser than elsewhere in India. Comparing the disabilities experienced by the lower castes in Punjab with the rest of India, Satish Saberwal, who studied a small town of Punjab during the late 1960s, writes:

…even if the Brahmins were able to carve a ceremonial place at Ranjit Singh’s court for themselves, there is no evidence that they acquired much land or that they were able to enforce the social circumstances that they would have required for maintaining high levels of ritual purity; and therefore the lowest castes in Punjab had to carry only a light burden of ritual impurities, much lighter, physically and socially, than the burden elsewhere in India (Saberwal 1976: 7).

Joyce Pettigrew, another anthropologist, goes to the extent of saying that the rural society of Punjab differs radically from Hindu India because of the absence of caste among the Sikhs (1975: 4).

However, not everyone who has studied Punjab agrees with such a position. Anthropologist Paul Hershman, who carried out his fieldwork in a village near Jalandhar, for example, completely disagrees with the thesis that the ideas of purity and impurity did not exist in Punjab or that caste in the region functioned more like...
Sikhs Today: Development, Disparity and Differences

Contesting Pettigrew’s claims on the absence of caste in Punjab, he writes:

Pettigrew appears to argue from the premise of Sikh theology that there is no caste among the Sikhs, but this is manifestly not the case when one considers the relationships....There are most certainly many caste divisions within the Sikh fold (Hershman 1981: 21).

Most other students of Punjab also agree that though the structure of hierarchy could be different in the state when compared to other regions of India, caste divisions, however, did exist among the Sikhs. To some extent pollution and avoidance were also practiced in the region particularly in relation to the SC, both among the Hindus as well as among the Sikhs (H. Singh 1977; I.P. Singh 1975; Nayar 1966; Saberwal 1976).

While recognising that caste divisions existed among the Sikhs, the available literature also indicates that the change experienced in the attitudes towards caste during the last century has been quite significant in the region. Evidence for this is available from studies of individual villages or towns, as well as from the social reform movements for the uplift of the ‘low castes’.

I.P. Singh (1975, 1977), who conducted a study of a village near Amritsar during the late 1950s provides a fairly good idea about the nature of caste relations in a Sikh village. The Sikhs living in the village were divided into two groups, the Sardars (the upper castes) and the Mazhabis (lower-caste scavengers). The first group included the Jats, Kambohs, Tarkhans, Kumhars, Sunars, and Nais (in the Hindu caste hierarchy, they would all be treated as Shudras, and with the exception of Jats, they were perhaps all included in the list of ‘Other Backward Classes’). Though the agriculturist Jats considered themselves higher than other groups in this category, Singh found no feeling of caste-based avoidance or prejudice among them. They visited each other’s houses, interdined and attended marriage functions and celebrated most of the festivals together. In terms of the village settlement also, no demarcation existed in the houses of these groups.

It may be relevant to mention here that the village where Hershman did his fieldwork was surely not a typical village of Punjab. As mentioned above, the rural population of the state is largely Sikh while his study village had a majority population of Hindu households. His village had as many as 40 Brahmin households and almost all the SC households were reported as Hindus.
However, the Mazhabis, who constituted nearly half of the village population, were treated differently. They lived on one side of the village. They had a separate well, while all the other castes used a common well. In the village feasts, where everyone was invited, the Mazhabis sat separately. Since many of them worked as labourers in the fields of the Jat landowners, the latter visited the houses of the Mazhabis but they did so only as a patronising gesture.

There were also occasions where untouchability was either not practiced or its prevalence had been declining. Many Jats in the village let the Mazhabis enter their houses and did not consider their touch polluting. One of them in fact had employed a Mazhabi to clean utensils in his house.

Untouchability was practiced minimally among the drinkers in the village. The Mazhabis were the traditional brewers of country liquor in the village.

Mazhabis and Sardars drink liquor together at the fair and occasionally in the fields. We saw them drinking from the same glass which was passed from one to the other. However, in their homes they usually drink only among their own caste members. On festivals like Lohri and Holi, when villagers indulge in heavy drinking, no caste distinctions are observed (I.P. Singh 1977: 76).

The practice of untouchability was also less visible in religious affairs. There was only one gurudwara (Sikh place of worship) in the village where everyone was allowed entry. They also sat together while eating food in the gurudwara. The priest, who himself belonged to a low caste (Cheemba, washerman), served all the castes without any discrimination. He had performed all the marriages in the villages, irrespective of caste distinctions. This was quite in contrast to the way a Brahmin priest functioned. Brahmin priests used to perform rituals for the Sikhs in the village as well until the latter they began appointing their own priest for the gurudwara. But the Brahmin priest served only the upper-caste Sikhs.

Religious reform movements among the Sikhs during the 1920s, launched by Singh Sabhas and the Akalis, had a lasting impact on the religious life of the Sikhs in the village. The insistence of Sikh reformers to distance the ‘community’ from the Hindus and giving legal recognition to weddings conducted through the Sikh ritual Anand Karaj, made the village Brahmin priest redundant. Unlike the Brahmin, the Sikh priest could be from any caste and, as mentioned
above, in this particular village the priest was from a lower caste. He had been trained to be a priest at the Sikh Missionary College, Amritsar. Priesthood among the Sikhs had thus become an achieved, rather than an ascribed status.

With the exception of Hershman’s work, there is hardly any study of rural Punjab that reports about the superiority of status enjoyed by Brahmins over the Jats (the landowning peasant caste) and the Khatri (mostly in trade and services). Brahmins themselves tended to concede such a framework of ranking (D’Souza 1967). Commenting on the lack of respect enjoyed by the Brahmins of Punjab, Saberwal quotes Dev Raj Chanana:

In Punjabi the word Pandat (Pandit) denotes a Brahman and may connote some respect for the latter. But the word Bahman (Brahmin) almost always carries a little contempt (Saberwal 1976: 10).

In his study of a small town in Punjab, carried out during the late 1960s, Saberwal found a considerable change in attitude towards the traditional ideology of caste. ‘The conjunction of pressure from above with pressure from below had produced new cultural patterns, rejecting the ideas of inherited purity and pollution’ (Saberwal 1973: 256).

Empirical studies on caste relations in Punjab, though they do confirm that the ideas of purity and impurity were rather weak in the region, tend also to emphasise the significant role that different reform movements have played in bringing about this change.

As underlined above, despite the opposition of the Sikh Gurus to caste, it survived among the people. With routinisation over a period of time, particularly after the establishment of a Sikh kingdom under Ranjit Singh, Brahmanical orthodoxy is believed to have gotten entrenched in the region once again (I.P. Singh 1977: 81). The question of caste also became an important issue during British rule, when reform movements were initiated by the newly-emergent Sikh middle class during the late nineteenth century.

Along with the British rulers came Christian missionaries, with the intention of spreading the message of the Church. The first to find the appeal of the Church attractive in the region were members of the untouchable castes. The first conversion is reported to have taken place in 1873 when a man named Ditt was baptised in Sialkot. ‘To the surprise of the missionaries, Ditt was followed by hundreds of thousands of others from lower castes, and Punjab Christianity
became a de facto movement’ (Juergensmeyer 1988: 181). By 1890 there were 10,171 Christians living in 525 villages of Punjab and by 1911 their number had gone up to 163,994 and by 1921 to over 300,000 (see Webster 1999: 96; Grewal 1994: 130). Most of them came from a particular untouchable caste, the Chuhras (scavengers) and hailed mainly from rural areas. Given the nature of the rural power structure, ‘conversion to Christianity for these highly vulnerable people was a very risky act of rebellion’ (Webster 1999: 96–97).

According to Juergensmeyer, the Christian missionaries had not intentionally targeted the low castes for conversions; ‘It was the untouchables who had originally sought out Christianity’ (1988: 184). They obviously saw the potential for social mobility in conversions.

Originally, the missionaries of the Punjab had only attempted to convert the upper castes, since they regarded others as beyond the reach of the methods they preferred—intellectual argument and moral suasion. The enthusiasm of the first convert, Ditt, and the subsequent lower caste requests for conversion not only baffled the missionaries but embarrassed them: they saw no sensible or moral reason for keeping the lower castes out, yet feared that allowing them in would sully the church’s reputation (Juergensmeyer 1988: 184).

The fears of the missionaries were not unfounded. When a newspaper article in the *Tribune* of 19 October 1892 reported that the rate of conversions would soon turn the Punjab into a Christian region, ‘a tremor of fear ran through the upper caste Hindu and Sikh elite’ (*ibid.*: 181). There was a virtual competition among the religious communities — the Christians, Hindus and Sikhs — to win the untouchables over to their side. It was around this time that the Hindu reformist organisation, the Arya Samaj, made its entry into the Punjab.

The colonial administrative structure had also begun to deploy new categories of social aggregation and classification. The British thought of their populace in terms of religious communities and looked at them accordingly in the process of governance. They ‘encouraged the members of each community to present their case in communitarian terms’ (Grewal 1989: 195). The role that census enumeration played in converting the fuzzy boundaries into well-defined communities was perhaps most evident in Punjab. As Fox (1985) points out, these administrative discourses of British rulers had far-reaching influences.
on the process of identity formation in the region. The introduction of census thus made the ‘religious communities’ sensitive about the numbers. ‘Numbers were generally equated with strength, particularly for employment under the government’ (Grewal 1994: 131).

While the Muslim population remained stable at around 51 per cent during 1881–1911 and the Sikh and the Christian populations went up, the Hindu population showed a decline from about 41 per cent in 1881 to around 36 per cent in 1911 (Jones 1976: 324). The conversions to Christianity were mostly from the low castes; most of whom had earlier been recorded as Hindus by the colonial enumerators. The upper-caste Punjabi Hindus, who were already feeling marginalised by the Bengali clerks whom the British had brought with them from Calcutta for administrative work, would have obviously viewed the decline in Hindu population with much concern. The passing of the land alienation act in 1901 that stopped the transfer of agricultural land from the agricultural castes, mostly Sikhs and Muslims, to the non-agricultural castes, mostly Hindus, had also been seen by the Hindu elite as an act of discrimination against them.

The Arya Samaj movement was the first major reform movement in Punjab and it directly targeted caste. However, in its efforts to reform Hinduism it also criticised Sikh gurus and mobilised Dalit Sikhs for their return to Hinduism through the process of shuddhi. The reports of low-caste Sikhs being enunciated shuddhi and their re-conversion to Hinduism were viewed with much concern by the Sikh middle-class leadership. Since numbers had begun to matter and the communities in the region had become very sensitive about their size, the Sikh leadership was understandably keen to keep the lower castes within their fold.

The militant assertion of Hindutva identity by the Arya Samaj had already sparked a debate on the question of Sikh identity. The Sikhs began to assert that theirs was a separate religion and that they should not be clubbed with the Hindus (Oberoi 1994). The practice of untouchability or discrimination against the low castes among the Sikhs was attributed to the continued influence of Hinduism on the community. Thus the struggle against caste and untouchability, which were seen as core Hindu values, was implicated in the movement for a separate religious identity for the Sikhs.

The Singh Sabha movement launched during the 1920s for the liberation of Sikh gurudwaras from the Hindu Mahants also became a movement for de-Hinduisation of Sikh religion. One of the
main demands of the movement was ‘unquestioned entrance to Sikh places of worship’ for all (Juergensmeyer 1988: 28). Some members of the Sikh Khalsa Diwan in fact tried to create their own ‘depressed class movements’ to encourage SC support. The movement was not confined to the liberation of historic Sikh gurudwaras. Its impact went very far. In his study of a village in Amritsar district, I.P. Singh reported that the decline of the Brahmans in the village began around the time these reform movements were launched, i.e., 1922–26. It was after these movements that a low caste Sikh was appointed a priest in the local Gurudwara and he began to give equal treatment to members of all castes in the village (I.P. Singh 1977: 81–82).

This process seemed to have continued during the post-Independence period as well. More significantly perhaps, the rural Sikh elite attributed the change in the status of untouchables in Punjab to the quality of their religion. Reporting about his village, I.P. Singh writes:

> The modern preachers of equality of castes like the Sarpanch and his young friends point it out that what the new law demands is just what the gurus had preached. It is in keeping with the precepts of Sikh religion. There lies the major difference of caste structure between a Sikh village and a Hindu village. While in a Hindu village caste hierarchy and differences have religious sanctions behind them, there are no such sanctions in the Sikh religion. Thus it becomes easier to propagate and instill equality of caste relations in a Sikh village (ibid.: 79).

While the Sikh reformers attacked caste, the Sikh leadership, having become aware of the significance of numbers, did not try to deny the existence of caste among the Sikhs. Neither did they deny that the low castes among the Sikhs faced disabilities due to their birth. The Sikh leadership, in fact, had to lobby a great deal with the national leadership that along with the Hindus, certain Sikh castes should also be included in the list of the SCs for the provision of special benefits and reservations. They were obviously worried that if reservation benefits were not extended to the Sikhs, the low castes among them may declare their religion as Hinduism. Nayar reports that this ‘concession was achieved in return for an agreement by the Sikh leaders that no further political demands would be made in the future on behalf of the Sikh community’ (Nayar 1966: 238). However, while all the Hindu untouchable castes were given the special privileges, only four sub-castes of untouchable Sikhs were included
in the list. ‘The sub-castes excluded from the schedule showed little reluctance in abandoning the Khalsa (Sikh) tradition and declaring themselves Hindus in order to claim benefits’ (K. Singh 1966: 304).

Caste and Contemporary Sikhism

As I have tried to illustrate above, the question of caste and Sikhism has been quite a complicated one. Despite a denial at the ideological level, the contemporary Sikh leadership did not deny its existence at the empirical level. In fact, the ‘low caste’ Sikhs were the only non-Hindus who were included in the list of the SCs, a status that was not granted to their counterparts in the other minority communities, i.e., Muslims and Christians. Even Buddhists and Jains were not considered for such a status. It is only recently that the neo-Buddhist converts have begun to be registered as SCs. However, the Sikh leadership had to fight to get SC status for Sikh Dalits when the Indian Constitution was being framed. As Puri notes:

After Independence, one of the major demands put forward unanimously by all the 22 Sikh members of the East Punjab legislative assembly in 1948 related to securing for the former untouchable castes converted to Sikhism the same recognition and rights as would have been available to them if they had not become Sikhs (2003: 2699).

Surprisingly, the Chairman of the sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly, Vallabhbhai Patel resisted this demand and it was eventually granted only in exchange for a promise given in writing that ‘they would not put forward any further demands for any safeguard in the Constituent Assembly if their backward classes…were recognised and calculated as Scheduled Castes’. But not all Sikh Dalits were to be included in the list. Only four communities, the Mazhabis, Ramdasis, Kabirpanthis, and Sikligars were included. It was only after Master Tara Singh, an Akali leader launched another morcha that the remaining Dalit communities among the Sikhs were also included in the official list.

According to the 1961 Census of India, of the entire SC population of India, 98.56 per cent were returned as Hindus and the remaining 1.44 per cent as Sikhs (Singh 1995: 10). Apart from the SCs, Sikhs also

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6 Constituent Assembly Debates, in Constituent Assembly of India, Volume X, Friday, 14 October 1949.
have other caste divisions and there seems to be a marked variation in the development status of these different caste categories. As shown in Table 8.7 below, the SC population among rural Sikhs is 27.35 per cent, much higher than in the urban population, indicating a lower level of urbanisation among the Dalit Sikhs when compared to Sikhs in the general category.

**TABLE 8.7: Caste Groups among Sikhs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>ST</th>
<th>SC</th>
<th>OBC</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>27.35</td>
<td>22.95</td>
<td>48.70</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>15.17</td>
<td>18.56</td>
<td>66.16</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Calculated from National Sample Survey 2004–05, Consumption Expenditure Round.*

As the table shows, the Sikhs also have a small proportion of its population listed as Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Radhakrishna 2007). Interestingly, there is no separate list for STs for the state of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi, where most of the Sikhs live. So they are all from other parts of the country, the ‘de-notified tribes’, such as the Sikligar Sikhs of Rajasthan. Similarly, the Sikhs also have the so-called Other Backward Castes (OBCs) castes and they constitute a substantial proportion of the Sikh population. In fact, of the total rural Sikhs population, Dalits and OBC Sikhs together make up more than half.

How do caste differences reflect themselves in economic and social status? Table 8.8 gives a fairly good idea of the prevailing economic differences among the different caste groups among the Sikhs. As

**TABLE 8.8: Land Ownership among Sikhs according to Caste**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Landless</th>
<th>Marginal</th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Large</th>
<th>Very large</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBC</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTH</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Urban**

| SC    | 60.0     | 38.3     | 0.0   | 0.0    | 1.7   | 0.0        |
| OBC   | 35.3     | 52.4     | 1.4   | 6.6    | 0.0   | 4.2        |
| OTH   | 36.6     | 43.8     | 5.3   | 2.0    | 3.5   | 8.8        |

*Source: Calculated from National Sample Survey 2004–05, Consumption Expenditure Round.*
mentioned above, the SCs among the Sikhs are either landless or near landless. The position of OBC community among the Sikhs is a little better. A large proportion of them are marginal landowners but the number of large and very large landholders is also quite significant. The position of ‘upper caste’ (the others) is certainly far better. Less than 5 per cent of them are landless and more than half of the them are large or very large landowners.

The Gender Question

Perhaps more than caste, the question of gender has been a serious concern in the development writings on Sikhs. As is the case with Sikh studies in general, the question of gender in Sikhism has also been discussed mostly in historical frames (Jakobsh 2003; Malhotra 2002), and by scholars interested in the study of religious traditions. Only recently is some work beginning to be produced from a development perspective (Kaur 2007).

Historically speaking, there has been very little acknowledgement of the ‘problem’ within the Sikh faith/tradition. The dominant attitude, as has been argued by Jakobsh (2003), is that of silence. This mainstream thinking within the religious orthodoxy is well represented in the following lines of Surinder Suri:

The status of women was not an issue in Sikhism. Equality was implicit….Women are considered as an integral part of society who must not be excluded by any ritual or doctrinal consideration (1990: 103).

The reality on the ground, however, has always been very different. As Singh and Tatla point out, ‘historically Sikh society has been hyper-masculine, reflecting the character of rural Punjab, which evolved as a frontier zone. Sikh religious iconography is also very masculine, (Singh and Tatla 2007: 182). However, much of the contemporary concern for gender within the Sikh community has emerged from the growing demographic imbalance — the declining sex ratio among the Sikhs — revealed by the national census data of 2001. According to the 2001 Census, the sex ratio of the Sikh population was lowest among all the major religious communities of the country at 893, much below the national average of 933 women per 1000 men. The only other religious community with a worse sex ratio than the national average was the majority Hindu population with a sex ratio of 931. All the other religious minorities had sex ratios higher than the national average (Christians — 1009; Buddhists — 953; Jains — 940;
Muslim — 936). However, there are some interesting variations across States. For example, Delhi has the highest sex ratio among the Sikh population (925), followed by Chandigarh (910). Punjab, where a large majority of the Sikh population is concentrated, had a low sex ratio of 897. In other states and union territories also the sex ratio among the Sikh population was below 900.

More worrying still is the declining trend. For example, the 2001 data on child sex ratio (below the age of 6), is even worse. Though it goes down for almost all the religious communities, it is much worse for the Sikhs. There were only 786 girl children for 1000 male children among the Sikhs, far below the national average for Christians (964), Muslims (950) and Hindus (925).

Interestingly though, the low sex ratio among the Sikh does not tell us the entire story, which is much more complex than it may appear in the first instance. While sex ratios are low, literacy rates among Sikh women are higher. As the Census analysis shows:

female literacy scenario among Sikhs and Jains is very encouraging, as compared to other religions, wherein except one state all the other states have reported female literacy rate above 60 per cent. Twenty-nine states and union territories among the Jains, 16 states and union territories among Sikhs and 13 states and union territories among Christians are having female literacy above 80 per cent. The 2001 Census data brings out clearly a high literacy rate among the females of the Jains, Sikhs and Christians.7

On some of the health indicators as well, the Sikhs do quite well. For example, the data on immunisation shows that the proportion of Sikh women who had received immunisation during their pregnancy was higher (85.5 per cent) than all other religious groups except for the Jains (92.2 per cent).8

How should one make sense of this rather contradictory picture? Historically patriarchal values have been very strong in the north-west region of the subcontinent. Its dependence on an agrarian economy and the ‘martial’ traditions reinforced by the colonial rulers produced a culture of son preference. The nature of economic development in the region during the post-Independence period has

8 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) report, as processed by A. Thorat (2008: 20).
largely been agriculture-centric. Incomes went up but it failed to produce an urban middle-class or a bourgeois culture. The growing influence of the ideology of population control and family planning produced smaller families but with a skewed sex ratio. The Sikhs were not only the community with the lowest sex ratios but they were also the community with the lowest population growth rate during 1991 and 2001. The Sikh case is perhaps a good example of the kinds of contradictions that are embedded in the ‘models’ of economic development India has been pursuing during the post-colonial period.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding some very obvious development deficits, economically speaking, Sikhs have done fairly well as a community. The desire for social and economic mobility is extremely strong among them. One of the central features of the Sikh self-image is of ‘a hard-working and mobile community’. Mobility is perhaps the single most important secular value among the Sikhs. Though compared to the followers of other religious denominations in India, the number of Sikhs is quite small, they can be seen in almost every part of the country and in every sphere of economic life. They have also been a globally mobile community. They were among the first from the subcontinent to explore the western hemisphere. There are substantial numbers of Sikhs in countries like United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. Smaller populations of Sikhs can be found in many other countries of the world as well. The desire to go to foreign lands for better economic opportunities continues to be strong among the Sikhs.

Though Green Revolution technologies were introduced in different parts of the country, it was in Punjab that they proved most effective. Scholars writing on the subject also give due credit to the community culture of the Sikhs, particularly to the Jat Sikh farmers. For a long time Punjab was the richest state of the country, with the highest per capita income. As shown above, the number of ‘poor’ among the Sikhs is far lesser than any other religious community in India. The available official data also shows a growing occupational diversification among the Sikhs and a move away from agriculture.

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9 The Sikh value of *kirat karna, vand chhakna* (working hard and sharing/eating together) is quite opposite to one of the core values of caste society where labour is seen as being associated with lower status.
However, notwithstanding these achievements and the pride they take in the ‘modernity’ of their religious ethos, Sikhs are not a homogenous community. Apart from the economic inequalities that characterise the Sikh population, as it does with any other religious community, the Sikhs are also confronted with several other developmental challenges.

While ideologically Sikhism does not support caste-based inequality or the idea of untouchability, in social and political life the community continues to be divided on caste lines. Even though the growing institutionalisation of democratic politics and economic development during the post-Independence period have weakened the older structures of hierarchy and social inequality, caste prejudice continues to persist (see Jodhka 2000, 2002, 2004). More important than caste is perhaps the question of gender. Even though the Sikh religion provides useful resources for fighting against gender-based divisions and disabilities, such resources have not been used effectively to ‘reform’ the patriarchal culture of the community. The near obsession with mobility has also produced its ‘side-effects’, one of which is excessive consumerism and a desperation for going abroad. While such ills are often reported in popular media, we do not have much empirical research available on these issues. Like other religious communities, development related aspects of religion continued to be blind spots in the literature on Sikhism.

It is not only in the social sciences that the questions of development have been of marginal concern, in the social and political discourses also — from within and without — they have remained on the periphery. Much of the minority politics of the Sikhs in India during the post-Independence period has been identity-centric. The movement for Punjabi Suba, a Sikh majority province during the 1960s, and the Khalistan movement during 1980s and early 1990s, were both motivated by concerns for maintaining and promoting a separate Sikh identity. Though some of the demands articulated by the leadership during these movements had a development dimension, their effect was certainly not developmental. Moreover, these demands invariably reflected the aspirations of the more dominant sections within the community and showed little concern for those on the margins. Questions such as gender, environment, health, or even caste exclusion have not yet found a place in the mainstream community discourse of the Sikhs.
**APPENDIX: Sikh Population in Different States of India (2001)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Sikh Population</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>India</strong></td>
<td>1,92,15,730 (1.9)</td>
<td>1,41,06,481 (73.41)</td>
<td>5,109,249 (26.59)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>1,45,92,387 (59.90)</td>
<td>1,15,67,437 (79.27)</td>
<td>30,24,950 (20.73)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>11,70,662 (5.53)</td>
<td>8,84,969 (75.59)</td>
<td>2,85,693 (24.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>8,18,420 (1.44)</td>
<td>6,70,754 (81.95)</td>
<td>1,47,666 (18.05)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>6,78,059 (0.40)</td>
<td>4,60,605 (67.92)</td>
<td>2,17,454 (32.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>5,55,602 (4.01)</td>
<td>22,174 (3.99)</td>
<td>5,33,428 (96.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>2,15,337 (0.22)</td>
<td>29,611 (13.75)</td>
<td>1,85,726 (86.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttaranchal</td>
<td>2,12,025 (2.49)</td>
<td>1,58,090 (74.56)</td>
<td>53,935 (25.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>2,07,154 (2.04)</td>
<td>1,11,603 (53.87)</td>
<td>95,551 (46.13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>1,50,772 (0.24)</td>
<td>57,061 (37.84)</td>
<td>93,711 (62.16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chandigarh</td>
<td>1,45,175 (16.11)</td>
<td>18,076 (12.45)</td>
<td>1,27,099 (87.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>83,358 (0.30)</td>
<td>11,544 (13.84)</td>
<td>71,814 (86.16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>72,355 (1.2)</td>
<td>51,338 (70.97)</td>
<td>21,017 (29.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chhattisgarh</td>
<td>69,621 (0.33)</td>
<td>10,420 (14.96)</td>
<td>59,201 (85.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>66,391 (0.08)</td>
<td>10,758 (16.20)</td>
<td>55,633 (83.80)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>45,587 (0.08)</td>
<td>5,941 (13.03)</td>
<td>39,646 (86.97)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>30,998 (0.04)</td>
<td>5,413 (17.46)</td>
<td>25,585 (82.54)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>22,519 (0.08)</td>
<td>7,634 (33.90)</td>
<td>14,885 (66.10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>20,780 (0.02)</td>
<td>8,037 (38.67)</td>
<td>12,743 (61.33)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>17,492 (0.04)</td>
<td>2,092 (11.95)</td>
<td>15,400 (88.05)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>15,326 (0.02)</td>
<td>2,850 (18.59)</td>
<td>12,476 (81.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>9,545 (0.01)</td>
<td>2,338 (24.49)</td>
<td>7,207 (75.51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Appendix Continued)
## Appendix Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Sikh Population</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>3,110 (0.13)</td>
<td>876 (28.16)</td>
<td>2,234 (71.84)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>2,762 (0.09)</td>
<td>1,504 (54.45)</td>
<td>1,258 (45.55)</td>
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<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>1,865 (0.16)</td>
<td>864 (46.32)</td>
<td>1,001 (53.68)</td>
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<td>Manipur</td>
<td>1,653 (0.07)</td>
<td>843 (50.99)</td>
<td>810 (49.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andaman &amp; Nicobar Islands</td>
<td>1,587 (0.44)</td>
<td>825 (51.98)</td>
<td>762 (48.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>1,182 (0.03)</td>
<td>613 (51.86)</td>
<td>569 (48.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikkim</td>
<td>1,176 (0.21)</td>
<td>1,084 (92.17)</td>
<td>92 (07.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>1,152 (0.05)</td>
<td>615 (53.38)</td>
<td>537 (46.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goa</td>
<td>970 (0.07)</td>
<td>156 (16.08)</td>
<td>814 (83.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>326 (0.03)</td>
<td>192 (58.89)</td>
<td>134 (41.11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daman &amp; Diu</td>
<td>145 (0.09)</td>
<td>78 (53.79)</td>
<td>67 (46.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dadra &amp; Nagar Haveli</td>
<td>123 (0.05)</td>
<td>66 (53.65)</td>
<td>57 (46.35)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pondicherry</td>
<td>108 (0.01)</td>
<td>20 (18.51)</td>
<td>88 (81.49)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lakshadweep</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6 (100.00)</td>
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</table>

References


The Contemporary Muslim Situation in India: A Long-Term View

Javeed Alam

A deep change has begun to crystallise among the Muslim communities of India in the recent period. Since the submission of the Sachar Committee Report (SCR) in December 2006 a rather discernible unifying thread, of a positive kind, is beginning to shape the articulation of political demands among Indian Muslims. Much of what is being talked about can be summarised as the politics of inclusion as citizens (for the sake of convenience, we can refer to it as citizen politics). A pronounced characteristic of citizen politics is that it is resistant to discrimination and is marked by a push towards an egalitarian social ethos. Citizenship is, after all, at the very least, concerned with entrenched equal rights for all and becomes, therefore, facilitative of egalitarian living. This follows from the understanding that a citizen is, ideally speaking, constituted without reference to anything that attaches itself to a person as a cultural (specifically in case of India, ritual status) inheritance. Therefore, it needs to be noted that citizen politics can be conducted only within a secular framework.

Democratic politics in the last 15–20 years has so reshaped the issues at hand that all those communities which had been left behind or strongly felt so are today at the forefront of struggles for a more egalitarian social order. Democracy in India, therefore, has primarily become — over and above the many other definitions that mark out its terrain — the politics to which the governed take recourse to gain a voice and a foothold, some semblance of status, a measure of actual power and so on. Apart from the modern proletariat, the category of the governed in India is largely made up of the Dalits and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and women from these groups. It overlaps, more or less, with all those groups who were direct
producers in the pre-capitalist economy. We must remember that among these producer groups women also played a very important role, both in household production and in agriculture. Their work was, therefore, valuable in contributing to family welfare and to the overall economy. Actually, in the context of the level of development of productive forces, their work was highly skilled and comparable to those of men in most respects. This fact is important because in the present-day battle of the oppressed for equality, the leadership of these oppressed communities, including among the Muslims, has systematically excluded women from the struggle for equality and rights. This is an infirmity in the continuing expansion of democracy in India which needs to be kept in mind.

This broadly sets the terrain for the political battle for bourgeois equality, being waged now by all the oppressed communities. This battle has two aspects. There is on the one hand formal constitutional equality. This is a matter of declaration — you simply declare everyone to be equal. To that extent it is also passive, in the sense that it does not necessarily change the conditions. There is on the other hand a struggle for recognition. This is an active component of the process because it is based on reciprocity, that is, in the process of recognising we, at least, remove the opposition between the self and the other as something necessarily present or, maximally, make the other constitutive of our own self. Together these constitute an egalitarian society, notwithstanding all the materially based inequalities that may continue to persist. Therefore, there is nothing pejorative about referring to this as the politics of bourgeois equality.¹

In the last 20 years Muslim communities have increasingly joined this politics. As this process has gone on, an interesting development has taken place among the Muslims. Oppressed communities from among the Muslims who have joined this battle for bourgeois equality, have moved away from the elites of their community who had traditionally provided leadership to them. There has been a pronounced split between the ordinary Muslim masses and the established gentry. Socially oppressed Muslim communities have sought alliances with those who are akin to them in terms of work and leisure. They have been supporting, therefore, different political parties that represent the oppressed and this is particularly the case in the Indo-Gangetic belt. (As an aside, this has been an important

¹For a detailed discussion on these issues see Alam (2004).
cause for the decline of the Congress party). With the SCR new churnings are now beginning to take place, but how they will change political equations on the ground, it is too early to tell. Therefore, politics among the Muslim communities cannot be discussed without reference to what is happening among similar communities in other religions. This is of quite some importance in avoiding the absolutisation of community politics. This is the good that democracy has done for India, whatever the infirmities of such a politics may be.

There is something curious about the social churning and the kind of politics that has thus taken shape. In the case of most such communities, it was a dramatic moment which brought this new politics into the open as a discernible pattern. I do not mean to suggest that a dramatic event caused this to happen. What does happen is that a long-term secular trend (a development in the making), with all its currents and diverse propensities, come together and crystallise as a unified politics. In other words, the dramatic moment acts as a catalyst. In the case of the OBCs, therefore, it was not just the announcement of the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report in 1990, important though it was in itself. What made it a dramatic moment was the kind of reaction it provoked and the expressions those took — the long period of vandalism indulged in by the upper-caste youth who held society to ransom. And all of this took place with the shrill support of mass media and the backing of the bureaucracy. It polarised society into two warring camps. It was also the moment that created a privilegensia, marked by the decomposition and fragmentation of the consciousness of the middle class of the upper castes and their subsequent gravitation into the militant Hindu right-wing as a counter to the assertion of the oppressed.

Something similar happened in the case of the Muslims in India. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement had left the Muslims feeling rather bewildered, a feeling that was made worse after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, but that is another story. The killings, mayhem and anarchy that followed in the wake of L.K. Advani’s ‘rath yatra’, culminating in the massacre that followed the demolition of the mosque, was something India had never seen since after the Partition. Meanwhile, something of importance had changed as well, which should be noted. From this moment on, riots in the conventional sense ceased to take place in India. What came in their place were pogrom-like killings and cold-blooded massacres that reached their climax in Gujarat. To refer to these as riots, as many still do, is to surrender to
the discursive strategy of Hindutva ideologues, and become complicit in the making of a false and deceptive public perception of the current situation. The mass killings and the virulent propaganda conducted against the Muslims was a treacherous presence for the nation’s integrity and created a situation where Muslims had started to wonder if they were at all considered part of India’s citizenry.

Paradoxically, it was this moment that brought about a radical change in orientation and disposition among Muslims towards the Indian nation and politics within it. A curious feature of this change is that it does not seem to be the culmination of long-term trends or the result of any structural change but was the product of an exemplary act. V.P. Singh giving up power and losing his prime ministership to protect the Babri Masjid became, in the eyes of Indian Muslims, an act of sacrifice, of crucifixion. The memory of this act still operates in an exemplifying fashion and Muslims continue to feel a sense of wonder about Singh’s actions. The change, therefore, was sudden and had a dramatic impact. Muslims had by then come to accept that in the power games that are played in electoral politics, communities, and more specifically Muslims, will only be a detail in the much larger calculations for gaining power. Everybody, including the Janata Party in 1977, had used them only to gain power. It is only V.P. Singh then, standing as a lonely figure, who, within these inevitable power games, abdicated power to preserve the Muslim community’s honour and dignity. He made them believe that with him they could stand tall with dignity and pride as an inalienable part of the ‘nation’. This development took place in the background of the Mandal movement and led to the identification between this brand of politics and the shift within the Muslim community’s political stand.

One could quite conceivably argue that this change had been in the making for a much longer time, a process that was prompted by many factors. While this may well be true, there is little by way of evidence, direct or indirect, for anything to be said with confidence. All one can say is that if this were the case then V.P. Singh’s exemplary act worked as a catalyst, a precipitator. Whatever be the extent of validity of this perceptual assessment, what seems significant is that within the framework of dispositions that people have, this event brought about an important alteration in the way these were aligned. Questions of security, carefully fostered by the Congress party, got pushed back and the concern with dignity (and honour) attained relative ascendance. On questions of life, limb and property, though
fearful of future prospects, they seem to have learnt not to treat these as the only markers of their public lives.²

All of this brought a positive pan-Indian dimension to Muslim politics. In my travels from Shimla to Hyderabad to Calcutta and many other places, everywhere the tone and flavour of what the Muslims were discussing and debating was the same: how best they could align with the new secular trends and formations that were emerging in different parts of the country. The rapid spread of Hindutva ideology and the menacing marches up and down the country of Sadhu’s armed with *trishuls* added urgency to this search for new secular allies. The all-India dimension, which also took shape then, is crystallising now finally, with the dissemination of the findings of the SCR.

Earlier, what is now called Muslim politics was region specific, in the sense that there were distinct regional patterns. What I mean by region-specific pertains to the absence of any positive pan-Indian dimension; that is, a unifying democratic strand informing political debates among Muslims or the demands made by them in the different regions of India. Talk of Muslim politics in India was, to that extent, an over-generalisation and all such exercises at labelling are devoid of real content. Regional specificity did not die out with V.P. Singh’s exemplary act either, it remained a parallel current. Now with the SCR these will not die out still. All region-specific currents will remain but will be subsumed under a larger citizen politics.

The politics of Muslims in Hyderabad or the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh, for instance, had little to do with what existed in Malabar or the northern parts of Kerala. Likewise, what prevailed in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar had little in common with the south. Bengal had its own pattern. If we were to look at the demands around which Muslim politics was played out, we thus find very little common ground. Muslims in each region had, and still have, their own specific problems and the articulation of these gave the politics of these regions a distinct flavour. Also, there was very little actual contact between Muslim leaders in these regions, although they all knew each other and sympathised with their politics.

The region-specific nature of Muslim politics is presumably rooted in the nature of the presence of Muslims, as minorities in the various linguistic–cultural communities of India. To put it differently,

² Many of these issues have been discussed in Alam (2001).
Muslims exist everywhere as the minority components of the different nationalities (a term that is deeply suspect and whose use is disfavoured) of India. There are two sides to this difference. One, Muslims, both before and after Independence, as a people, did not get culturally integrated within their nationality groups. While this subject is outside the scope of the present discussion it is important nonetheless to note that this hindered the unification of different nationalities in India. The other aspect has to do with the very different nature of relations the Muslim minority has with the larger nationality of which it is a part. The nature of relations of Bengali Muslims with Bengali Hindus, as compared to Muslims in Kerala or Tamil Nadu or those in Uttar Pradesh is bound to give rise to different regional flavours in Muslims politics.

Some of these region-specific formations have been political parties of a communal nature. Most prominent among these are the Muslim League in Kerala and the Majlis-e-Ittahadul Muslimeen in the Hyderabad, and, on a smaller scale, the Muslim League in Tamil Nadu, which have become the main electoral voice of Muslims in these states. Each of these communal parties possess distinct histories, contexts and patterns of growth. Surprisingly, Muslim communal formations thrive in those regions where Hindu communalism does not have a strong presence, even though it is generally thought that one form of communalism reinforces another. Similarly, wherever Hindutva forces are strong and have been in power, there are virtually no organised Muslim communal parties. This does not mean, however, that there is no Muslim communal consciousness in these regions. On the contrary, in the pre-Independence period these were the regions where the separatist politics of the Muslim League was the strongest. In fact this may be the reason for the absence of Muslim communal parties today — a defensive fear of being linked to that brand of politics again. This is not to suggest that one kind of communalism does not reinforce another — it does, but the process is more complex. One can perhaps study this process of reinforcement by looking at, for instance, how the Indian government’s systematic anti-woman stand

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3 For Hyderabad, see Alam (1996). For an earlier period see Khan (1971).
4 As far as I am aware, there is no study of Muslim communalism or of the Muslim League in Kerala or Tamil Nadu. Not being an expert on communalism, I may well be wrong.
5 See Hasan (1991); also Spear (1967).
in the Shah Bano case worked in favour of Hindutva by giving a new voice to the most hidebound sections of the Muslim community.

Nevertheless, Muslim communalism is very different from the militant Hindu right-wing. Unlike Hindutva, as manifested in the different organisations which go together as the Sangh Parivar, Muslim communalism has neither a single, all-India ideology nor a monolithic organisation guided and led by something like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). It is not only region specific but also scattered and without any identifiable foundations. It is based, on the one hand, on resentments, grievances and apprehensions and, on the other, on vague hopes and aspirations of getting a better deal from the government.

Having discussed Muslim communalism and the nature of the Muslim communal consciousness, it is worth noting also that their spread is not as extensive as their numerical presence in the different regions of the country. Moreover, there has been some ambivalence, if not a contradiction, in the Muslim consciousness since the beginning of Ram Janmabhoomi and Babri Masjid controversy. With the growth of the Sangh Parivar organisations and the BJP’s stints in power, Muslim political organisations, including communal ones like the Majlis in Hyderabad or the League in Kerala, have increasingly taken to making a vocal defense of secularism. There have been any number of ideological statements by Muslim leaders proclaiming secularism as a desirable ideology,6 in addition to making repeated appeals to voters to support the ‘best proven’ secular candidate from their constituencies. Therefore, Muslims are today, unlike earlier, in alignment with different secular forces in the different regions of India. But, on cultural and religious questions, they show an uncanny affinity with Muslim orthodoxy across the world, taking to the streets in protest over the slightest provocation. This hypersensitivity of the Muslim community shows a clear unease with the ongoing process of secularisation. One can cite innumerable instances from reactions to art, cinema, dress and so on to show how strong the resistance can

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6 Abdul Rahim Quereshi, Secretary, Muslim Personal Law Board, has written articles in Urdu arguing in defence of Palestine remaining a secular state because of the sizeable Christian minority that lives there and who should be made to feel secure. This was in the context of the tussle between the Hamas and the Al Fateh following the death of Yasser Arafat.
be to choices that others may make but which appear contradictory to what is considered acceptable to Islamic sensibilities or identity. This is an ambivalence that needs to be studied more closely, both in its theoretical and empirical manifestations.

Alignment with secularism as a political ideology as well as with secular forces has altered the Muslim consciousness, including those who are part of communal formations. There are no shrill communal voices to be heard among Muslim organisations today. These are communal only to the extent of trying to defend the issues and interests that are close to the community. Given this, these groups have become or are becoming more akin to communitarian organisations. This is undoubtedly a welcome development, one that may create more long-term democratic possibilities.

However, alongside this, there has emerged a rather worrisome aspect that may prove to be disastrous for the country as a whole. A small, in fact miniscule, section of the Muslim community has taken to wanton acts of terrorism. And slowly they have also managed to acquire international links. Terrorism among Muslims in India has post-Babri Masjid origins. The first recorded act of Muslim terrorist violence in India (leaving aside the violence in Kashmir, not because Kashmir is not a part of India but, together with the North-East, it has a history of specificities which sets it apart) took place on 6 December 1993, to the day one year after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. And it was done with crude bombs placed in some trains leaving from Hyderabad. While some exploded, most did not because this was the job of young men who had hurriedly learnt to make bombs to observe the mosque’s barsi (yearly celebration of the death of a near one). It is with this act that trans-border terrorists came to know that there was a potential terrorist constituency in India which could be tapped into. After this terrorism grew and by now there exist many modules in the country with clear trans-border links. Prior to this there had been no evidence that any Indian Muslim could be recruited by any international network. Nonetheless, today it is a menace to both Muslims and the country at large, irrespective of its origins, which are, however, not unimportant because they give you the first causal links.

Let us return now to a question that concerns the greater majority of all Muslims and that has a direct link with what has been referred to earlier as the regional specificity of Muslim politics. There has been one factor underlying this specificity and its spread that
has imparted to the Muslim consciousness a recognisable common feature and kept them away from different democratic currents in Indian politics. This relates to the history and sociology of riots since the early 1960s, and their increasing incidence since the 1980s. This has been, I think, the source of some kind of pan-Indian unification of Muslim communities. Whatever the differences between Muslims belonging to individual linguistic–cultural communities and within these on the basis of occupations and skills, a larger and common consciousness born out of similar experiences has emerged. It is of a negative kind, of being outsiders who lack bonds of belonging with other communities in the country. To put it in another way, Muslims have been feeling like the unwanted other in Indian society. This had gone on from the 1960s till, what I have above termed as V.P. Singh’s exemplary act of sacrifice for the sake Muslims. This thesis, I admit, is controversial and not easy to establish conclusively, but I shall stick my neck out and try to argue it nonetheless.

Anthropologically-inclined political analysts have been arguing for a long time that there is no such thing as a Muslim community in India, because they are scattered across numerous and diverse ethno-cultural and linguistic regions in the country and because, at a micro level, the surrounding Hindu ethos has made imperceptible yet deep inroads among Muslims. There are three kinds of works which emphasise, directly or inferentially, the multi-community nature of the Muslim population of India. One is due to the survival, as strong and visible vestiges, of living habits, thinking patterns and worshipping styles among Muslims from times before their conversion to Islam. Second, there is the view that points to the deep impact on caste and ritual practices of the surrounding Hindu milieu have had on Muslims, resulting in perceptible differences in the outlook and behaviour among them even across short physical distances. There is a third view which holds that this is an implication and consequence of being embedded in the larger social structures and the demographic features of Indian society.

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7 For this viewpoint see Mujeeb (1967), especially the ‘Introduction’.
8 For an elucidation of this viewpoint see Ahmed (1973).
9 For studies around this theme see Imam (1975). There are many more works on these themes but the ones noted above best represent such viewpoints. For an interesting historical overview see also Spear (1967).
I strongly believe that there is a certain naïveté surrounding such an application of anthropological categories, which are notoriously oblivious of the underlying political process. This is true not only of the anthropological approach to studying the Muslim problem in India but also with regard to various Adivasi communities undergoing processes of social and/or political unification. I would argue, on the contrary, that ethnic and other diversities, linguistic differences and social differentiation, can coexist with growing political unification and an emergent sense of ‘community’.

Now this may appear to be an affront to anthropology, but I would argue that what provides the basic impetus to the political unification of Muslims around a common discourse, of equal significance to them wherever they may be located in India, is the regularity with which riots take place and a pervasive perception among them of being discriminated against and a feeling of being unwanted in Indian society. This is not to say that the socio-political problems faced by Muslims or the demands they raise in Kerala or in Andhra Pradesh, are identical — that this is not the case has been argued earlier. However, these differences tend to get subordinated to the overwhelmingly brutal fact of riots and the growing feeling of being discriminated against. Common suffering in communal riots brings Muslims together just as economic strangulation unites the tribals, or the evils of untouchability unites Dalits, or gender humiliation

10 There is another debate on this issue within the Marxist tradition. On this see Habib (1976) where he assumes, rightly I think but for reasons I may disagree with, that something of a pan-Indian community has already begun to take shape. Suneet Chopra (1976), in a rejoinder written using the same title, feels that the heterogeneity of factors will not allow such a sense of community to emerge.

11 I have developed an elaborate argument through empirical reasoning on this theme by looking at the Jharkhand Adivasis. See Alam (1989). While the tribals have experienced trans-ethnic unification and refer to themselves politically as Jharkhandis, anthropological scholarship on the region has kept pointing to the sharp differences among the Mundas and the Oraons and Santhals and Hos and what not. These differences still remain when it comes to kinship rituals or festivals or marriages but it will be absurd not to recognise them as one people, politically. I do not mean to suggest that the Muslim case is identical or, even, similar. Far from it. I am only buttressing the theoretical possibility of a certain process in the presence of factors X, Y and Z and another set of factors like Xi Yii & Ziii — sharply differing anthropological features.

unites women — all in common political action and generating a strong sense of bonding. But there is one important difference here. Communal carnage and butchery are much more prominent news items. Wherever these occur, they immediately become part of the Muslim consciousness everywhere. The fact of carrying a Muslim name is to involuntarily share in this consciousness. Wherever I have travelled in India since the late 1970s, among the first questions Muslims have asked me are: ‘Are there riots in your area?’, ‘How safe are Muslims there?’, ‘Do they get jobs?’.

It is this shared perception that has set in motion a process of unification among Muslims and has given rise to an incipient sense of being a pan-Indian community. However, the absence of organisational uniformity and a common ideological foundation to Muslim (communal) politics (in contrast to the way Hindutva provides a common cementing force for Hindu communal forces all over the country) has substantially hampered this process. To whatever extent this happened so far it is because of a negative development — the rendering of Indian Muslims as a people as the ‘Other’ of the nation. Nonetheless, this circumstance has left open the possibility of radical democratic interventions and the making of a new politics.13

This possibility is now taking shape. What started with V.P. Singh is now crystallising with the discussions and movements that have emerged around the SCR. A uniform thread of a democratic kind is fast becoming visible across different regions of the country. I call this a positive development and have argued that it is so because it represents citizen politics. This citizen politics has three important values, viz., equality, recognition and equal rights, and a set of demands like jobs, income, education, health, housing, etc. These are precisely the questions that have come to the forefront of Muslim politics. These values and issues, whether with Dalits, OBCs or Muslims, are the stuff of secular politics and offer a common basis to the politics of the oppressed.

One important component of secular politics, which is often not discussed, has to do with everyday life. The daily rhythms of the mundane lives we lead come to the fore. It does not mean that the sacred or the substantive, in terms of beliefs or commitments, become unimportant, rather that it no longer occupies as visible a position in the political life of the ordinary people. Instead, issues of

13For very different kind of discussion on the dialectics of Muslim orientations in India see Hasan (1988).
everyday life receive attention. This is what happened in Europe in the nineteenth century, playing a rather decisive role in the secularisation of politics and, eventually, of society. I do not mean to suggest that there is going to be a replay of what happened in Europe. This is only to highlight the importance of this development. By what route the secular will come to become a publicly acknowledged feature of our society is not going to be easy to predict. What should be taken note of, however, is the emergence of secular themes in the politics of the oppressed, even as we recognise that this has not yet stabilised and there can be reversals given the prominent possibility of a right-wing reaction.

In this context, some of the issues raised by the SCR will actually serve to strengthen this trend. I do not intend to discuss the report here because it has been quite extensively written about already.14 The Report has established that the socio-economic condition of Muslim communities in India is abysmally low, just above that of the Dalits and perhaps worse off than the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The question of the under-representation of Muslims in the services and allied areas, their lagging behind in education, having poor access to health facilities and so on have been equally well established, not that any of this is a startling revelation. Many of us who have been using the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) survey data on class formation within different communities have written on lines quite similar to what the Sachar Committee has come to show. What puts the findings of this committee on an altogether different footing is not just its thoroughness, but also the official stamp that it carries.15

What should be highlighted is the backwardness of those areas where Muslim populations (territorially) have a sizeable presence. This relates to the availability of housing, tap water, schools, medical facilities, roads — what the SCR has called ‘infrastructural variables’. The access of Muslim children to Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is also low and so is its overall coverage. There are, according to 2001 Census, 11 districts where the Muslim population is above 50 per cent and 38 districts where it is above 25 per cent — approximately a third of the Muslim population lives in these areas.

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14 For a very useful discussion, see the ‘Symposium On Sachar Committee Report’ in the Economic and Political Weekly, 10–16 March 2007, comprising five articles.

15 For an earlier situation, especially in relation to the Gopal Singh Report, see, among others, Varadarajan (1997).
There are another 182 districts where the Muslim population is between 10 to 25 per cent and about 47 per cent of Muslims live in these areas. Apart from these districts, there are a large number of small and medium-sized towns with a sizeable Muslim population. All these areas are poorly provided with urban infrastructure and other civic amenities. Some may argue, as has been the case, that the under-representation of Muslims in the services and their unemployment may be due to the educational and social backwardness of the community. However, the extent of this under-representation cannot be accounted by the degree of backwardness. How does one account for the sheer absence of physical infrastructure? The short answer can only be one: Muslim areas are being deliberately ignored in the state provision of public services of all kinds. With regard to physical development, densely populated Muslim areas are similar in many ways to tribal belts or village areas where Dalits reside. A very high degree of deliberate neglect, therefore, becomes undeniable.

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16 It is also noted in the SCR that many areas of Muslim concentration have been designated by banks as ‘red zones’ or negative geographic zones, which means that the banks are instructed to be very cautious in granting loans here. What makes the banks declare these areas as not creditworthy? There is no evidence, I am told by those well-informed, of greater non-recoverability of loans from Muslims. In fact my experience of work in rural areas tells me that the vulnerable are very afraid of not abiding by contractual obligations whether with the official or non-official agencies. Given their social location it is not easy for them to defy rules, unlike the powerful who get away with a lot in a rule deficit society like ours.

17 Indicators of development here are of an objective, quantitative kind so the matter of neglect or discrimination is also qualitatively of a different order. The fact is that in the selection of a candidate for a job, a subjective element of one sort or another is involved. This requires not just a fair assessment of skills or merit but also prejudice, bias or simply the lack of sensitivity, ‘as in the case of women’, even if we were to write off hostility. There cannot be any subjectivity when it comes to choosing an alignment for a road or for providing a doctor or a teacher to a primary health centre or a school and such other things. When such is the case it is deliberate and intentional on the part of decision-makers and ultimately reflects on the nature of the state. During the terrorist blast in Malegaon, a town of a few lakhs with a majority of Muslim population, there was not a single government hospital available. We are told that the chief minister of the state, blissful in his ignorance, was also shocked when he came to know of this.
This has led many people quite innocently, but a section of the communal-minded leadership among the Muslims as well, to blame the Indian state. The latter assert that all deprivation and poverty among the Muslims is the making of the Indian state. This view is completely erroneous. The state enters into this in a different way, as we will soon see. It did not create poverty among the Muslims like it did among the tribal communities through massive displacements. To understand the present plight of ordinary Muslims in India it is essential to take an analytical look at poverty among them. We need to study how conditions left behind by the pre-colonial feudal rulers were unimpacted by the working of the colonial economy. In other words, Indian poverty including among the Muslims, is a creation of a complex combination of factors related to feudalism and colonialism.

Historically, the Muslim gentry and the ruling classes from among them have never treated the Muslim masses any better or differently than their other subjects. All people were equally the beasts of burden, unworthy of respect or dignity in the eyes of the rulers. It is important to remember the limits to the brotherhood of faith in conditions of feudal rule — rabble-rousers among the leaders of Muslims as well as the Hindutva chauvinists need to be reminded of this. Hindutva chauvinists are being utterly dishonest in harping on the claim that ordinary Muslims have been a favoured community because of a long period of Muslim rule. Feudal self-aggrandisation is not a favour one does to another, the Muslim masses being no exception. Also there is no evidence to prove that in areas ruled by Muslim kings the condition of the Muslim masses, including the peasantry among them, was any better. Take Telangana for instance, which was, till quite recently (1948) ruled by the Nizams. If anything, the conditions of the peasants here, including Muslim peasants, is worse than in other parts of southern India. Same is the case with Marathwada, also ruled by the Nizams. There was of course a Muslim gentry, which will be discussed a little later. The evidence from Uttar Pradesh or Bihar, where vast feudal estates existed under Muslim landlords, does not show that the condition of Muslim peasants was any better there than where Muslim peasants were under the Hindu feudal lords. Once the British had established a foothold in India in 1757 after the Battle of Plassey, they found that the condition of Muslim peasants was no better than that of Hindus (Grant 1962). The condition of a few retainers here or there is no evidence of any kind, and much the same
can be said of handicraftsmen or those others engaged in secondary household production.18

Colonialism impacted on this situation in many ways but two in particular were significant, in my view, in creating the poverty that India inherited after Independence. The impoverishment of the peasantry was a result of these. This needs some elaboration because to simply say that there is no evidence that the Muslim peasants were not any worse off is not enough.

By the time the earliest British conquests of India were completed, the revenue policy of the new colonial regime was well in place. It made for, among others, three major changes in the revenue policy of the Mughals as perfected by Raja Todar Mal (which itself was built on the one created by Alauddin Khilji). Most drastically, the English colonial administration changed the basis of levying revenue from the land cultivated to the land owned; that is, under the Mughal system if the peasant had say 100 acres but cultivated only 50, revenue was calculated only for those 50 acres, whereas in the colonial system it would be calculated for the entire 100 acres owned. Second, under the pre-colonial system, revenue was collected after the crop was harvested, but the British changed that to the financial year which meant that it was collected before the crop was harvested and the peasant was thus forced to borrow money to pay the revenue (Bagchi 1983; see also Habib 1975).

Together these two measures not only doubled the amount of revenue levied but also added to the interest burden on the peasant because he was now forced to borrow money to pay the revenue. Moreover, the Mughal state made concessions in case of crop failure, but such measures were discontinued by the British. All this added enormously to the revenue burden on the peasant; it became back-breaking. Additionally, earlier, part of the revenue collected used

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18 Dedicated champion of Muslim rights and well being, Iqbal A. Ansari, is one of the few men who explicitly acknowledges this fact. He writes,

The facts are that the overwhelming majority of the present day Muslims of India are of the indigenous origin and they did not have any share in power even during Medieval India, and they did not undergo any socio-economic upward mobility by the virtue of their conversion to Islam. Their present backwardness can be traced to their occupational structure and social status that has remained unchanged during the period of about a thousand years (1997).
to be reinvested in land improvement and in other welfare measures taken by the state for society. The British on the other hand used the entire revenue either to finance further conquest of India or the money was repatriated to Britain (Bagchi 1976a, 1983).

The result of this was the impoverishment of the entire peasantry and, we must remember, the worst famine India had experienced till then. It affected each and every community equally, depending only on who inhabited which area. Landlessness also followed for the first time on a very large scale, having hitherto been a negligible feature. This was also caused by a drastic change introduced by the British in their land policy in India. In pre-British times there existed a long-established convention, invariably followed, that a non-peasant would not be allowed to alienate the land of a peasant; only a peasant could acquire the land of another peasant. All this changed with the British. Anyone was free to buy land, as one would any other commodity. With rising indebtedness large amounts of land passed into the hand of money lenders and traders who were no longer barred by the state from buying agricultural land. Land became a commodity, which earlier it was not.

There is no evidence to suggest that these changes in revenue policy impacted different communities differently. Historical research has not shown any such tendency anywhere in India. In the absence of such data, it is untenable to argue that the British treated Muslim peasants differently during the colonial period.

What affected the different communities differently later on, after the inauguration of Industrial Revolution in Britain, was the process of de-industrialisation, which took place in India on a massive scale. India had a vast pre-modern manufacturing sector, so much so that Akbar had established a department called *Mahkam e Kharkhana* (Department for Factories). It is well known that India had a vast and flourishing textile sector. There was also large-scale manufacturing of guns and armaments and, therefore, there existed a spread of a number of foundries. Manufacture of saltpeter was also quite extensive. Guilds of various kinds existed for the manufacture of articles required by the courts and the numerous aristocrats and the gentry. All these were more or less completely destroyed by the forced imports of British industrial manufactured goods (Bagchi 1976b). It is true that in the caste order, and under its influence, different communities specialised in the production of different kinds of manufacture, including Muslims in some sectors. But it was not the case at that time
that Muslims were employed in very large numbers in any of these factories. There is no study to show that Muslims were especially badly affected. They, with the others, created a very large pool of unemployed. All these people were eventually thrown on to agriculture, further impoverishing it and increasing the burden on peasants.

At this point I wish to make a small digression. In our analysis of poverty (and deprivation), its structure, in a conceptual sense, is generally under-theorised. There is need to pay greater attention to the structure of poverty. The dynamics of what happens at this level go much deeper and the remedial actions therefore should attempt to alter the deeper forces emanating from the structure. The need to pay greater attention to this has yet another angle. We can then avoid a totalising view of the community and opt for a disaggregated discursive strategy in discussing the problem. A politics so conceived will not allow communitarian concerns from becoming communal. We should remind ourselves that communalism is a result of the interventions from above, by the powerful within a community. It is after all a power relation, no matter which way you tune its ideology. The Muslim League before Partition and Hindutva now are symbolic of the establishing of control by hegemonic elements in a community over the larger group’s politics, using its name. Love of Ram could never become hatred of the other without such an intervention from above.

Muslim poverty, therefore, is very much a result of the many intersections of feudalism and the depredations and predatory practices of the British colonial rule. India after Independence inherited this situation. The Indian state is in no way responsible for Muslim poverty, as has been alleged by communal leaders out to make a quick political out of the findings of the SCR.¹⁹ The state in India is responsible for the manner in which it has treated poverty in general and in being blind and insensitive to the continued under-representation of Muslims in the services and other public bodies. In fact, in a number of sensitive areas of employment there has been a declining trend, even evidence

¹⁹There is nothing written on these lines by anyone. But in a number of conventions of Muslims that I had a chance to attend, this has not been an unusual refrain. One leader went on to shame Indian democracy, calling the condition of Muslims a black spot on democracy in India. He had to be gently reminded that it is entirely because of democracy in India that something like the Sachar Report becomes possible and much else that is happening.
of secret directives from certain ministries to be careful in recruiting the Muslims. Here the Indian state is culpable and ought to be held accountable.

In order to understand the dilemma facing Muslims, it is important to be perceptive of the fault lines that have created certain insensivities and cruelties in Indian society. Muslims are not the only people to have suffered neglect. Dalits also have been the victims of hostile neglect, routine violence and sporadic killings. Their presence is seen by many social groups to be like that of a deadly virus that should be immediately removed or else it may cause fatal contaminations. It is because sustained reservations for them, over an extended period of time, that ordinary people from among the Dalits have produced a steady stream into the middle classes and which in turn has provided a reserve of energy to continue their protracted struggle. And yet they remain at the bottom of the heap of the unwanted ‘Other’ in Indian society. In one sense the Adivasis have in fact suffered the most. They are the most numerous victims of the massive displacement caused by developmental processes and the unnecessary gigantisms that have become a part of it. Compensation and rehabilitation has been so pathetic that Roy Burman once coined the phrase, ‘displacement–compensation–displacement continuum’, meaning thereby that you so rehabilitate people that they soon get alienated both from land and income and remain poor.

There is an explanation for why this has been the case, which may well be a speculation but an enriching one nonetheless. Caste society produces a consciousness that has deep contempt, often unconsciously, for those located lower down the order — all the poor, oppressed and disregarded folk belong here. It does not cause anyone any pain if they remain as they have been in the past even in future. Given this, there cannot be any need for urgent change. This consciousness will always try to prove that things are better even when there has not been even the slightest improvement. How else can we explain the pronounced efficiency of the same personnel who

20 There are two kinds of debates going on today without the policy-makers trying to link them or at least to see if there is any connection between the figures being cited. I am referring to the figures about poverty and those about malnutrition. The figures about undernourished children, at 47 per cent plus, are approximately two times what the Planning Commission has given for poverty. Now the question is also a methodological one, who
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put back to normal infrastructure and other physical assets in the case of natural disasters but fail to distribute food and relief to the poor in the case of a drought or famine? Attitudes to the lowly, to people of minor social status, in a society where caste is historically and almost genetically part of one’s consciousness, are one of utter contempt and condescension. Consciousness is a curious thing, in terms of its structure. If it is prearranged to be prejudiced then in the experience of the ‘Other’ it will always find something to reinforce this prejudice, screening out anything that may negate it. Prejudice always employs gatekeepers, who never allow anything to gatecrash. A consciousness in which caste is a genetic feature is akin but not identical to a consciousness in which patriarchy is the genetic component; you are always nice, it is the other who is of a complaining type. So we find the poor, including the Muslim, always grumbling even though the state is doing so much for them. That is why, I would speculate further, that much of what goes in the name of affirmative action, in fact, has failed to take off the ground. Actually, administrative negligence and failure have their roots, not in this or that technicality or lapse, but in a wider, more deep-rooted contempt for ordinary people.

Going back to colonial history, allow me to highlight something that has become so much a part of Muslim thinking and gives it a certain sensitivity. While the impoverishment of the peasantry, including Muslims, went on, the Muslim gentry and salariat were doing quite well in the services and employment, especially the judiciary. These Muslims did not experience any decline till the mid-1830s, even as a very versatile and eminent elite was emerging from among the Hindu upper castes which would usher in both the Indian renaissance and a Hindu religious revival. But when the decline did set in, it was rapid and steep. It happened with the adoption of, what is famously known as, the McCauley Minute. After a long debate on

deliberate neglect or callousness. If we do not answer this question in terms of poverty, then we are making a very disturbing comment on the culture informing Indian families and their attitudes towards raising children.
the issue of vernacular vs. English education, Lord Macauley won the debate and his position was adopted in 1833–34 as the official language policy for the British empire. In 1837 orders were issued for a shift from Persian, till then the language of administration, to English, for conducting all administration and business. After this the Muslim decline was rapid.21 Since then Muslims hold the government responsible for both their decline and their upward mobility, whichever case applied.

Muslims were proficient in Persian as many Hindus also were. But by the 1830s a sizeable number of Hindus had become proficient in English as well, but Muslims pronouncedly lagged behind. Many writers have said that Muslims resisted English because of their conservatism and Hindus, with their nose tuned to opportunity, took to English and hogged it. I would put it a little differently — when the Hindus learnt Persian and Urdu they did it as a forced necessity, because there were opportunities in doing so. When they had to give up Persian and Urdu and take to English, their instinct told them that they were moving from one foreign setting into another full, perhaps, of opportunities. For Hindus it was a rational choice situation. On the other hand, for Muslims, Urdu and Persian were seen as their own languages and to give them up for English was seen as giving up your mother tongue for a foreign imposition. For the Muslims, therefore, it was not a rational choice situation but an emotional burden they had to decide about, and such situations always result in delays. They could not make up their minds till about 1860s and therefore lagged behind, but after this made very rapid strides once the reasons for these decisions became clear with the intervention of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan at the national level and many regional leaders like Syed Abdul Lateef in Bengal.

Quite apart from small measures of self help, Muslims relied heavily on the state to lift them up. Sir Syed’s advice to them to stay away from the emerging Congress platform was in fact, in my reading, an instruction to not take to politics and confine themselves to making only economic demands. The British read this quite clearly. They conveyed to the Muslim leadership that their demands being non-political could be easily met, whereas the Congress’ demands being

21 The classic work on this issue is W.W. Hunter, *Indian Musalman*, available in many different prints. Some very useful material has recently been reproduced in a reader friendly manner. See Karim (1980) and De (1976).
political could hardly be conceded. So it was better for the Muslims to stay away from the Congress. This became one important aspect of what has come to be known as the divide and rule policy.

Whatever had accrued thus from 1860 to the time of Independence was transferred, barring a region or two in India, to Pakistan. It was the elites among the Muslims who fought for Pakistan and when it materialised they migrated to their realised ‘homeland’ leaving the Muslim masses in India to fend for themselves. Since then, with only minor shifts of an inconsequential nature, the condition of Indian Muslims has remained what is described in the SCR. They will once again have to lean on the government. As a vulnerable community they cannot, barring a small measure of self help like before, overcome the many hurdles that have been created by the economic and social structure, quite apart from the many prejudices and biases embedded within these structures. If the government is not forthcoming, there is a communal leadership waiting to take charge.

I have often in this article spoken of the economic and social backwardness of Indian Muslims and their being located, socio-economically speaking, just above the Dalits and generally below the OBCs. Having said this it must also be emphasised that Muslims taken as a whole are unlike any other backward community. There is no other community in India, or perhaps even elsewhere, with such a large-scale presence of backwardness alongside such a big stratum of people with pronouncedly high level of accomplishment. In the creative fields of art, literature, music, and culture they are second to none in the world; in the intellectual world of science and humanities they stand equal to any other community in India; in the professional world of doctors, lawyers and so on also they have done exceptionally well; same is the case in sports; and the list goes on. Suffice to note here that Muslims are a highly accomplished and successful people. And these accomplishments of Muslims are a visible part of Indian social life, whereas the extent of their backwardness is perhaps only a statistical feature.

These two sides put together — widespread backwardness and high accomplishment — make Muslims a unique and incomparable people, I would argue anywhere in the world. This specificity ought to be recognised by the democratic movement in India. When the Sangh Parivar takes exception to the state pandering to Muslims it is to this section of successful Muslims that they are pointing. It is not easy to say to the communal minded and ignorant that such is the
case. It is going to be, I presume, one of the most delicately fought
tussles for democratic forces in India ever since Independence. Com-
munal chauvinists, led by the RSS and the BJP are going to make a big
issue of the minorityism of secular forces, especially of the ‘pampering’
of Muslims by the Congress Party. Their main contention will
centre around, as whenever the issue of positive discrimination for
Muslims has arisen, the threat they believe this poses to the unity and
oneness of India. Quotas for Muslims will lead to separatism, they
argue, as they always have historically. The Muslim elite has always
had a separatist mentality (whatever the term ‘separatist’ implies in
today’s context); the negative charge that this term carries is what is
important.

Here an issue of much signifi-
cance is involved and needs to be
sorted out carefully. It relates to the nature or character of Muslim
political demands today, as distinct from those made in the days prior
to Independence, starting with the intervention made by Sir Syed
Ahmad Khan in the aftermath of the great rebellion 1857. Much of
what we have seen of Muslim political demands in the last few dec-
dades is concerned with what is entailed in the politics of citizenship
and, therefore, with egalitarianism and rights. A sea change has taken
place in the way Muslims have placed themselves in relation to the
mainstream of India’s political life.

Muslims, in other words, have joined in the politics of empowerment,
egalitarianism and the deepening of democracy. This, as I have
referred to above, is the politics of citizenship rights. Not that other
trends do not exist in Muslim politics, like that of political Islam
or terrorist activity, but the trend mentioned here, it seems to me,
has a decisive edge. There is now a possibility of building alliances
between oppressed communities, which was already happening in
ad hoc ways. Left democratic interventions must help cement these
alliances. It should be obvious that a politics based on communities,
however oppressed, can never become class politics. But if it can,
through democratic alliances of the oppressed, acquire the tone of
radical democracy, then it can come into closer alignment with Left
democratic politics, and this would be an important task for the
radical forces.

It is therefore important to distinguish the nature of Muslim pol-
itics today from that which was dominant in the pre-Independence
era. This is all the more important because the BJP and the Hindutva
brigade is today raising the bogus claim that acting on the recommendations of the SCR will only strengthen separatist trends and weaken national unity. Nothing can be more far fetched, but let us consider this briefly.

This new brand of politics, as should be obvious, is radically different from the pre-Independence trends seen in Muslim politics. From Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to Jinnah and the partition of India, notwithstanding some major differences in their politics of which the implications are many, one feature existed as a common theme. This had to do with the amount of mental energy that went into showing that Muslims were different and their politics had nothing to do with that of the emerging freedom movement. In other words, the effort was to demarcate the Muslim communities as an ally of the British and demand not only a share in power but also weighted reservation, greater than their proportion in the population. All this was viewed as being essential to neutralise the overwhelming preponderance of Hindus. This early form of separatism (keeping the Muslims distinct as a people, though not necessarily with territorial division) persisted in varying forms at different times and was the crux of pre-Independence Muslim politics.

To compare the politics of these two dramatically different times is ludicrous. The change that has taken place by now, both in political content and form, is quite evident and also rather drastic. Except at the surface level, that is, in asking for reservations and quotas and forms of affirmative action, there is nothing in common between the politics of then and now. The surface similarities are only misleading. Therefore, careful attention to details should be paid while constructing our understanding of the current situation. The BJP and Hindutva forces are going to create hell if any attempt is made to implement special schemes for the welfare of Muslims or if the state accedes to the demand for reservations that may be raised by some Muslims. It is here that careful thought is required. Whatever strengthens chauvinism, weakens democracy. And the weakening of democracy is not in the interest of the ordinary people, including the Muslims. So the leadership of the Muslim communities needs to take great care in how they formulate their demands. It should be obvious to them that whatever the nature of the backwardness of Muslims, they have not been marginalised in the country by the state except, perhaps, in Gujarat.
References


Between Identity and Equity: An Agenda for Affirmative Action for Muslims*

Tanweer Fazal

Developmental studies today must per force attend to the issue of social exclusion of hitherto marginal groups — ethnic and religious minorities, women, indigenous groups and populations assigned lower status in an acutely stratified society as ours. This article is located amidst the raging debate over affirmative action, including reservations, for India’s Muslims. For the Muslims of India, both identity and equity are intensely contested concepts that impinge upon political mobilisation as well as policy initiatives. This has received fresh impetus following first, the findings of the Sachar Committee, which have validated the widespread perception of Muslim marginalisation; and second, the emergence of powerful collective voices from amongst the Muslim middle and lower castes. At the heart of the issue is whether Muslims qua Muslims deserve reservation, in which case would the sociologically identified Ashrafs get to be included among the beneficiaries. Or is marginality among Muslims, akin to other communities, primarily a caste/status group experience? And therefore should initiatives for distributive justice, including quotas, be tempered to account for cumulative deprivations of the Ajlafs and Arzals?1 This article persuasively argues for the latter — a formula consistent with Constitutional entitlements, prevailing legal discourse and one that stands the test of political pragmatism.

* An earlier version of this article was published in Contemporary Perspectives: History and Sociology of South Asia 1(2), July–December 2007, pp. 110–29.

1 Ashraf, Ajlaf and Arzal refer to the broad caste categories persisting among the Muslims of South Asia. See p. 235 for further explanation.
The Constitution recognises only three social categories for the purpose of reservation: Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBCs) or Other Backward Classes (OBCs). In operational terms, it is only in the category of OBC that Muslims can avail the benefit of reservations. The Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1950 restricts the benefits accruing to the SC status only to the ‘untouchables’ from the so-called ‘Indic’ religions (see Fazal 2006). ST status, though theoretically open, does not hold much meaning given the miniscule percentage (0.03 per cent, Census of 1991) of those characterised as STs among Muslims. The Constitutional reference to the term ‘backward classes’ finds place in articles 15(4) and 16(4) wherein the state is empowered to make special provisions for SEBCs. However, the definition and identification of the term has defied fixity, giving rise to variegated legal and constitutional ambiguities.

Tracing the trajectory of the concept OBC thus becomes critical. This is attempted here briefly with the help of historical data, through analyses of the Constituent Assembly Debates (1946 to 1949), Supreme Court judgements and reports of the various State and national backward classes’ commissions. This clarification becomes important as we discuss protective discrimination, whether for a section or for all Muslims. This is all the more urgent as the ambiguity surrounding ‘backward classes’ is often made a pretext by a section of the Muslim leadership to argue that there is no constitutional bar on extending the benefits of reservation to religious groups provided the entire community is identified as SEBC under Article 16(4) of the Constitution. Thus, harping on Muslim under-representation, a recent resolution of the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat reiterated its long-stated demand of ‘separate reservation quota of 10 per cent … for the Muslim community which forms a Backward Class under the existing scheme of reservation…’ This claim is disputed by the Muslim backwards who resist any attempt at the ‘bundling of unequals’ together. Thus, reservation for all Muslims is seen by these groups as detrimental to the interest of middle and lower-caste Muslims whose under-representation and deprivation, it is argued, is far greater than the relatively advanced Muslim upper

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2 Resolution of All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat, Markazi Majlis-e-Mushawarat, 10 June 2006.
castes (Ansari 2004). This constitutional ambiguity has prompted at least two state governments, Kerala and Karnataka, to declare their entire Muslim population — minus the creamy layer — as backward. The section titled ‘modes of intervention’ attempts to understand precisely how this was accomplished.

Identifying Muslim OBCs: Who are They?

The term ‘backward classes’ came into use in the British period with a variety of referents and, evidently, without any clearly specified parameters regarding the inclusion and exclusion of groups clubbed as backward. In its early usage, ‘backward classes’ was a blanket category encompassing the underprivileged and marginalised castes, tribes and other backward communities. It can be traced as far back as 1880, when it was deployed to describe a set of groups, called the illiterate or indigent classes, entitled to allowances for study in elementary schools (Galanter 1984: 156). The later phase of British rule saw a tendency towards greater crystallisation in order to avoid conflation of categories. The Starte Committee (1930), delving into the question of nomenclature, recommended that the term ‘depressed classes’ should be used to denote the untouchables, whereas the wider group — including depressed classes, aboriginal and hill tribes, other backward classes (including wandering tribes) — may be designated ‘backward classes’.

In Madras, the term was used to refer to the stratum above the untouchables. The Madras Provincial Backward Classes’ League presented a list of more than a hundred ‘forward non-Brahmin communities’ to the Madras government in 1944 that comprised half of the population of the presidency (ibid.: 159).

Despite the vagueness in colonial usage, the ‘backward classes’ came to denote the under-represented castes or social categories largely in the Hindu social order or the indigenous tribes that followed a variety of faiths. It is important to note that while the social differentiation among the Hindus was taken account of, in the case of Muslims, given the predominant discourse of Muslim backwardness, the community was constructed as a monolith so far as strategies

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3 The ‘Other Backward Classes’ category, distinct from both the untouchables and the tribes, as per the Committee’s estimate included 95 caste groups, whose combined population share stood at 1.041 millions in 1921. See GoI (1930), cited in Galanter (1984: 157).
for affirmative action were considered. This despite the fact that the various Census enumerations in the British period had provided detailed accounts of the presence of descent-based social stratification, including untouchability in its various forms that existed among the followers of Islam in India.

This amorphousness in usage could be observed in the course of Constitution-making too. While Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the Constitution sanctioned affirmative action for the backward classes, the debates in the Constituent Assembly, if at all, exacerbated the imprecision in the definition of the term. We may discern two different treatments. The first sense of the term straddled all sections — untouchables and tribes included — which required preferential treatment. Contra this blanket category, in its second sense, it marked out a distinct social group — the stratum just above the untouchables, but depressed nonetheless. On the question whether caste or class was to be the measure of backwardness, Dr Ambedkar declared, ‘What are called backward classes are…nothing but a collection of certain castes (GoI 1950: 702).

These usages however, remained, anchored in the Hindu social structure. The debates in the Constituent Assembly were bereft of any discussion on the question of backward groups from among religious minorities. The issue finally came to be raised by Mohammad Ismail Sahib and Sardar Hukum Singh who sought to clarify whether the term extended to the backward classes of minority communities. Essentially, the Muslim members of the Assembly argued for religious minorities as a category to be included within the broad definition of backward classes. Citing the case of Madras where in 1944, 150 groups had been declared as backward, invariably all of them being Hindu caste groups, Mohammad Ismail Sahib demanded the inclusion of under-represented minority groups within the purview of backward classes: ‘…there are backward people amongst the non-majority people as well. The Christians are backward….So also the Muslims, and also the Scheduled Castes. If any provision is made, it has to be made for such really backward people (ibid.: 692).

It is to be noted that while the lists of SCs and STs were appended to the Constitution, the task of identifying groups to be included in the OBC list was left to the Commission for the Backward Classes; Article 340 empowered the State to appoint such a commission. A member of the Constituent Assembly explained that the commission would ‘go through the whole of the country…and find out
which castes of Hindus, Muslims, etc., are really backward according to certain standards, educational, social, economic, etc.4

Two national commissions, in addition to several state appointed ones, have dealt with the matter. The First All India Backward Classes’ Commission or Kaka Kalelkar Commission (1955), brought out a list of nearly 2,400 backward castes and communities, one-third of which were considered ‘most backward’, requiring exclusive attention. The criterion of backwardness that the Commission relied upon was essentially ‘caste’ or ‘community’; however, other factors, like educational advancement, income levels and employment status, were also considered relevant. The report of the Commission was the first instance in which social/caste hierarchy among Muslims received official recognition. A significant number of Muslim occupational groups, termed ‘backward communities’, were included in the ‘backward’ and the ‘most backward’ lists proposed by the Commission: ‘There are a number of communities amongst them [Muslims] that are suffering from social inferiority in their own society and consequent educational backwardness. Such backward communities are included in the list of other backward communities’ (GoI 1955: 125).

The Commission’s reliance on caste as a unit of backwardness became controversial. Kaka Kalelkar, the chairman himself, found the caste test inconsistent with democracy and detrimental to the creation of a ‘casteless and classless’ society. And one of the excuses offered was its deleterious impact on Muslims and Christians: ‘My eyes were however open to the dangers of suggesting remedies on the caste basis when I discovered that it is going to have a most unhealthy effect on the Muslim and Christian sections of the nation’ (GoI 1981: 3). The report was tabled in Parliament in September 1956. Minister of Home Affairs, G.B. Pant, expressed apprehension that the emphasis on caste displayed the ‘dangers of separatism’. It was argued that the developmental efforts through the Five-year Plans would lead to ‘the establishment of our society on the socialist pattern’, an evolution with which ‘social and other distinctions will disappear’ (GoI 1983: 2). The report was finally rejected by the central government in 1961. The problem of backward classes was left to the States; the centre however, suggested to the States to prefer economic

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tests over caste to identify backward classes. The question of OBCs was thus shelved for the next two decades.

The Mandal Commission (1980) too retained caste as a unit of measuring backwardness. The tangible indicators to ascertain a caste or social group as ‘backward’ included lower position in the caste hierarchy, lower age at marriage within the group, higher female work participation, higher school drop-out rate, inaccessibility to drinking water, lower average value of family assets, higher occurrence of kutchha houses, and so on. The Commission, however, was emphatic about the use of caste as a unit to identify backward groups. Referring to several sociological studies, it saw castes as the ‘building bricks of Hindu social structure’, which had endured despite the constitutional commitment to establish a casteless and egalitarian society. ‘The changes in the caste system are representative more of shifts in emphasis than any material alteration in its basic structure’ (GoI 1981: 18).

The Commission arrived at an exhaustive list of 3,743 castes or social groups that could be declared backward. In principle, it acknowledged the presence of caste or caste-like groups among Muslims, and the ‘Mandal list’ included nearly 200 Muslim occupational groups spread out in different states.⁵ For the inclusion of non-Hindu communities, the ‘rough and ready’ criteria that the Commission evolved had two conditions: first, all ‘untouchables’ converted to any non-Hindu religion and, second, such occupational communities which are known by the name of their traditional hereditary occupation and whose Hindu counterparts have been included in the list of Hindu OBCs.

Whether caste could be the measure of backwardness for the purposes of Article 16(4) has remained contentious, inviting innumerable interventions of the courts. The courts, in the final analysis, like the two backward classes’ commissions, have largely accepted ‘caste’ as a significant albeit not the sole basis of classification. This could be observed in Ramkrishna Singh vs. State of Mysore (1960) wherein, the Mysore High Court equated caste with class under certain circumstances: ‘a class may correspond to a body of persons

⁵ After eliminating the overlaps, about 80 distinct Muslim backward castes can be identified in the Mandal list. The updated central list of OBCs contains nearly 90–95 Muslim castes.
grouped together on the basis of castes'. In *Balaji vs. State of Mysore* (1963), the Supreme Court put a ceiling on the magnitude of quota at 50 per cent. The Court was critical of invoking caste as the sole criterion, citing among other reasons, its inapplicability to non-Hindu groups. Thus, for the Court, ‘castes in relation to Hindus’ could be a ‘relevant factor’, yet ‘it was not the…dominant test’. This was further reiterated in *Chitralekha vs. State of Mysore* (1964), wherein the court accepted caste as one of the measures of social backwardness but desisted from making it the compelling one.

The ‘caste basis’ received further affirmation in *P. Rajendran vs. State of Madras* (1968), wherein the Supreme Court held that ‘a caste is also a class of citizens if the caste as a whole is socially and educationally backward’. In *U.S.V. Balaram vs. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1972), the court was more explicit in allowing the use of caste as a determinant to define backwardness. Setting aside the order of the Andhra Pradesh High Court that had scrapped the Andhra government’s endeavour to provide caste-based reservation for backward classes, the Supreme Court ruled: ‘If…caste as a whole is socially and educationally backward, …the reservation made of such persons will have to be upheld notwithstanding the fact that a few individuals in that group may be…above the general average’.

The Supreme Court in its celebrated *Indira Sawhney vs. the Union of India* (1992), popularly called the Mandal case, vindicated the caste-based classification of the Mandal Commission. However, the ‘creamy layer’ within caste groups was removed from the purview of reservation. The nine-judge bench rejected economic criteria as the sole determinant of backwardness. Therefore, the order of the government reserving 10 per cent of seats for ‘other economically backward’ (meant for poor among the upper castes) was invalidated. The Court upheld the concept of caste as a social class in the Indian context: ‘A caste can be and quite often is a social class in India. If it is backward socially, it would be a backward class for the purposes of Article 16(4)’.

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6 *All India Reporter* 1960, Mys. 338 at 345.
7 *All India Reporter*, 1963 SC 649 at 659.
8 *All India Reporter*, 1964 SC1823.
9 *All India Reporter* 1968 SC 1012 at 1015.
10 *All India Reporter*, 1972, SC 1375.
On the question of identifying OBC groups among non-Hindus, it acknowledged that ‘…almost all followers of non-Hindu religions except those of Zoroastrianism, are converts from Hindu religion, and in the new religion they carried with them their castes as well.’ Referring to the caste structure among Muslims, the Commission cited at length The Census Report of 1901 of Bengal where the occurrence of a three-fold division of the Muslim society into Ashraf, Ajlaf and Arzal was reported in detail. Since Islam did not recognise castes or the caste system, the Court suggested the identification of Muslim OBCs by their occupations: ‘The social groups following different occupations are known among Hindus by the castes named after the occupations and among non-Hindus by occupational names. Hence, for identifying the backward classes among the non-Hindus, their occupations can furnish a valid test.’

OBCs in the Muslim Social Structure

There is sufficient evidence to suggest the presence of descent-based social stratification mimicking the Hindu caste structure among the Muslims of India. The Census of India, 1901 listed 133 social groups that were wholly or partially Muslim. Contemporary Muslim society in India is divided into three major groups: (i) the Ashrafs, who trace their origins to foreign lands such as Arabia, Persia, Turkistan or Afghanistan. They also include the upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam such as Muslim Rajputs in Uttar Pradesh; (ii) the Ajlafs or middle-caste converts such as Jolaha (weaver), Dhunia (cotton-carder), Kulu (oil-presser), Kunjra (vegetable-seller), Hajjam (barber), Darzi (tailor), and the like, whose occupations are considered ritually clean; (iii) the Arzals or converts from the erstwhile untouchable castes such as Bhangis (scavenger), Mehtars (sweeper), Chamars (tanner), Doms, Halalkhors, Labegis, Abdals, and Bediyas.

This descent-based social stratification takes various forms in different regions. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, the Syed, Shaikh, Pathan and Labbai (descendants of Arab traders who took native wives), occupy the apex position. Those engaged in ‘unclean’ occupations — Dudekula (cotton cleaners), Hazam (barbers) and Fakir-budbudki (mendicants) are at the lowest level (Saheb

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12 Ibid., p. 535.
13 Ibid., p. 535.
Tamil Muslims reportedly have four endogamous subdivisions — Rawther, Labbai, Marakayar and Kayalar (Mines 1977: 25–36). Further south, in Kerala, the Moplahs of Malabar are divided into five ranked sections called the Thangals, Arabis, Malbaris, Pusalars, and Ossans (D’soza 1973: 49–51).

Muslim groups currently bracketed under the category ‘OBC’ come essentially from the non-Ashraf sections of the Muslim population and are identified with their traditional occupations. In her study of a village in Uttar Pradesh, Zarina Bhatti identified 18 such groups, for example, Julahas (weavers), Mirasis (singers), Darzis (tailors), Halwais (sweetmakers), Manihars (banglemakers) and so on (1973: 89–106). The Census enumerations of 1911 to 1931 listed 102 caste groups among Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, of which at least 97 belonged to the non-Ashraf category. Many such groups, such as the Rajputs, Kayasthas, Koeris, Koris, Kumhars, Kurmis, Malis, and Mochis, were common among both Hindus and Muslims. The non-Ashraf groups numbered 58 in Delhi, 35 in Bombay and 16 in Madhya Pradesh (GoI 1953). More recently, a survey sponsored by the Bihar State Minorities’ Commission could arrive at a list of 39 such occupational groups (ADRI 2005: 15).

Modes of Intervention: Three Models of Protective Discrimination for Muslims

Having traced the emergence and evolution of OBCs in general, and Muslim OBCs in particular, it is evident that notwithstanding the constitutional imprecision, OBC as a category in official parlance refers to:

(i) Caste groups occupying the middle position in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Their backwardness though is required to be substantiated through tangible indicators.

(ii) In the Muslim case, it implies occupational groups, those with similar occupation as Hindu OBCs and also the Muslim equivalents to SCs. In terms of sociological categories, the Ajlafs and the Arzals, populate the rank of Muslim OBCs.

As per the Sachar Committee Report (based on National Sample Survey Organisation [NSSO] 61st round), Muslim OBCs constitute 40.7 per cent of the total Muslim population, 6.4 per cent of
the country’s entire population and 15.7 per cent of the total OBC population. In terms of regional analysis we find that in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, they constitute almost the entire Muslim population. This has to do largely with the way in which these states have defined their OBC populations. The Hindi–Urdu belt, comprising Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand, also has the majority of the Muslims listed as OBCs. On the other hand, in the two states of West Bengal and Assam, both with substantial population of Muslims, the proportion of OBCs is miniscule (GoI 2006: 2004–05). Thus, the benefits attached to OBC status are denied to most Muslims residing in these states.

The argument advanced in this section is drawn largely from the experiences of the various modes of affirmative action for Muslims or Muslim OBCs introduced at the State level. It is argued that in the absence of reservation for the Muslim community as a whole, the OBC provision can be effectively utilised by Muslims provided they are able to get a large number of Muslim communities enlisted. In our analysis of the situation in various states, we found at least three distinct models that have worked in varying degrees to extend the reservation benefit to their Muslim populations:

Reservation for all Muslims: Kerala and Karnataka

Kerala and Karnataka offer a unique case where the entire Muslim population, excluding its creamy layer, is included in the OBC list and provided with an exclusive quota. In a strictly caste-based reservation regime that continues to abhor religious categories, this is truly exceptional. At the outset, however, it deserves mention that in the two states, a quota for religious minorities is more or less the continuation of a policy that dates back to the colonial period.

In Mysore, following the recommendations of the Miller Committee (1918), an order issued by the Maharaja of Mysore in 1921 directed government departments to gradually raise the proportion of backward communities up to 50 per cent of their total strength over a period of seven years. The affirmative action, although accepted in principle, did not alter the situation much so far as the dominance of Brahmins in public employment was concerned. Even in 1949, Brahmins constituted hardly 4 per cent of the population but held 41.29 per cent of the gazetted posts in the State. The Muslim share had gradually risen from 4.32 per cent in 1918 to 6.79 per cent in 1949 (Yadav and Singh 1994: 138). On the reorganisation of
Mysore state as Karnataka, the caste and community composition of the State changed drastically. The Muslim share in population, which was earlier 5 per cent, now rose to 10 per cent. In the new reservation scheme, all non-Brahmin Hindu castes and religious minorities like Muslims and Christians were included in the list of backward classes. The magnitude of reservation rose to 67 per cent in admissions to educational institutions and 57 per cent for government jobs. The court struck down the order. The modified government orders of 1958 and 1959 also met the same fate.

In 1960, the Nagan Gowda Committee recommended bifurcation of the ‘backward classes’ category into ‘more backward classes’ (A) and ‘backward classes’ (B). Following this, the state government initially set aside 28 per cent for the backward classes and 22 per cent for more backward classes. With another 18 percent of the seats reserved for SCs and STs, the total quota reached 68 per cent. The Supreme Court, in a landmark judgment, however, placed a ceiling of 50 per cent on the quantum of reservation. Consequently, reservation for backward classes was reduced to 30 per cent — Muslims as a whole continued to be considered as among the backward communities.

Karnataka appointed its first Backward Classes’ Commission with L.G Havanur as its chairman in 1972. The Commission, using a set of social, economic and educational indicators, classified the Brahmins, Bunts, Jains, Kshatriyas and Lingayats (other than the artisans) as forward. The Commission held that as Muslims and Christians did not suffer from caste-related impediments, they could not be included within the category ‘backward classes’ for the purposes of entitlements under Article 15(4) and 16(4) of the Constitution. However, considering the inadequate representation of Muslims in public service, the Commission recommended the creation of a distinct category of minority group with reservation not exceeding 6 per cent. The quota for backward classes was fixed at 32 per cent so that together with 18 per cent for SCs and STs, it could meet the ceiling of 50 per cent set by the Supreme Court. Further, the Commission classified the backward classes into three sub-categories, namely, backward communities, backward castes and backward

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14 High Court of Mysore, 1958, Writ Petition Nos 369, 370. A reference to this case has also been made in Ramakrishna Singh, Ram Singh and Ors vs. State of Mysore and Ors, AIR 1960 Mys 338.
15 Balaji vs. the State of Mysore, 1963, SC 649.
The entire Muslim community was placed under backward communities. The state government went a step further to create a new category called ‘backward special group’ for the economically deprived among all castes and communities.

Over the years, the Karnataka government appointed two more commissions for backward classes. The Venkataswamy Commission (1983) recommended the removal of two of the dominant castes of Karnataka, Lingayats and Vokkaligas from the list of beneficiary castes. This generated a great deal of controversy and the state government refused to accept its recommendations. The Chinappa Reddy Commission (1990) classified the backward castes and communities into categories I (52 castes), II (14 castes/communities) and III (all others) (Thimmaiah 1993: 145). Both Commissions recommended multiple means tests so as to disqualify the affluent candidates of the backward castes fromcornering the advantage of reservations. The Government of Karnataka partially accepted the proposed scheme for the sub-categorisation of the backward classes, however, it also made some modifications. In 1994, a government order classified the backward communities into categories I, IIA and IIB, IIIA and IIIB, and IV. Category IIB set aside 4 per cent of the seats exclusively for the Muslims of the state. Category IIIA included the Vokkaliga groups and IIIB, the Lingayats — two of the most dominant castes of the state. In addition, the category I list includes, along with other OBCs, Muslim occupational groups such as Jalagara, Kasab, Kasai, Siddi, Sikkalgar, Nalabund, Dhobi, Kumbara, Chapparbund, Darvesu, Phul Mali, Rangrez, etc.16

Likewise, in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, the demand for reservation for under-represented castes and communities was accepted as early as in 1936, with a quota being fixed for each community on the basis of its numerical strength. In Malabar (then part of Madras Presidency), however, reservation for non-Brahmins was accepted in 1921 itself. Quotas were fixed not only for caste groups such as the Ezhavas, but also for religious minorities, Muslims and sections of the Christians. Post Independence, compartmental quotas were replaced by reservation only for the backward and marginalised groups. In the new reservation scheme introduced in 1952,

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the quantum of reservation was fixed at 45 per cent, in which 35 per cent was earmarked for the backward classes and the rest for SCs and STs. The beneficiaries included the Ezhavas, Kammalas, the Nadars (Hindu and Christian), other Hindu backward castes, and SC and OBC converts to Christianity. Muslims along with Latin Christians as a whole continued to derive benefits, and they were now clubbed within the constitutionally recognised category, the ‘backward classes’.

On the reorganisation of the state of Kerala in 1956, the quota for backward classes was enhanced to 40 per cent. When the government realised that certain caste groups, notably the Ezhavas, had appropriated most of this quota, the scheme was modified to introduce sub-quotas for the major backward groups. A separate Muslim share was fixed at 10 per cent that later rose to 12 per cent. Thus, in Kerala, 40 per cent of the seats are earmarked for the backward classes and 10 per cent for the SCs and STs. Within the backward classes category are sub-quotas for Ezhavas (14 per cent), Muslims (12 per cent), Latin Catholics (4 per cent), Nadars (2 per cent), Christian converts from SCs (1 per cent), Dheeravas (1 per cent), OBCs (3 per cent), and Vishwakarmas (3 per cent).

**Invoking Caste: Tamil Nadu**

Tamil Nadu, part of the earlier Madras presidency, and another centre of a pulsating non-Brahmin mobilisation, had a similar provision as that of Kerala and Karnataka. Yet, the case of Tamil Nadu is different. In Tamil Nadu, unlike Kerala and Karnataka, reservation benefits for Muslims as a community were withdrawn after Independence. A number of castes/communities from among the Muslims though are provided the safety net of reservation of seats in admissions and government jobs.

Amongst the states, Tamil Nadu has a history of compensatory discrimination for the backward classes that dates back to the early years of colonial rule in India.\(^\text{17}\) To begin with, the Muslims who were educationally very backward were given special treatment vide a resolution dated 29 July 1872. Later, it was extended to the ‘aborigines’ and low-caste Hindus. The statistics presented by the Census superintendent of Madras Presidency in 1881 show that

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\(^{17}\) As far back as 1851, the Madras Revenue Board had instructed the district collectors to restrict the number of Brahmin entrants into the services.
Brahmins were grossly over-represented in high-salaried jobs compared to Muslims and the non-Brahmin castes. A government order of 1927 laid down the provisions for a compartmental reservation of posts. Non-Brahmins were to have 42 per cent of the posts available, while the Muslims too had a fair share of 17 per cent of the posts set aside for them.

The Order of 1927 has been modified many a time since then. A 1947 Order effected a separation in the category of Backward Hindus and Scheduled Castes through a bifurcation of the non-Brahmin castes. In 1951, the compartmental reservation scheme was given up; reservations were now extended to only the constitutionally recognised deprived categories such as SCs, STs and the backward classes. Separate quotas for Muslims were also withdrawn; in its place, various communities among Muslims considered backward were included in the list of backward classes. The first Backward Classes’ Commission of Tamil Nadu or Sattanathan Commission (1970), operating with the 1951 categorisation, identified 105 castes/community as backward, and recommended 31 per cent reservation, while 18 per cent was left for the SCs and STs. Tamil-speaking Muslim groups, such as Labbais and Deccani Muslims, were included in the backward list. The Commission also recommended an income ceiling of Rs 9,000 per annum as a criterion for availing the benefits. All the recommendations of the Commission were accepted except for the one on income ceiling. The magnitude of reservation now stood at 49 per cent. There was a massive leap in the quantum of reservation in 1980 when the 31 per cent quota for backward classes was raised to 50 per cent, taking the total to a staggering 68 per cent.

Tamil Nadu’s second Backward Classes’ Commission or Ambasankar Commission was set up in 1982. After considering its report, the state government split the category backward classes into Backward Castes (BCs), Most Backward Classes (MBCs) and Denotified Communities. The SC reservation is maintained at 18 per cent, 1 per cent is left for STs, 30 per cent for the backward castes, and 20 per cent for MBCs and denotified communities. The quantum of reservation stands at 69 per cent — far exceeding the ceiling of 50 per cent set by the Supreme Court. The state government has, however, been able to protect its reservation policy through legislation — the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of Seats in Educational Institution and of appointments or posts in the Services under the State) Bill, 1993.
said Act received the protection of the 9th Schedule through the 76th amendment of the Constitution.

On the question of reservation for Muslims, the case of Tamil Nadu is a marked departure from Kerala and Karnataka. The government has done away with reservation on religious grounds, yet a majority of the Muslims have been able to avail the benefits of reservations through inclusion in the fold of backward classes. According to the population figures provided by NSSO 61st Round, the Muslim backward groups included in the state list constitute 93.3 per cent of the state’s Muslim population.

**Muslim OBCs as Most Backward Classes: Bihar**

A third model is offered by Bihar, which had no precedence of reservation for the backward classes prior to Independence, yet has adopted a comprehensive policy of reservation for deprived groups. The ‘Karpuri formula’, as it is popularly called, allows for the bifurcation of the category backward classes into its advanced section, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the relatively more deprived, Most Backward Classes (MBCs).

According to the report of the Bihar Backward Classes’ Commission or the Mungeral Commission (1976), the forward castes of Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs, and Kayasthas constituted 13 per cent of the population of undivided Bihar; the upper backward castes like Banias, Yadavas, Kurmis, and Koeris constituted 19.3 per cent; the minor artisans and landless castes like Dhanuk and Mallahs formed 32 per cent, while Muslims and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes comprised 12.5 per cent and 23.5 per cent respectively. While the three *dwija* (twice-born castes) — Brahmins, Bhumihars and Rajputs — largely monopolised land ownership between them owing to the prevailing Zamindari system, the Kayasthas, though not landed, took the lead in modern education and became prominent in Congress politics. Following Independence, particularly after the abolition of the Zamindari system, the peasant castes such as the Yadavas, Kurmis and Koeris started to make their presence felt in state politics. By 1962, around 24.9 per cent of the members of the Congress Legislature Party came from backward, mostly upper backward castes.

In terms of affirmative action for the backward classes, the first step was taken in 1951 when the Bihar government issued an order listing 79 castes, which were deemed more backward than the 30 castes in
Annexure 2. There was, however, no reservation for OBCs, neither in employment nor for admission to educational institutions. The social welfare department gave fee concessions to backward students listed in the above two lists. The first major effort to understand the plight of the backward classes in Bihar was taken when the Mungeri Lal Commission was constituted in 1971. In its report, submitted in 1975, the Commission recommended the bifurcation of the backward classes into Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Most Backward Classes (MBCs). The OBC list contained 128 castes and the MBC list had 93 castes groups. The Karpoori Thakur government in 1978 accepted the classification made by the Commission. For the purposes of recruitment to jobs, 8 per cent was set aside for the OBCs, 12 per cent for the MBCs, 14 per cent for the SCs, 10 per cent for the STs, 3 per cent for women and another 3 per cent for the economically backward. After the carving out of Jharkhand from Bihar, the above scheme was slightly amended. The ST quota was reduced to 1 per cent, the SC quota was now fixed at 15 per cent, 13 per cent for OBCs, 18 per cent for the MBCs and 3 per cent for backward caste women.

Muslim caste groups, depending on their level of backwardness, have been included both in the OBC as well as the MBC list. While 9 Muslim groups have been included in the state’s OBC list, 27 of them appear in the MBC list. In Bihar, the Muslim OBCs constitute 63 per cent of the population. Thus, while remaining consistent with the caste/biradari-based policy of protective discrimination, Bihar has been able to bring the majority of the Muslim groups within the purview of reservation.

Analysing Intervention

The three case studies presented above provide different models that can be effectively utilised to address the problem of Muslim reservation without inviting legal wrangles. It is important that as large a number of Muslim groups that fulfill the criteria are declared OBCs. Wherever Muslims have been able to achieve this, their relative share in public employment has increased. For instance, Tamil Nadu has a Muslim presence of 5.6 per cent, 93.3 per cent of which is declared backward, and this is reflected in their presence in public employment to some extent (3.2 per cent). Compare this with the case of West Bengal, where only 2.1 per cent of Muslims are to be found in public employment despite their large share of 25 per cent in the
total population of the state. The Muslim OBC population in the state is also very minimal at 2.4 per cent of all Muslims. Effectively, the OBC provision remains unutilised in West Bengal.

Of the three different models outlined above, the one offered by Kerala and Karnataka — extending reservation benefits to all Muslims irrespective of their position in the caste hierarchy — has appeared most attractive to the Muslim leadership, who have argued for the application of this model at the all-India level. However, it is the other models, namely the ones followed in Tamil Nadu and Bihar, which can really stand the scrutiny of logical consistency and the principles of social justice. This is arguable for the reasons discussed below.

First, these two remain well within the ambit of a caste-based reservation policy for the backward classes. It is also consistent with the recommendations of various backward classes’ commissions and Supreme Court judgments. And, therefore, it is unlikely to invite litigations or any palpable backlash from the Hindu right. On this count, Muslims should be wary of harping on the Kerala and Karnataka model where the category of religion is invoked, for it runs the risk of meeting the same fate as the Andhra endeavour.

Second, and more importantly, the denial of social hierarchy among Muslims, particularly in the Kerala model, inadvertently perpetuates the myth of a Muslim monolith. The strengths of the Bihar and Tamil Nadu cases lie in the fact that they address the issue of inter-group inequality by extending the benefits of reservation to a large proportion of the Muslim community, without ignoring the intra-group inequality along caste/biradari lines among Muslims. The Sachar Committee Report substantiates the inequality that exists between the Ashrafs and OBC Muslims across all sectors. In public employment, if we take railways as a case in point, we find 4.5 per cent Ashrafs but only 0.4 per cent OBCs on the rolls. This story is repeated in all other sectors, such as central PSUs (2.7 per cent vs 0.6 per cent), university faculty (3.9 per cent vs. 1.4 per cent) and university non-teaching (3 per cent vs 1.7 per cent) (GoI 2006: 210, Table 10.10). It is significant to note, however, that while the Muslim upper castes too remain under-represented in public employment, the deprivation faced by the Muslim OBCs is far greater.

18 For the share of Muslims in public employment in different states see GoI (2006: 370, Appendix, Table 9.4).
19 The term Muslim Gen is used for Ashrafs in the table.
Third, the bifurcation of the backward category into OBCs and MBCs ensures that the more advanced among the backwards do not encroach upon the share of the relatively more deprived. This is important because Muslim OBCs, clubbed as they are with more advanced Hindu OBCs, have failed to take advantage of the provision for reservation. This is once again substantiated by the Sachar Committee Report. While the Muslim OBCs constitute nearly 15 per cent of the total OBC population, their share in public employment ranges from a miniscule 0.4 per cent to 1.6 per cent. As early as in 1951, the Kaka Kalelkar Commission had made recommendations on these lines. The report of the Mandal Commission too carried a note of dissent on the issue. This forms one of the significant recommendations of the Sachar Committee as such a measure would invariably bring a large number of backwards among Muslims within the MBC ambit. This is borne out by the case of Bihar where 27 of 36 Muslim backward have found place in the MBC list.

As a fourth point, it is important to note that, increasingly, a large number of Muslim groups have been included in the central and State lists of OBCs. A comparison of both the lists, however, clearly brings out the incongruity between the two, with the State lists usually being more comprehensive. In Bihar, for example, Faqir, Itrfarosh, Jat, Gadaria, and Surajpuri are listed in the State list of beneficiaries but are yet to be included in the central list. In Gujarat, Muslim groups such as Jilaya, Tariya-tai, Mansuri, Arab, Sumra, Tarak, Kalal, and Bahvaiya are listed in the State’s backward list but not in the central list. Similarly, many Muslim groups in Maharashtra, such as the Mansooris, Pan Faroshs, Ataar, Sanpagarudi, Muslim Madari, Muslim Gawli, Darwesi, Hashmi, Nalband, among others, have not found a place in the central list (GoI 2006: 200–01).

And finally, the caste model, as it may be referred to, also requires that the Arzals or Muslims of Dalit origins should be extended the entitlements earmarked for the scheduled castes. Despite the absence of scriptural sanction for untouchability in Islam, there is ample evidence to suggest the prevalence of the practice in its various forms among its followers in India.

Postscript
The recent case of Andhra Pradesh provides an interesting corroboration in favour of the caste model. In Andhra Pradesh, the state government in 2004 set aside a 5 per cent quota for the entire Muslim
community. This reservation invoking religion, however, was struck down by the court. The government was compelled subsequently to shift the discourse from community to caste. The recourse to a religious basis for reservation singularly failed to impress the Court. In a renewed bid, the government has now shifted the discourse from community to caste, precisely the point that this article makes. The Bill enacted by the state’s Legislative Assembly now sets aside 4 per cent of the seats for a separate category of Muslim backwards (category E in the backward list). A large number of Muslim caste groups such as Muslim Dhobi, Garadi Muslim or Kani-kattuvallu, Labbi, Turaka Kasha, Gosangi Muslim or Phakeer Sayebulu — hitherto denied the benefits of reservation — have found a place in the State’s list of backward classes.20 While groups comprising the Muslim elite, such as the Syeds, Pathans, Mughals, Cutchi Memons, Bohras and so on, have been kept outside the purview of this legislation, the move is estimated to benefit nearly 90 per cent of the State’s Muslim population.

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Struggle for the Margin or from the Margin

Gopal Guru

The struggle has no control on the fruits that it produces.
— Babasaheb Ambedkar

In recent decades the initiatives being taken by the Indian state regarding protective measures for certain sections of society have generated a good deal of support as well as contestation from several social groups who are among the likely beneficiaries. In fact, the force of contestation seems to have overwhelmed the tone and tenor of support these measures have received, the articulation of which has been both vertical and horizontal. At the vertical level, implicated into this logic of contestation are upper-caste adversaries, represented today by the loosely structured outfit, Youth for Equality. These groups are up in arms against state-led policies of positive discrimination and are, to that extent, against those social groups that have benefited from them. At the horizontal level, on the other hand, these protective policies have fanned a tacit tension between Dalit sub-castes, thus positioning the Madigas against the Malas in Andhra Pradesh, the Matangs against Mahars in Maharashtra, and the Walmikis against Chamars or Ravidasis in north India, among others. Thus, till the Sachar Committee Report (SCR) was published, the contestations were taking place around the parameters of caste. However, the Sachar Committee’s recommendations have added one more dimension to this complexity by introducing religious minorities as well. Although the tension between Dalits and Muslims from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category is not vocal, the very unit of analysis used by the SCR has given rise to this tension (GoI 2006: xiii).
This is evident from the open as well as some of the more oblique responses that have been offered by several intellectuals (although, at this time, these are primarily polemical and have not generated much debate) for they have chosen what I would call a negative reference point in order to strengthen the case for minority protection. These scholars (Hasan 2008; Padgaonkar 2007) have chosen Dalit and Dalit-related institutional provisions as their point of reference in order to argue for the relative backwardness of minority communities in employment and other realms of opportunity. With respect to the unequal distribution of resources, they maintain that the state has been biased in favour of Dalits and has ignored the minorities. A study of these responses suggests that they are more concerned with a ‘struggle for the margin’ rather than engaging in a ‘struggle from the margin’. An alternative kind of struggle could have adopted a more positive point of reference, one based on a principle that is universal and cuts across several social situations rather than focusing on a particular situation at a given point in time. This alternative struggle from the margin, would be for the solidarity of all those who are equal victims of the lack of attention and of state negligence. The SCR has has by its singular focus on one community fuelled the sense of relative deprivation among them rather than encouraging a sense of solidarity with other marginalised groups. In fact, the methodological move made by selecting a negative point of reference has resulted in the report fracturing the larger solidarity. While making a comparison between Dalits and Muslims the report also treats the Dalits as an analytically homogenous category, which it is not. If the struggle from the margin is to be an expression of social solidarity, then its reference point too has to be universal.

Concomitantly, solidarity demands that intellectuals make comparisons vertically, within the community, and horizontally, with comparable groups in other communities. This will be a more positive and effectual frame of reference. However, this is not what is being suggested by most scholars. Intellectual responses to the questions raised by the SCR appear to lack rigorous analysis and have thus far been superficial, if not completely ignorant, of the more substantive elements that require attention. We already have examples to show that the methodological fallacy of taking up a negative reference point in support of new claims for accommodation into the margin results in undercutting the social base of solidarity. However, before we discuss
this struggle for margin further, it is necessary first to understand two rather contradictory dimensions of the margin.

Margin is a generic term that can have varying connotations in different spheres of thought. For instance, in economics a margin is a mathematical tool used to measure the level of profit. In this usage it has a quantitative dimension. Viewed mathematically, therefore, communities with a demographic preponderance could be seen as the mainstream and those with a minuscule population as being on the margins of the dominant communities. But this is not sufficient condition to determine the margin. For instance, Parsis are at the centre, in a position of privilege, not because of their numerical preponderance. At another level, a margin could also be understood in terms of lines that when drawn enable the main text to be defined more prominently, similar to the manner in which the cartographer draws vertical or horizontal lines. It could be argued thus that the state also possesses the skills of a cartographer. The Planning Commission of India is one example of this for it draws the line that decides who is above or below the poverty line. Similarly, statistical enumeration through census and surveys are important tools needed to define the margins of the country’s population. Thus, what the idea of a margin does is to eliminate the fuzzy and vague notion of a population and lend a more concrete orientation to our understanding of society. Similarly, it could be argued that indices such as gross domestic product (GDP) and per capita cost (PCC) are nothing but cartographic devices deployed by the state. The Human Development Reports (HDRs) issued by the United Nations are also exercises in a kind of global cartography that draws defining lines between the centre and its margins on a worldwide basis. India, for example, boasts that it is the centre and along with China is a competitive centre at least in the Asian context. At a national level, when the state puts some social segments on the margins of mainstream development it does so by assigning a conceptual meaning to this act of distancing. It is through the ascription of such conceptual meanings that the state is able to appear as a maibaap sarkar, where the relationship between the state and its citizens is that of patron–client. This could also be read as the refuudalisation of the state’s relationship with the people of the country who no longer remain active citizens but become passive recipients of state patronage.

The margin, thus understood, is an expression of the asymmetry of the relationship between the state and its citizens, and it becomes
the medium through which the latter expresses itself in the form of welfare measures at its best and the prison/mental asylum at its worst. It is interesting to note, in fact, that the margins find their only expression through the state. The margin is a repository of the feeling of vanity that resides with the dominant group. As a repository, it can involve a sense of care (asylums), patronage (subsidies for farmers, fellowship hostels for BC students), concern (mental hospitals or remand homes for the children) and contempt (prisons), and finally repulsion (for the Dalit colonies in the country).

State policy, thus, is driven by the logic of margins, which are first created through a fermenting social reality and then disaggregated by experts into accurate percentages. The Sachar Committee, for instance, sought to fracture a social reality that looked almost untouched and then tried to assign social visibility to the Muslim community by construing it in terms of percentages. It has rightly brought to light a volume of problems that the Muslim community, particularly its lower rungs, is facing. However, while this aspect of the SCR is quite positive, as it happens generally with committees and commissions set up by the state there is also a flipside: it is oblivious of the fallout of such a state policy. The state, I would argue, is seeking to express itself through the margin without allowing the latter to make an impact on itself. First, through these self-enlightened moves the state creates several margins and then it seeks to control relations among them. As a result, the route leading from one margin to another necessarily passes through the state. The state, in other words, retains the power to mediate these relationships; the margins do not approach each other independent of or outside the state. To use a more familiar analogy, while writing a text, we use the margins to include all those points that got excluded on the first writing of the text. The state, similarly, also uses the margin as a corrigendum, to include in its welfare policies all those who were left out in the first instance. The recent extension of reservations to castes that had been excluded on the first instance is a case in point. The margin is thus used to perfect the main text.

The margin, to sum up this section, is a conceptual and ideological construction of space within which a person or a group of persons is located for rhetorical and strategic purposes either by the state or the market. It is a recurring state of exception that, ironically, expresses the need either for the retention/affirmation of the mainstream or its subversion. As we shall see in the following sections, a margin is actually deployed in the service of the first, not the second. This is done
principally to define and emphasise the asymmetry of relationships between the margin and its obverse, the mainstream. As mentioned above, the margin serves as an expression of the dominant group. A logical requirement, the mainstream defines itself by assigning to the margin an inferior meaning. In the present scenario it is the Indian state, which, through the Sachar Committee, has sought to define the margin for minorities. Perhaps the state realises that creating new margins is the best way to insulate its structures from a possible critical response that might emanate, ironically, from the vibrant margins. However, as the history of such attempts clearly shows, people at the margin tend to become the marginal part of the structures in existence and thus do not find it necessary to question the limits of the latter. Let us discuss how this happens.

There are scholars who criticise certain sub-castes of the Dalit cluster for having monopolised the benefits that have accrued from the basket of protective policies offered by the state. They point to how the Chamars in the north, Malas in Andhra Pradesh, Adi Karnataka in Karnataka, Mahars in Maharashtra and Vankars in Gujarat — all Dalit sub-castes — have been monopolising reservation benefits and depriving, respectively, the Valmikis in the north, Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, Adi Dravidas in Karnataka, Matangs in Maharashtra, and Walmikis in Gujarat, of the benefits from them. It has been noted too that the respective governments have tried to introduce ‘the lexical principle’ in these states by introducing sub-categories in the form of ‘a, b, c, d’, in the overall quota meant for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) of that State. The state had a political interest in introducing internal differentiation, for instance, it is alleged that the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government in Andhra Pradesh introduced internal division among the SCs only to win over the Madigas and thus limit the electoral gains of the Congress party, which enjoys the support of majority SCs in the state. A similar politics could be said to hold true with regard to the Matangs of Maharashtra. While it is true that these Dalit sub-castes, who are also sarcastically referred to as ‘Dalit Brahmins’, have an edge over the other sub-castes, but this does not explain why these castes have taken a lead in using reservations as a means of socio-economic upliftment and modernisation.

The lack of historical understanding of this process has led some, including the Sachar Committee, to entertain inappropriate reference points. There is a tendency among scholars to use the Dalit quota as a standard to measure the relative lag in the material positions
of the different Dalit sub-castes. But this is not sufficient in trying to evaluate the structural factors that are responsible for generating uneven responses to the opportunities thrown up by the state. It is in this sense that the unit of comparison chosen by scholars like Xaxa (2001) and the Sachar Committee is negative; it seeks to insulate the existing structures from a critical reading. The political fallout of such an understanding is that it presents the so called ‘monopoly’ as being voluntary or arbitrary, something that is based only on the ability and will power of those groups who are involved in the ‘monopolisation’ of resources.

For further clarification, and to highlight the fact that structures have a bearing in generating an uneven response from the social groups they address, we can cite a case from the State of Maharashtra. The Mahars of Maharashtra have been ahead of other castes, particularly the Matangs, in making use of reservations. There are several studies that attest to this. But the question that requires attention is why they took the lead? There are three interrelated reasons that should explain their early responses to modernity. As has been put famously, certain ‘push and pull’ factors prompted an early response to reservations from the Mahars. Objective conditions and subjective responses thus enable us to understand the relative lag of other sub-castes. (Then it becomes a moral question on the part of the Maharashtra to take lexical principle of John Rawls seriously. If they fail to do so, then the support of the state becomes essential and unavoidable.) The structural position of the Mahars in a self-sufficient village economy — engaged in un-skilled occupations, with little or no share in watan lands, their demographic preponderance over other castes in the village and the recurrence of natural calamities — all these cumulatively constituted the push factor. On the other side of the causative spectrum, factors like urbanisation, modernisation and industrialisation constituted the pull factors. The Mahars were employed in the military, in dockyards and in the textile mills of Nagpur and Mumbai. They were also employed in the railways, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and other government departments. By responding to education early they became available for reservation benefits. The Mangs and Chambas, on the other hand, were still tied to the village economy. Their skilled occupations offered them a source of livelihood from within the self-sufficient village economy. This is true of many other sub-castes as well, like the Chamars of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Malas of
Andhra Pradesh and Holayars of Karnataka. Their traditional occupations were eventually destroyed because of the introduction of sophistication in the nylon industry and chappal-making (footwear), forcing them to take to education. However, by the time they arrived at the processes of modernisation they were already late.

The same is true of the Valmikis, traditionally a scavenger sub-caste, who were also latecomers to the process of modernisation. While they were not engaged in skilled occupations like the Mangs or Chakliyars of Tamil Nadu, their services, however, were crucial across the board for the maintenance of patriarchy. They were associated with feudal families who forced them to clean the faeces of their wives and children. In return for these services performed for the feudal lords they received old and spoilt food and clothes. Even today, scavenging is a job that does not require much education; it is still performed manually. In pathology labs, airports and big malls, the Valmikis are thus employed for manual scavenging. Some people argue that the Dalits working in mortuaries are better trained at opening dead bodies for a post mortem, but this skill has not yet received any official recognition. Even in a pathology lab their job is merely to reach the samples to technicians who process it further for analysis. The Chamars of Uttar Pradesh, to take another example, are landless agricultural labourers, and are a numerically large group. The tanning industry that the dalits were a part of, cannot accommodate all of them. This means that they have also been pushed out of their traditional jobs and into the world of modern education. The tension between Malas and Madigas needs to be understood in terms of a similar structural dynamics. The Madigas are latecomers for precisely the same reasons. The Madigas, who are predominant in the region of Telagana, the erstwhile Hyderabad state, were pushed out of their traditional occupation of leather tanning because of the mechanisation of irrigation. However, they were pushed out from their traditional occupations later than the Malas who took to education early on, and came to enjoy the benefits of reservation early as well.

Although one can offer an explanation to get rid of the misunderstandings that arise from assertions made by scholars that are often taken as truisms, we need also to be mindful of another element. State-driven policies are prone to creating a feeling of mutual disdain among different social groups, such as when Ambedkar compared Dalits to Muslims during the Round Table Conference held in 1930.
The reference point for a Muslim local was always the upwardly mobile Dalit from his village. However, until recently, this had not been a matter of much concern for the elite Muslims. One of the reasons that explains why is the confidence of the elite Muslims in the Nehruvian vision, which replaced the need for any comparison with Dalits.

However, the existing policy regime has created some tensions between Dalits and Muslims. For instance, reservations for the SCs may make some members of the Muslim community feel relatively deprived when it comes to access to opportunities provided by policies of preferential treatment. But what Muslims overlook is the special minority status that their institutions already enjoy. For example, in Aligrah Muslim University, there is no reservation for the SCs. There is therefore a contradiction between policy and principle; there is commitment to the advocacy of a principle but not to its implementation. What is a gain at the level of principle is thus lost at the level of policy.

Principles have larger universal concerns, they are not devised for a particular social group. The principles of affirmative action are social justice and recognition, which can cover all kinds of marginalised social groups without making any exclusive distinction. When, however, these principles are broken and are sought to be implemented as policies they become a matter of contention. The question that arises then is where to accommodate these newcomers into the policy of reservation? Should they be accommodated within the existing quota or is there a need to create a separate quota for them? These are concerns that cannot be addressed through a ‘stepping on each other’s toes’ approach. Egalitarian principles demand the accommodation of more groups into the existing opportunity structure, however the principle of utility creates serious difficulties in devising effective policies. The utility principle suggests that we should not introduce reservations for they might annoy the majority group and may lead to caste-based riots, violence and possible loss of life. What then is the use of introducing reservations, since they cannot produce the desired results? If this were indeed the case the government would not implement reservations at all. In contradistinction, an egalitarian framework makes the principle of social justice a matter of rights, and the lexicon of rights does not allow it to be influenced by consequentialist arguments, i.e., that you do $x$, then $y$ will happen. The attitude, rather, is ‘let people suffer, but we will continue to fight for
our rights’. One has to find out, therefore, if the present minority demand for affirmative action can be treated as a matter of rights?

Dalit assertions are not against Muslims but against upper-caste Brahmins, the entire history of the social movement for reservation proves this. The reference point for their demand has always been the upper castes, not the lower castes. Those castes which are in pursuit of modernity and development target the upper echelons as their reference point. This was true of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Babasaheb Ambedkar, both of whom shared a common vision of making their respective communities modern. The Dalits did not see non-Brahmins as their reference point in western and south India, their reference was the top rung of the category of the twice-born or dwija. Since they arrived at the realisation of their relative deprivation earlier than the other castes it was natural for them to set their sight as those who sought to monopolise the opportunity structure. But the sub-castes among the lower castes saw the lower castes as their point of reference. They found not the upper castes but the Dalits as their immediate reference point. They could not have seen the twice-born caste as located on top because they had already been ushered into other new avenues of work and mobility. For the sub-castes within the Dalit cluster, it is the concrete being — the individual — who becomes the object of comparison. For Muslims, however, it is not the individual but institutions that become the gauge in ascertaining relative deprivation. For example, some Muslim observers criticise the Indian state for having failed to offer the same kind of policy package as was done for the SCs. They complain that the state did not devise similar institutional interventions for Muslims. A secular Nehru had impressed the Muslim elite much more than a modernist Ambedkar. Communal tensions forced this Nehruvian affinity on the larger Muslim community. As a result, while the force of the language of rights in Muslim discourses is strong, the emphasis on social justice is rather weak. In contrast, in Dalit discourses the latter has been quite forceful and prominent. For Dalits civil society is the prime target, not the state. But for Muslims the target is the state (Bose and Jalal 2004). Dalits defend their claim for reservation in the context of the vagaries of civil society whereas the Muslims do it in the context of the callousness of the state. The slippage of casteism that has percolated into these communities suggests an internal differentiation as the basis of reservation. For example, the Pasmanda Muslims from Bihar have been demanding reservation within reservation. So are other organisations, like Dalit and OBC
Muslim groups. The Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, led by the late Arvind Nirmal, is yet another example that shows these growing trends.

The same is true of Muslims. They, especially the lower rungs of the Muslim community, also find themselves latecomers to the process of modernisation. In Maharashtra, in Malegaon (Nashik district) the powerloom industry has declined by almost 80 per cent and in Bhiwandi (Thane district) the situation is getting worse day by day. OBC Muslims have lost their jobs due to the closing down of many of the units here. Benaras, a strong powerloom centre, has been unable to retain OBC Muslims as employees. These Muslims are then forced to find an alternative means of earning money. Some of them have taken to modern education. The difference between today’s Muslims and Muslims of the nineteenth century is that for the latter, and for Sir Syed, the Indian National Congress was the reference point, not the Dalits. For today’s Muslims, however, the reference point is the Dalits. Some years ago, at a national conference on the Dalit–Muslim–OBC front in Delhi, Dr Asghar Ali Engineer, made a sensational observation in his keynote address. He asked, ‘why have the Muslims in the country not produced an Ambedkar?’ Some of the elite Muslims present at the seminar did not approve of this comment, their discomfort becoming clear from their body language. Today, Ambedkar has become an object of hatred, at least for the Muslim elite, for whom Nehru is still the favourite. Considered historically, however, the relationship between Dalits and Muslims has had a mixed trajectory. This is because both of them are drawn into a relationship of completion that is finally governed by the colonial state. Muslims are of course competing with Hindus, but with the Dalits they need to cooperate. The fate of the Muslims of West Bengal, for instance, is similar to that of the Dalits in the State. This suggests the need to launch a social struggle not for the margin but from the margin.

The processes of globalisation produce their own margins. These margins are like a beehive, one that has been emptied by the upper castes and whose function is to store nectar collected from different plants. Paralleling this, the processes of educational development are linked with the available opportunity structure. One finds positions like barristers, teachers and engineers being monopolised largely by the upper castes. The earliest mass-scale opportunities of upward mobility, were created through education, which in itself was an expanding world of employment. Thus, to begin with, the Brahmins
started with the teacher’s job. Then, along with the expansion of the banking and insurance sectors, they moved to banking, at least in Maharashtra. The operation of banks was inaugurated with many promises of modernisation and growth, but ultimately ended up functioning on the basis of caste considerations. The Brahmin community moved from banking onto more lucrative professions like medicine and engineering, leaving teaching to the *bahujan* but continuing to retain banking for themselves. Now they have moved to foreign shores with the information technology (IT) industry, raising questions of concern regarding nationalism and patriotism. It would be an interesting and telling exercise to find out how many of the twice-born group are engaged in these leading occupations. Their association with India and their feeling of nationalist pride is only at a symbolic level. That is to say the Brahmins have retained their national identity but only in an abstract form. Having moved from engineering to medicine to IT and found employment abroad, the state’s opportunity structures are now seeking to be filled. The state has declared hundreds and thousands of posts vacant but does not end up filling them. It is in this context, where the proverbial bees from the margins have swarmed the opportunity structure, that the Sachar Committee’s recommendations need to be considered seriously.

This article began with the argument that the principle of affirmative action can lead to solidarity whereas its reduction to the needs of policy implementation leads to the fragmentation of the community. It has been argued by some scholars that the Constituent Assembly chose not to debate these issues by operating on the principle of minority, instead, the principle of ‘groups’ was invoked. Reservation for the Dalits and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) is based on this group criterion. The SCR is asking for the conversion of a minority religious community into a social group, which is in turn seen as being comprised of individuals. We can thus see how the reservation principle, which should be looking to create and strengthen solidarity, becomes fragmentary the moment it is converted into a policy. The failure of the lexical principle or rotation is responsible for this fragmentation. For policy-making one has to disaggregate the individual from the larger chaotic and anonymous mass of people. This is done by the state through the introduction of several criteria. Why and how does the state do this? It does so through the ideology of liberalism, which is deployed to maintain in place the tension between
hope and despair. This is what the colonial state also did. There were communities, such as Christians for instance, who did not compete to acquire favour because they were already in a favourable position. Communities, therefore, like the Sikhs and Muslims, and the Dalits on the other hand, had to struggle and compete to win favour. Competition between these communities was, therefore, natural. However, the focus of the Muslim community was more on political demands, which ultimately resulted in the creation of Pakistan. The Dalit focus was on the political as well but they focused much more on social, educational and economic questions. The situation changed after Independence, and today, Muslims are asking for educational and economic opportunities. They find that they are latecomers, and they have reached this realisation only through a comparison with Dalits. Even the SCR suggests this rather unhealthy comparison.

Policy regimes seek to individualise people and thus create target groups. For once they are individualised it becomes easy for the state to impose surveillance and exercise power on them. This need not be done directly by the state but by making individuals participate in their own surveillance, as for instance, Dalits asking for caste certificate verification. It is also expected that a policy regime will eventually lead to internal differentiation, even if this does not happen automatically. Ironically, it is the elites from among the minority groups, otherwise opposed to their lower-caste members, particularly in everyday forms of social and cultural life, who have now become the chief protagonists in this policy regime.

The historical context used in putting forward the Sachar Committee’s propositions is based on a negative reference point. The Muslim–Dalit relationship in India can be understood in terms of emulation and competition; during the 1970s it was emulation and today it is competition. Emulation produces a feeling of jealousy and competition produces hatred. This hatred also has a middle-class touch to it. Capacity is internal and ability depends on external resources. Capacity does not directly produce achievement, it has to be supported by ability. The SCR discusses only the capacity and does not talk about the ability to actually produce achievement. The competition element has received a further boost because of the mention it has found in the SCR. The Report suggests that a Muslim electoral constituency should be carved out from the existing reservations meant for the Dalits. This is seen as stepping on the toes of Dalits. Unlike other communities, Muslims provided the background conditions for
the Dalits to compete. Dalits started defining themselves as a community, because communities were the unit of distribution. The same competitive spirit was present even during the Round Table Conference. Muslims, tribal communities and the Dalit sub-castes have today chosen ‘dominant’ Dalits as their negative reference point. In a sense, the Dalits themselves have set up this reference point. They wish to become bourgeois and for that their reference point has been the upper castes. The thrust of their aspirations is the upper caste; they too want to go to the US, and join more IITs and IIMs. However absurd it might appear, they want to retain for themselves the upper castes’ aspirations. As members of minority communities aspire to share the opportunities available through state policies, they seek, in effect, to share the margin with Dalits. As a result, the margin has become the reference point not just for Dalits but also for the minorities, the OBCs and the poor from the upper castes. The upper caste feels rather content about this reference point for political reasons, because it has the potential to create bad blood among the social groups that exist at the margins. The state for its part plays an interesting game in all this. It needs to create a social tension among the groups from the margin so that it can then proclaim that it is committed to egalitarianism and is interested in taking the equality project seriously.

Ironically enough, it is only when elite Muslims have moved out and away from the state that they, along with the state, have made the SCs a point of reference by speaking of their relative deprivation of the Muslims. During the freedom struggle, the Dalits, led by Ambedkar, complained that the Congress was favouring Muslims in the matter of affirmative treatment. Although he held a different scholarly opinion on Pakistan, he chose not to mix policy with principle and put forward a case for Dalits to receive preferential treatment. It was after the Partition that the Muslims lost this ground and suddenly the Dalits became the chosen subjects for preferential treatment. The Indian state did not think of the Muslims as the appropriate target community for such a policy.

It could be argued that several groups, like Madigas, Matangs, Walmikis and even STs view the dominant sub-castes of the SCs as a negative reference point. Obviously it is the sense of individual interests and welfare that makes these groups privilege their concerns about state policy, but in doing so they walk into the trap laid by the state. Even for nurturing individualist aspirations, should they not take the upper-caste, upwardly mobile groups as their reference point?
Similarly, why do the protagonists of minority welfare not take the case of already entrenched minority traders and industrialists as their reference point? Why do they not include members of other minority communities who belong to the same class category? The elite of the minority communities from among the poorer class often forget that making the margin a site for contestation will ultimately be in favour of the state rather than the groups in question.

The state prefers to address the question of who is marginal, rather than looking at marginality as a condition. It is relatively easy for the state to deal with marginals because they offer it a definite opportunity for the deployment of a liberal ideology. A liberal ideology works on the basis of balancing despair and hope; it does not allow crises to accumulate even as it continues to accumulate a surplus. In fact, surplus accumulation depends on the diffusion of crises, that always already reside in the conditions. Thus, once minorities and Dalits are converted into a target they can be shortlisted for patronage. This apportionment of marginals from marginality leads to other legitimising mechanisms, like creating a commission for equal opportunity or preparing a diversity index and setting up other commissions whose members can then become experts on devising a more perfect criterion for being labelled marginal.

Marginality, thus understood, is the condition that underlies and renews structures of inequality. To that extent, dramatic restructuring is not the state’s agenda. In fact, structurally, the state is forced to produce the marginal, disaggregate them, classify them and ultimately bring them into the policy regime fold, making them cardholders and certificate-holders. This individuation helps the state obtain support for its liberal ideology, which is a post-facto justification of the notion of inequality. Once it becomes individual-oriented, the state begins to legitimise this ideology by advocating that today it is one person’s turn, tomorrow it will be someone else’s. Thus, liberal ideology oscillates between despair and hope, and does not allow either to dominate. It seeks to moderate responses to utter destitution and frustration. Through the SCR the state aims to accomplish exactly this moderation in the attitude of the Muslim youth of India today. The utility principle discussed above, is also regressive because it generates a pro-consumption attitude among the people. It seeks to fragment the social reality into individuals and target groups, and it seeks to disaggregate the community into individuals. Policy regimes thus, ultimately, require social fragmentation.
References


Government of India (GoI), 2006. *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India: A Report*. New Delhi: Prime Minister’s High Level Committee (Sachar Committee), Cabinet Secretariat, GoI.

This article explores the broad question of whether religious or community identity affects a group’s development. Religion is understood as a dimension of culture whereby people hold certain beliefs and values which set them apart from other communities. These beliefs and values translate into specific social practices followed by many if not all members of the community. In what way do these social practices influence developmental outcomes? For this article, development is understood as ‘human development’ and gauged through conventional indicators such as health, literacy, fertility, and education. From among these indicators, we examine whether differential literacy and the education levels of socio-religious communities can be explained by their respective ideologies. The communities being considered are Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). For the purposes of analysis Jains, Buddhists and Zoroastrians (JBZ) have been clubbed together as one group and the SCs and STs as another. Although SCs/STs do not constitute a religious community in the same way as the others, their specific shared circumstances of socio-economic backwardness lead us to consider and compare their human development with that of religious communities.

* Earlier drafts of this article were presented at the Iran Cultural Center (2004), Jammu University (2005) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (2006). I would like to thank Surjit Bhalla for help with using National Sample Survey (NSS) data on education.
As is well-known, the relationship between religion and development and explorations into it were very much a part of the work done by classical sociologists such as Weber, Marx and Durkheim. Weber in particular examined the relationship between capitalism and Protestantism, arguing that the ‘spirit of capitalism’ evolved due to certain peculiar features of the Protestant faith such as trust, ethical business practices, the importance given to frugality and, most important, to seeing a ‘sign of grace’ in one’s material success, that is success based on ethical principles (Weber 1992). Weber also looked at why other religions, such as Hinduism and Confucianism, did not develop the capitalist spirit or were resistant to it, focusing his argument on the ‘this worldly’ or ‘other worldly’ character of a particular religion. It led scholars to question if there are such inherently inhibiting factors in certain religious ideologies. Weber’s work was much debated and evidence was procured to show that it was a confluence of factors that determines economic behaviour and that it would be difficult to isolate religious ideology as a determining factor. To give credit to Weber, his work on the various religious ideologies, especially Puritanism, was very nuanced, giving importance to historical factors and examining how religious beliefs translate into specific practices, the unintended consequence of which was the production of a capitalist spirit. Following the classical thinkers, sociologists continue to see religion as an important component of culture that influences everyday practices and the choices people make or are constrained to make. For many communities, religion provides the framework of action and this can influence outcomes in other spheres of their social life.

Religious Communities and Human Development

In recent times, debates have resurfaced on whether the practices entailed by certain religious or socio-religious ideologies or characteristics are a hindrance to the secular development of its followers. By ‘secular development’ I mean an enhancement in capabilities related to literacy, education, health, work, fertility decisions, and the freedom to make one’s own choices vis-à-vis the kind of life people value and wish to lead. Recent studies on development have also been interested in why group inequalities do not correlate merely with income differences but also with the social dimensions of gender, religion, region, and caste (see Dreze 2004). Census reports
and surveys reveal that prosperity and capability achievements are differentially distributed according to the above attributes. With a wealth of research and research tools available, it is possible to pinpoint specific geographical regions and groups that are characterised by low development and high poverty. If such differences persist, it becomes important to ask what the reason is.

**Important Questions**

This article examines the literacy and educational levels of different communities of India to interrogate the relationship between socio-religious ideology and concomitant development indicators. Some important questions are: is religion a factor in shaping access to education in different religious communities? Is the demand and supply of education affected by the religion of a community? Can differential educational levels of a community be attributed to the religious values or social status that a community holds? If data shows us higher levels of educational attainment among Christians than among Hindus/Muslims, is this an effect of religion? If so, then why? Related questions are — do disadvantaged communities such as SCs face similar and equal barriers to education as Muslims? Are they of the same nature? Are both SCs and Muslims excluded from schooling and if so, does it have anything to do with their community backgrounds?

A second order of questions relates to contradictions in the development paradigm. Such a conundrum characterises the Sikh community. How can we explain the high and improving education levels of Sikh girls and, at the same time, understand the sharp discrimination against them as revealed by low adult and juvenile sex ratios? Is Sikh religion empowering for women in some ways and not in others? If Sikhism espouses equality of the sexes, why are well-being outcomes so different in life and in learning?

Another more nuanced question relates to whether constraints faced by women of different socio-religious communities in accessing education are related to the religion per se or with behavioural requirements of the religion — seclusion, for instance, or sex segregation, withdrawal from public spaces after puberty, early marriage, etc. Or are such constraints largely due to secular factors, such as levels of poverty and well-being, gender discrimination, location in poor or rich areas, villages and towns, places where schooling is easily accessible or not, and factors such as safety, among others.
A study of the position of women within religious communities and the restrictions that are placed on their entitlements and choices has been of special concern and interest. Most religions remain patriarchal in nature and have tended to reinforce religious prescriptions by expecting women to conform to specific behavioural norms. As a result the backwardness\(^1\) of women has often been attributed to religious or community characteristics. Sometimes the blame has been laid at the door of factors external to religion and sometimes internal to it, i.e., Muslims may be discriminated against in health, education and employment because they are Muslims — a minority community. At other times it could be claimed that Muslims do not believe in restricting family size and thus have higher rates of fertility. Muslim women may be restricted from going out due to seclusion norms so their education attainment and work participation rates suffer. Yet, the huge decline in fertility and substantial increases in literacy in many Muslim countries and in India’s southern states make us pause in drawing such automatic conclusions.

That a purely ‘culturological’ explanation is difficult to subscribe to is brought out by several recent studies. For instance, while the overall development achievements of Muslims and of the SCs/STs remain lower than those of other communities in India, we also know that the regional dimension to such achievements and inequalities is significant (GoI 2006; Hasan and Menon 2004). Thus, the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh in north India share many developmental characteristics with other religious communities of the state and have different socio-economic indicators than Muslims in south India. Despite differing religious beliefs and practices, rural Muslim and Hindu women are subjected to similar living conditions and patriarchal norms (Jeffery 2001). Similarly, Jejeebhoy and Sathar conclude from their study of women’s autonomy in India and Pakistan that ‘religion plays a modest role in influencing female autonomy in our (the) study sample’ (2001: 706). They argue that the north/south differences within India are much sharper than differences between Hindu and Muslim women in Uttar Pradesh or Punjab. Further, Punjabi women on both sides of the India–Pakistan border experience similar limitations on autonomy, emphasising the effect of region rather than religion (ibid.: 706).

\(^1\) By this I mean secular backwardness, as expressed by indicators like literacy, education, workforce participation, political representation, etc.
A telling fact that emerges from our perusal of available data is that literacy levels of young Hindu and Muslim women are more or less similar. Despite many such findings, certain stereotypes about the characteristics of various religious communities prevail, even in intellectual perceptions, and often these stereotypes drive state policy. But stereotypes need to be interrogated and not accepted at face value, and it is only a contextual understanding that can help us explain the conditions shared by large groups of people who may be of the same gender, race, caste or religion.

Another disadvantage of stereotypical constructions is that they give the impression of homogeneity and convey a certain timelessness; so while the reality is differentiated and changing, our perceptions often are not. It is important to understand the time dimension of social change and develop adequate ways of measuring or evaluating change. Doing this allows us to fine-tune policy rather than making one-size-fits-all policies which become inefficient and difficult to revise. Thus, group-based affirmative action policies, having been devised at a particular point in time, need to evolve in keeping with the changing socio-economic conditions of the people that they apply to. This article, while paying attention to the time dimension by comparing change over a 22-year period, does not, however, attempt to compare regional or intra-community dimensions.

Examining Trends

While the broad contours of the development indicators of socio-religious communities of India are well-known from census findings, there has been some degree of interest in assessing how the conditions of different communities have changed over time. This has generally been a simplistic exercise, captured by straightforward numbers showing changes in fertility or improvements in educational attainment or poverty levels. Some scholars, such as Jean Dreze (2004), have noted the correlation between communities and the status of literacy and education among them, pointing to the various factors that have conditioned differential achievements. Dreze notes a trend of rapid increases in literacy and education across the country and he has pointed out some factors that need to be explored to understand long-standing regional and social patterns. A more comprehensive assessment of change would require, however, that we look into the extent to which the barriers that earlier prevented members of some socio-religious communities from accessing education still remain or
have fallen away. To what extent have secular ideas and institutions and economic changes weakened the hold of the caste system and other structures of inequality that have historically prevented disadvantaged groups from being able to access opportunities for participation? To what extent have government educational and affirmative action policies helped these groups?

The above questions are beyond the scope of the present article, though I hope to pursue them at a later date. Presently, what is sought is the mapping of some trends in literacy and education for different religious communities — Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christians, and SCs (the last as a distinct social category). This has been done on the basis of NSS data for 1983 and 2004–05. NSS data are based on surveys of approximately 120,000 households, covering 700,000 individuals.

The figures examined in this study, throw up some surprising and interesting patterns. Analysing the progress of different religious communities in the field of education in the last two decades (1983–2005) will help us understand if religious identities continue to be correlated with their progress and development. The gender gap is also examined to understand whether women have progressed despite the restrictions placed on them by society and for which their religion is often held responsible. Much of the analysis presented here is confirmed by the findings of the Sachar Committee Report (SCR 2006), which uses a combination of census and NSS data to assess the relative indicators of socio-religious communities. This article, however, specifically compares data from two NSS rounds (a period of just over two decades) and also calculates the figures for the youth population between the ages of 8–24 to get a perspective on future trends.

Educated Youth; Progressing Women

Table 12.1 and Figure 12.1 examine literacy and education in India from NSS data for the years 1983–2005. Literacy is defined here as people with at least two years of schooling; and education is defined in terms of the number of years of schooling completed. Despite all the obstacles faced by Indians in becoming literate and in pursuing higher
education, there has been rapid and steady progress in this area over the last two decades. Table 12.1 shows literacy for the entire population (all ages) and for the youth (ages 8–24). The youth age group is examined because it is a much better indicator of changes, and expected future changes, in educational attainment.

**TABLE 12.1: Literacy and Education in India, 1983–2005**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per cent)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth (age 8–24)</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>89.4</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth (age 8–24)</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Source:** NSS Employment and Unemployment Surveys, 1983 and 2004–05

**Notes:** Each literacy cell represents the proportion of people in that age group who are literate, i.e., greater than, or have had equal to 2 years of schooling; each education cell represents achievement in terms of average years of schooling.

First, some stylised facts. In 1983, less than half, 41 per cent, of the Indian population was literate. In 2004–05, the percentage had improved, but was still a lowly 57 per cent. These literacy rates look depressing since the figures 20 years later include the older population which continues to remain illiterate. However, if we exclude the older population and assess literacy levels of the younger population (8–24 years) we find considerable improvement, with figures for 2004–05 being close to the goal of universal literacy at 85 per cent.

Table 12.1 also reveals the progress in education by a different indicator — the mean years of schooling completed by the different age groups. In 1983, the average educational attainment of an Indian was very low — only 2.5 years. In 2004–05, this had increased to 4.3 years. As expected, the youth population is more educated and by 2004–05, had an average educational level of more than 6 years. For the entire population, the mean education years have increased by 1.8 years (from 2.5 to 4.3 years); for the younger population, the increase was a larger, 2.4 years (from 3.7 to 6.1 years).

Figure 12.1 documents the changes in literacy for the different age–sex groups. Literacy for the entire population increased by 16.1
percentage points (ppt) (from 41.1 per cent in 1983 to 57.2 per cent in 2004–05). For the youth population, the literacy increase was much larger at 24.5 ppt (from 60.1 per cent to 84.6 per cent). If one looks at the figures for the same time period, but disaggregated by gender, literacy for young women increased the most, 31.6 ppt (from 48.1 to 79.7 per cent), a considerably higher increase than the 18.2 ppt achieved by young males (from 71.2 to 89.4 per cent).

The above analysis of trends in youth literacy reveals that women are progressing faster than men although a gap in levels still remains. The figures in the chart include all socio-religious communities and at one level it can be taken to indicate that while all communities are improving their literacy rates, women overall are experiencing a faster pace of change. However, the above data does not give us the disaggregated figures by socio-religious communities; Table 12.2 (literacy) and Table 12.3 (mean years of education) do that.

**Literacy and Education by Socio-religious Community**

Table 12.2 reports the levels and changes in literacy by socio-religious communities for the years 1983 and 2004–05. Unlike Table 12.1, these data are reported for the younger age group only (for the entire
TABLE 12.2: Caste, Religion and Literacy for Youth, Ages 8–24 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/Religion</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Gender Ratio (%)</th>
<th>Progress Change in ppt.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC/ST</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>79.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBZ</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>95.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>79.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: 1) JBZ represents Jains, Buddhists and Zoroastrians.

2) Each cell represents the proportion of people in that socio-religious group who are literate, i.e., greater than or equal to years of schooling.

3) The third column set (gender ratio) represents female achievement in literacy in relative terms. For example, the number 50.6 means that for every 100 SC/ST males that were literate, there were 50.6 SC/ST females who were literate.

4) The final column measures the change in the female/male ratio between 1983 and 2004–05.
TABLE 12.3: Caste, Religion and Education for Youth, Ages 8–24 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/Religion</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Gender Ratio (%)</th>
<th>Progress Change in ppt.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC/ST</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBZ</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NSS Employment and Unemployment Surveys, 1983 and 2004–05

Notes: 1) JBZ represents Jains, Buddhists and Zoroastrians.
2) Each cell represents the means years of educational attainment for the religious/social group.
3) The third column set (female–male ratio) represents female achievement in education in relative terms; for example, the number 48.4 means that for every 100 years of education obtained by SC/ST males, the SC/ST females obtained 48.4 years.
4) The final column measures the change in the female/male ratio between 1983 and 2004–05.
population, the trends are similar). A rank ordering of the socio-religious communities reveals that the Christians were the most educated in 1983 (at 86 per cent literacy). In 2004–05, the group comprising Jains, Buddhists and Zoroastrians was the most educated, (with 96 per cent literacy compared to 93 per cent for Christians). Christians are followed by the Sikhs, but the most encouraging finding is that other communities — Hindus, Muslims and SCs/STs — are not as far behind as in the past.

Interesting findings also emerge from the comparisons between Hindus, Muslims and SC/ST communities. Conventional wisdom suggests that the barriers faced by Muslims are far greater than those faced by the majority community, and as a result their education levels are much lower. However, this does not seem to be the case for the last 20 years. Literacy levels in the Hindu population was 6 percentage points higher in 1983 (60 vs. 54 per cent) and this gap narrowed down to 4 per cent in 2004–05. Interestingly, youth literacy for both Hindu and Muslim women was at near identical levels in both 1983 and 2004–05 (46.8 and 45.3 per cent respectively). The community with the largest change in literacy levels are the SCs/STs. Their literacy rates jumped from a low 43 per cent in 1983 to a near equal 79 per cent in 2004–05.

The table also reports the gender ratio or male–female differentials in literacy by community. The gender ratio in literacy is defined as the proportion of literate females per 100 males — a gender ratio of 100 would mean that the women and men are equally educated. While there was considerable disparity in the gender ratio in 1983, by 2004–05 there seems to have been a remarkable amount of convergence. In 1983, the gender ratio was only 68, indicating that girls had only two-thirds the literacy attainment level of men. By 2004–05, the ratio had almost reached parity, at 89 per cent. SC/STs had the lowest gender gap, but by 2004–05, the gender ratio had reached a high 84 per cent for this group, i.e., for every 100 literate SC/ST males, there were 84 literate SC/ST females in that year. The gender ratio for Muslim women is among the highest at 91 per cent in 2004–05; it is somewhat higher than that among Hindus (88 per cent) or SCs/STs (84 per cent).

The last column in Table 12.2 refers to progress or change in the gender ratio over the 20-years span. SC/ST women have narrowed the gap by the largest amount, their gender ratio has increased from 51 per cent in 1983 to 84 per cent in 2004–05. This is the most surprising result, that the SC/STs have the highest rate of progress both for
overall as well as differential male–female literacy. This is mostly due to
the fact that they were lagging behind the most and thus had the most
catching up to do. Given that the demand for education is a function
of income, these data indirectly indicate that poverty levels in the
SC/ST community may have also declined commensurately.

Having discussed literacy, we now move on to examining
figures on the change in mean years of education for each of the communities.
Do we see a trend similar to what we observed for literacy? While
the average number of years of education have more than doubled for
SC/ST communities, from 2.3 years in 1983 to 5.2 years in 2004–05
(Table 12.1), for other communities the rate of progress has been
slightly lesser but at more or less the same rate. The mean education
years, at 5.2, are less than average for SCs/STs and Muslims by about
1 year (Table 12.3). The nation-wise average is 6.1 years, and the
Hindus, are average with mean education level is 6.2 years. Although
the SCR (GoI 2006: 56, 57) finds Muslim mean education years for ages
7–16 below those of SC/STs, we find that for the larger age group 8–24
years, there is hardly any difference between the two communities in
2004–05. Indeed, Muslim educational attainment is marginally higher
at 5.3 vs. 5.2 years (SC/STs). Confirming our findings, as reported
in Table 12.1, the SCR does reveal that the increase in enrolment has
been the highest among SCs/STs, followed by Muslims.

Figures 12.2 and 12.3 explore the changes in the gender ratio for
the two different indicators and the different age and social groups.
Regarding male–female differentials in education levels, the data
indicates a large amount of catch-up by women. In 1983, for every
100 young literate males, only 68 females were literate; in 2004–05,
this fraction had increased to a near equal level of 89 per cent, i.e., 89
literate women for every 100 literate men in 2004–05.

Figure 12.3 reports the change in gender gap for the different com-
munities.3 Regardless of the indicator, the SC/STs show the most
progress — an increase of more than 30 percentage points. The other
communities have witnessed a 20–25 percentage point increase. The
reason why the Christian community has shown very little change
is because their gender gap was close to zero in 1983, i.e., not much
progress was needed because parity already existed. Jains, Buddhists

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3 For the youth population only; results are similar for the entire population.
and Zoroastrians have also made substantial progress towards equality. Both Hindu and Muslim women have progressed by about the same amount — a 20–25 percentage point increase for both indicators.

Thus, no matter how the data is sliced, the trends are similar. Those communities who were the most backward in terms of literacy/education are catching up faster than those who were ahead in 1983. The reasons for some of these findings are explored below.

### Some Inferences

The data analysed above shows that the situation vis-à-vis literacy and education for all religious communities, despite being far from ideal, has improved considerably. One needs to explain three striking findings here. One, the rapid advancement seen among the worst off communities, namely the SCs/STs. The second finding is that contrary to expectations and beliefs, Hindus and Muslims, especially women, are progressing at the same rate. The third is that women of
all communities are progressing faster than the men. An important point to keep in mind here is that since these trends apply to youth populations they may be indicators of long-term or future trends, which would signify a qualitative change in educational prospects of most communities.

Let us briefly examine all three important findings. As mentioned earlier, this article has not conducted a disaggregated analysis according to region or economic levels and therefore it is possible only to offer explanations at a general level. A more in-depth analysis would require correlating these with other factors and examining in detail the barriers to education faced by different communities.

Although some of the progress witnessed for SC/ST groups could possibly be attributed to quotas in education, this is a hypothesis that needs further examination. In order to isolate the effect of quotas one would have to do a more detailed comparative analysis with a community that has not been a beneficiary of quotas, e.g., Muslims. Since both the disadvantaged communities are at present showing progress from their earlier levels, perhaps the change has
to be attributed to factors common to all communities, such as the recognition of the importance of education, improvements in access to education, declines in poverty levels, etc. Besides government support and a public consensus on affirmative action for SCs/STs, the latter have also gained from social movements that have given them a voice and made them more aware of the opportunities available. What also allows the largest ‘catching up’ in literacy and education for SCs/STs to take place is the lowest base from which they began.

With regard to Muslims, some analysis has been offered by the Sachar Committee Report, which broadly concludes that although Muslims do lag behind national averages, their achievements or disabilities are better understood in the context of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the regions in which they are located rather than being attributable to their religion per se. However, the Report, while noting the rapid development in literacy and education taking place among Muslims and especially among Muslim women, fails to attribute any significance to it. This lacuna in the report points to the fact that while barriers to education are well-researched, there are few studies on what causes positive change. Real insights will come from observing and analysing both the factors that have made for progress among disadvantaged communities as well as the barriers that still remain.

The critical point to be made here is that the trends in youth literacy suggest that many of the older obstacles to literacy and education, especially among women, are disappearing and that these apply equally to women and girls of all socio-religious communities. Some general reasons which may explain this increase in literacy and education among all the socio-religious groups, especially among women, are discussed below.

**The Importance of Being Educated**

It would be tautological to claim that one of the reasons for the change that we see is that the value of education has been accepted almost universally. Amartya Sen has argued that education is valuable in itself and not just because it makes us eligible for the job market. The ability to read and write and to understand issues enhances one’s ability to make choices and improves participation in the economy and society. An education thus enhances a person’s capabilities and allows him/her to function to their fullest potential. It can reduce
the impact of social inequality and is the most important means of upward social mobility available in modern societies. Inversely, the lack of education can sharpen and deepen economic inequalities as shown by many sociologists, including Pierre Bourdieu. There is ample evidence to show that that parents need little convincing that education is good for their children — this is a big factor in the demand for education, both public and private.

**Barriers to Female Education**

Studies in the sociology of education and by scholars in other disciplines demonstrate that if one can get rid of the practical constraints that prevent children, especially girl children, from being educated, parents from all communities have few objections in sending them to school. The main obstacles are not religious, they are secular: (i) poverty and the inability to afford education; (ii) the need for children to start earning money at an early age; (iii) keeping girl children at home to look after younger siblings — this happens when both parents work and there are no facilities for child care; (iv) lack of schools at a convenient distance — this affects girls more, especially their higher education; (v) the poor quality of education afforded by the state (which includes teacher absenteeism and lack of infrastructure, the lack of toilet facilities for girls has often been cited as a factor in reducing school attendance); and (vi) uneducated parents.

**Changes in Parental Attitudes**

Despite the oft-stated and broad-based benefits of education, people continue to see it as an investment, with employment as the final goal. Parents who do not see education translating into employment think that educating children, especially girl children, is a waste of their resources. In some rural communities and among poorer sections of the population, children are seen as being better off engaged in productive work rather than attending school. It is considered more useful for them to begin contributing to the family or learning a trade or profession that they will eventually pursue. Again, despite such misgivings, NSS data shows that more and more girls are being educated in all religious communities. Studies from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (the latter an Islamic nation) reveal that when asked who they would withdraw from school in case of financial constraints, almost all parents replied that they would withdraw the child who was not doing well (Mukhopadhay and Sudarshan 2003). This is a change from earlier times when the girl child would have been the
one to be withdrawn, if she was sent to school at all. This remains the case with the Hindu and Muslim communities in India, explaining partially the male–female gap in educational attainment among them. The gender bias in inter-generational transfers favours boys over girls among most Indian communities.

Yet, looking at the trends in female literacy and education, one conclusion that can be drawn is that parents today are discriminating far less between male and female children than was the case earlier. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon’s study on Muslim women (2004) confirms this with their finding that parental opposition to the education of girl children is a disappearing variable except in some rural pockets. A significant finding of their study is that even among Muslims there is not much opposition to co-education and this is true among younger parents. Indeed, they argue that there is a perceptible intergenerational shift in attitudes to co-education. The fact that Hindu and Muslim women share similar literacy characteristics reiterates our point that the conditions on the ground for Muslim and Hindu women are not much different — while the religions may be different, patriarchal norms applicable to them are similar.

**Demographic Transition and Gender Effects of Catch-up in Education**

With the demographic transition taking place in most states, families now have fewer children enabling them to spend more on education. Also, with fewer children, parents are now less likely to discriminate on the basis of gender. In many parts of the country, educational attainment among girls is now higher than that of boys. However, as Punjab and Haryana reveal, this does not necessarily lessen other forms of discrimination. In Punjab especially, smaller families and greater education of mothers, and access to new sex-determination technologies, has cumulatively led to female foeticide, resulting in a very low sex ratios among children. Despite high literacy and education figures for women among the Sikhs, the predominant community in the Punjab, preference for a son is resilient and daughters do not appear to be welcome.

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4 The ‘demographic transition’ refers to the shift of a population from high birth and death rates to low birth and death rates as it develops economically. In India, there is north–south divide in relation to this transition with most of the southern states having accomplished the demographic transition while many northern states lag behind.
Nonetheless, the most important effect of catching up in terms of education might well be the eventual decline of son-preference. Together with reforms in property laws, better education will allow women to become independent and also capable of offering support to parents. Women’s improved educational status and earning capacity should, over time, have an effect on dowry so that women are not viewed as an economic burden by parents.

**Conclusion**

What do the trends in literacy and education for different socio-religious communities tell us about the relationship between religion and their socio-economic indicators? From the recent progress seen among all socio-religious communities, we cannot infer that socio-religious ideology is solely or directly responsible for the educational status of a community. Nor can we argue that there is excessive discrimination against specific religious communities. What we also see is that communities are changing their attitudes to education without discarding their religious values. However, there are various social and political factors affecting communities that can have a dampening effect on development opportunities and gains. Thus, the communal violence that affects religious communities can reduce access to education. This especially affects girl children who may be withdrawn from school or kept from pursuing higher education. Low age at marriage also impacts girls’ education. In this case, it is the factors responsible for low age at marriage that would need to be examined and not religious ideology per se. At the same time, government policies which make education accessible and affordable go a long way in contributing to communities accessing education irrespective of religious background.

The recent trends in literacy and education, described in this article, point to the need for further research which would explain the rapid increases in literacy and education witnessed among all socio-religious communities.

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The question of minorities has dominated Indian politics for over a century. In 1909, separate electorates for Muslims were introduced at the national level. In 2009, employment and educational quotas for Muslims are under consideration in the wake of the recommendations of the Sachar Committee and Ranganath Misra Committee. India is not alone here, minority rights are currently debated by states across the world. Importantly, in each country, the manner in which minority rights are accommodated is shaped by histories of nation-building.

In India, the forms in which the question of minorities has recurred in public debate have tended to follow lines that crystallised at a key historical moment, the making of the Indian Constitution. Elsewhere, I have argued that the Constituent Assembly debates (1946–50), which accompanied the founding of the Indian nation state, marked a turning point in the justification of group rights (Bajpai 2000). Whereas in the colonial framework, the entitlement of minority groups to special provisions had been an established principle, during the Constituent Assembly debates, the purpose of preferential treatment was recast towards the amelioration of ‘backwardness’ alone.

This argument fits the case of quotas well, and helps explain their career during Constitution-making, as well as subsequently, in post-Independence India. Quotas and other forms of special representation in legislatures and public services, known at the time as political safeguards, had been the chief element in the colonial regime of minority rights. Religious minorities, notably Muslims, had been the main beneficiaries of political safeguards, and were included in such provisions in initial constitutional proposals. By the time of the final draft of the Constitution, however, political safeguards for religious
minorities were dropped, and these came to be restricted mainly to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.¹ I have argued that whereas quotas for the ‘backward’ classes had a justificatory basis in the nationalist vocabulary, those for the religious minorities did not. This is crucial for understanding the final shape of reservations in the Indian Constitution (Bajpai 2000).

The recasting of the justificatory basis of reservations at the time of Constitution-making has influenced the forms of minority claims in post-Independence India. ‘Backwardness’ of a community has become the sole focus of quota claims.² This was not the case in the late colonial period, when quotas for a group were sought also on grounds that it constituted a distinct minority community. Indeed, during the Constituent Assembly debates, several representatives had petitioned for quotas for Scheduled Castes and Tribes on grounds that these were communities distinct from the majority population.³ Nowadays, by contrast, reservations are universally sought on grounds of ‘backwardness’, as recent debates on quotas for Muslims indicate.

Whereas the constitutional and post-Independence career of quotas corroborates my argument regarding the recasting of the basis of preferential treatment during Constitution-making, the case of the other important category of minority safeguards, cultural rights, appears to fit less well. The Indian Constitution includes cultural and educational rights of religious minorities as justiciable fundamental rights. These assume the form of the rights of individuals, as well as minority group rights.⁴ Cultural rights of minorities have been augmented in the post-Independence period as a result of legislative and

¹ Some temporary provisions for Anglo-Indians were also retained.
² Of course, what ‘backwardness’ consists of is by no means self-evident. A range of criteria have been invoked by politicians, including poverty and economic deprivation; educational disadvantage; low social status; a history of discrimination and oppression by dominant groups; under-representation in government employment and educational institutions. These criteria have been related in different ways, depending upon the preferred set of beneficiaries. On the multiplicity of criteria for ‘backwardness’, see Galanter (1984).
⁴ Individuals have the freedom to profess, practice and propagate their religion (Article 25), every religious group or denomination, including minority groups has the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and
judicial enactment. How are we to make sense of this career of cultural rights in terms of the argument outlined above? In particular, does the claim that backwardness became the sole legitimate basis for group preferential treatment apply only to the case of reservations? Was a normative basis fashioned by nationalists for special cultural rights for religious minorities?

This article offers a re-reading of the debates on cultural and educational rights of minorities in the Constituent Assembly. The first section focuses on the career of cultural rights provisions through successive drafts of the Constitution. It shows that minority cultural rights also came to be attenuated during Constitution-making, but the reduction was less drastic than in the case of political safeguards. The second section of the article analyses the debates in the Constituent Assembly on cultural and educational rights. I argue that unlike political safeguards, minority cultural and educational rights did find some support within the nationalist vocabulary. Nevertheless, on closer analysis, crucial gaps appear which suggest that the justificatory basis of minority cultural rights was weak. The general conclusion from the case of political safeguards, namely that cultural difference lacked legitimacy as a basis for group preferential treatment in the nationalist vocabulary, holds, with minor qualifications, also in the case of cultural safeguards. The final section discusses implications of the justificatory deficit for the career of cultural safeguards during Constitution making, and more speculatively, in post-Independence Indian politics.

Some clarifications are in order regarding the scope of this article. The term ‘nationalist vocabulary’ indicates a heuristic category in my analysis, designating the dominant nationalist opinion. It was espoused by a varying set of individuals, including increasingly, as the deliberations unfolded, minority representatives. Nationalist opinion of course spanned diverse ideological strands and positions, notably ranging between ‘modernists’ and ‘traditionalists’, and within each of these categories, ‘hardliners’ and ‘moderates’. The focus of this article, however, is on delineating the common ground between these strands. Second, the argument of this article is intended to supplement charitable purposes, to manage its own affairs in matters of religion, to own, acquire and administer property in accordance with law (Article 26). Minority groups have the right to preserve their language, script and culture and to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice (Articles 29, 30).
Minority Cultural Rights and Constitution-making

the existing, scant literature on minority rights during Constitution-making (Retzlaff 1963; Ansari 1999). I argue that the nationalist vocabulary is one crucial, and neglected factor for understanding the fate of cultural rights, not the only relevant factor. The account of the nationalist vocabulary here is based on a particular source, the Constituent Assembly debates. As such, this article is intended as a modest contribution to our understanding of the career of minority rights in India.

Cultural Rights in the Constituent Assembly:
A Case of Retrenchment?

In the three years that it took to write the Constitution, momentous years in Indian politics spanning Partition, constitutional provisions for minorities were revised several times over in ways significant and small. Broadly speaking, minority provisions were of two types: political safeguards comprising mainly representation in legislatures, executives and government employment on the one hand; and cultural safeguards, concerning religious, cultural and educational rights, on the other. Political safeguards for religious minorities were withdrawn during Constitution-making. What was the career of minority cultural rights in the Constituent Assembly?

Two views on this subject are to be found in the existing literature. The first distinguishes the case of cultural rights from political safeguards; the second amalgamates the two and holds that cultural rights for religious minorities, like political safeguards, were retracted during Constitution-making. Each of these views needs to be nuanced further. My reading suggests that while there was an overall trend of retrenchment, this assumed different degrees and forms in different areas of minority rights. Three broad positions on minority rights can be distinguished in the Constituent Assembly. The first position, that of opposition to all group rights, might be characterised as assimilationist/integrationist; the second position of support for maximal group rights, as multinational; and a third intermediate position of support for some safeguards, as limited multiculturalism. It is important to underline that this classification is

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5 For an example of the first, see Chandhoke (1999), for the latter, see Ansari (1999).
6 This is an adaptation of Adeney’s typology (2007). For a classification of positions on secularism in the Constituent Assembly debates, see Chiriyankandath (2000).
heuristic: parties and individuals moved from one position to another during the Assembly’s career. Whereas at the start of the Assembly’s deliberations, Muslim, Sikh and Scheduled Caste representatives from non-Congress parties espoused a multinational position (favouring, for instance, safeguards such as separate electorates), by the end, most had moved to a limited multicultural position. In the end, with regard to political safeguards for religious minorities, the assimilationist/integrationist ‘no safeguards’ position prevailed. On political safeguards for ‘backward classes’, and cultural safeguards for minorities, a limited multicultural position would be embodied in the Constitution. The Constitution-makers would institute religious, cultural and educational rights in many cases in a form that was in keeping with the demands of minority representatives, against the preferences of integrationists, Hindu nationalists and radical secularists alike. However, cultural safeguards too came to be cut-back somewhat during Constitution-making.

Let us consider some examples. In August 1947, the Assembly had adopted a draft provision which read ‘No minority whether based on religion, community or language shall be discriminated against in regard to admission into State educational institutions, nor shall any religious instruction be compulsorily imposed on them’ (emphasis added). The clause was described as a ‘simple non-discriminatory clause against minorities in the matter of admission to schools which

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7 In some cases, individuals occupied different positions in distinct policy areas, so for instance, K.M. Munshi was integrationist in the matter of political safeguards, but more multicultural with respect to cultural rights.

8 Although the stance of the Indian Constitution towards Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists is more assimilationist than in the case of Muslims and Christians (Singh 2006; Adeney 2007).

9 For a more complete account of this process, see Bajpai (forthcoming).
are maintained by the State’. In 1948, this came to be amended to read ‘No citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the State or receiving aid out of State funds on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them’ (emphasis added). As has been noted, the effect of broadening the protection offered by the right to all citizens was to build an ambiguity into the cultural and educational rights of minorities (Ansari 1999: 130). For it meant that if minority educational institutions were to hold, for instance, that the preservation of their language and culture or the educational advancement of the community required giving preference in admission to students from their community, this could be declared unconstitutional under the new phrasing of the article, as indeed has been the case in some judicial decisions.

Another important change of wording in cultural rights between the report and the draft stage of Constitution-making occurred in the article pertaining to the language and script of minorities. The original article adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 1947 read: ‘Minorities in every unit shall be protected in respect of their language, script, and culture, and no laws or regulations may be enacted that may operate oppressively or prejudicially in this respect’ (emphasis added). The Drafting Committee changed the wording to ‘Any section of citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script, and culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same’ (Shiva Rao 1967–68, 5: 275). The change was defended as providing more robust protection to minorities, as it gave a fundamental right ‘so that if a State made any law which was inconsistent with the provisions of this article, then that…law would be invalid’. However, importantly, under the revised article, the state had no obligation to undertake measures to protect the language and script of minorities: protection would be a matter for community initiative. The change elicited opposition among others from several Muslim representatives in the Constituent Assembly, who pressed for a restoration of the earlier wording and tabled an amendment providing for primary education to minorities in their mother tongue at the state’s expense.¹³

The cultural rights eventually adopted in 1949 thus represented some attenuation from the proposals initially accepted by the Constituent Assembly in 1947. At the same time, however, unlike in the case of political safeguards, the opponents of minority cultural rights also did not get their way. Thus, for instance, demands that cultural and educational rights be confined to linguistic minorities were rejected, as were proposals that cultural and educational provisions for minorities be relegated to the non-justiciable parts of the Constitution, instead of enforceable fundamental rights. In the case of religious freedom provisions as well, several minority demands were acceded to. For example, despite the objections of secularist hardliners, state aid was permitted to minority educational institutions imparting religious instruction. And against the opposition of several nationalists, of both secularist and Hindu inclination, the Constitution incorporated a broad definition of the right to freedom of religion, encompassing the right to religious ‘practice’ as well as, controversially, to ‘propagate’ religion in addition to the right to ‘profess’ religion.

The case of personal law offers a good example of the intermediate compromise position that ultimately prevailed in the Constitution on the religious and cultural rights of minorities. On the one hand, despite earlier assurances by the Congress party, notably in the Nehru Report of 1928 and the Congress Scheme for a Communal Settlement at the Second Round Table Conference of October 1931

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14 Proposals to this effect advanced by Jayaprakash Narayan and Damodar Swarup Seth were rejected. See Shiva Rao (1967–68, 4: 45–47).  
15 A suggestion to this effect mooted by Govind Vallabh Pant was rejected. See Shiva Rao (1967–68, 2: 279).  
16 Modernists such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and B.R. Ambedkar urged a narrower version of the right that would permit only the freedom of religious worship and the freedom to ‘profess’ religion, against the broader definition that was eventually adopted encompassing the ‘practise’ of religion. For more details, see Shiva Rao (1967–68, 2: 140, 165, 173, 208) and Jha (2002).  
17 Although the Advisory Committee initially qualified the right to propagate religion by laying down that conversion brought about by coercion or undue influence would not be recognised by law, eventually Patel agreed to dropping this clause. The right to propagate religion was retained in the teeth of strong opposition from majoritarian Hindu Congressmen. See Shiva Rao (1967–68, 2: 268) and Chiriyankandath (2000: 14).
that personal laws would be protected by specific provisions in the future Constitution, no guarantees were provided for personal laws. The inclusion in the Constitution of a provision for a uniform civil code, albeit only in a non-justiciable form, meant that the continued existence of religious laws could no longer be taken for granted. On the other hand, despite the strong urging of ‘secularist hardliners’, there would be no justiciable provision regarding a uniform civil code to supplant the different religious laws that had governed ‘personal’ matters such as marriage, divorce in the colonial period.

In sum, an examination of the career of minority cultural rights in the Constituent Assembly suggests a dynamic of moderate retrenchment. An intermediate position of limited multicultural safeguards eventually prevailed in the Constitution: these were protected as fundamental rights, but in forms that were often weaker than those initially endorsed by the Assembly. Whereas attenuation in the case of political safeguards had involved a narrowing of their focus to the ‘backward classes’, in the case of cultural rights, this took place through a series of steps involving a broadening of rights pertaining specifically to minorities, to all citizens.

Cultural Rights and the Nationalist Vocabulary

What accounts for the changes to the cultural rights of minorities during Constitution-making? As in the case of political safeguards, the main frame in terms of which these have been understood in the existing literature is the Partition of the country. Both discussions which distinguish the fate of cultural rights from political rights, and those which combine the two within a common arc of retrenchment

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18 A demand put forward by Muslim representatives that the right to personal law be included in the fundamental right to religion was rejected, as was a demand for the addition to the clause regarding the Uniform Civil Code of a provision that communities having their personal law not be obliged to give it up. For earlier Congress assurances, see for instance Zaidi (1984: 96) and Ansari (1999: 114).

19 These included Congress Christian leader Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Parsi Socialist Minnoo Masani. Proponents of personal law were, however, assured that the State would not impose a uniform code on unwilling communities. See CAD (1946–50, 7: 777–82).
share the view that the Partition of the country accounts for the changes in minority safeguards during Constitution-making.\textsuperscript{20}

Closer examination suggests that the Partition serves as shorthand, explicitly or implicitly, for a range of factors. Chief among these are the dominant position of the Congress party after Partition, and a hardening of attitudes within the Congress against special safeguards for religious minorities.\textsuperscript{21} After Partition, a preponderant Congress that no longer needed to conciliate minorities, that was convinced more than ever of the perils of safeguards, retracted its earlier promises.

While Partition likely played an important role, my reading of the Constituent Assembly debates suggests that it does not suffice for understanding the changes to minority rights during Constitution-making. After all, if the dominance of the Congress in the Assembly after Partition and its conversion to ‘homogenized unitary cultural nationalism’ is all there is to the story, what prevented cultural rights for minorities from being withdrawn altogether, like political safeguards?

One possible explanation is that the retention of cultural rights was the result of a political compromise. There is indeed evidence in the Constituent Assembly debates suggesting that some representatives might have given up claims to political safeguards in return for desired cultural rights. Rev. Jerome D’Souza supported the withdrawal of political safeguards for religious minorities thus:

The desire of our country and of our leadership is to work for the political homogeneity of this vast country. Unfortunately that political homogeneity was threatened and to some extent destroyed by the need to give political safeguards to minorities. But remember those safeguards were asked for or deemed necessary for the sake of religious and cultural and individual rights and not merely for the sake of political privileges or any emoluments which might come from them. And as long as these cultural and personal rights are safeguarded, we do not need any other political safeguard...(CAD 1946–50, 7: 39–40).

Even if there was a trade-off between cultural rights and political safeguards, however, certain questions remain. Given the massive dominance of the Congress in the post-Partition Constituent Assembly, why was there a need for a compromise at all? My reading


\textsuperscript{21} See for instance Retzlaff (1966), Ansari (1999) and for a more detailed discussion, see Bajpai (forthcoming).
suggests that there were longer-term factors to do with the nature of the political ideals of Indian nationalism that illuminate the fate of minority safeguards. A closer analysis of political debate is needed for a better grasp of why cultural rights survived unlike political safeguards and the respects in which these too underwent some attenuation during Constitution-making.

Such an analysis suggests, to begin with, that unlike political safeguards, the cultural rights of minorities did find support from key nationalist ideals. For instance, whereas secularism was construed as precluding the recognition of religious and cultural distinctions in the political arena, and thereby as incompatible with political safeguards for minorities, it was seen to imply religious and cultural freedom for all citizens. Indeed, the latter was regarded by most representatives as a corollary of the exclusion of religion from the political domain. Proponents of secularism differed over the extent to which religion and culture should be allowed in public life, with modernists pressing for the privatisation of religion. Nevertheless, the pursuit of religion and the preservation of language and culture were for most part regarded as legitimate goals. The conception of secularism that dominated in nationalist opinion in this period was not of hostility to religion, but of state impartiality between religions. It was because religion was held to be important by the Indian people, and because of the diversity of religions practiced in India that the state, in order

For instance, Jagat Narain Lal held: ‘...this State is going to be a secular state, and will guarantee freedom of faith, worship and of thought, and that it is not going to recognise any religious distinctions for the purpose of conferring political rights...’ (CAD 1946–50, 8: 308).

See in particular the debates over the phrasing of fundamental rights provisions on religious freedom and religious instruction in educational institutions.

Supporting an amendment giving the President the option of taking his oath of office in the name of God, a proposal that was supported by representatives of religious minorities and incorporated into the Constitution, K.M. Munshi asserted: ‘We must take cognizance of the fact that India is a religious minded country. Even while we are talking of a secular state, our mode of thought and life is largely coloured by a religious attitude to life...the state in India cannot be secular in the sense of being anti religious’ (CAD 1946–50, 7: 1057). For a more detailed discussion of conceptions of secularism in the Constituent Assembly debates, see Chiriyankandath (2000), Bajpai (2002) and Jha (2002).
to treat its citizens equally, had to be secular, in the sense of not identifying with any particular religion.

Further, in a departure from the standard liberal position, groups as well as individuals were recognised in nationalist opinion as the subjects of rights and entitlements. There was an easy switch in the nationalist vocabulary between individuals and groups as entities to whom a regime of rights and associated norms of freedom, equality and justice would apply. It was commonly held that all individuals and groups should have the freedom to pursue their religion and develop their language and culture, or that justice demanded that no individual or group be subject to compulsion in matters of religion or language. The recognition of group rights in religious and cultural matters was supported by colonial policies of communal entitlements, as well as early nationalist views, where communities were regarded as the units of the nation. Moreover, since the late 1920s, the Congress had reiterated a commitment to the protection of the culture, language and scripts of minorities. All Congress resolutions since 1931 had included minority cultural rights in their lists of fundamental rights of citizens. These, along with rights to non-discrimination, were regarded as the appropriate sphere for the pursuit of minority concerns, rather than political safeguards.

However, although minority cultural rights were supported by some elements of the nationalist vocabulary, these conflicted with

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25 On the general point, see Mahajan (1998) and Bhargava (1999).
26 Seconding the Objectives Resolution, Purushottamadas Tandon stated: ‘The Resolution...has equality as its underlying theme...we shall do justice to all communities and give full freedom in their social and religious affairs’ (CAD 1946–50, 1: 66–67). See also Vijayalakshmi Pandit in CAD (1946–50, 2: 261) and S. Radhakrishnan in CAD (1946–50, 2: 254).
27 Until the 1920s, historians have argued, the nation was mostly envisioned as a composite of communities defined in religious, regional and caste terms. The terms ‘nation’ and ‘community’ were often used interchangeably in English, as well as Indian languages in the late nineteenth century. See Pandey (1990: Chapters 6 and 7).
28 A commitment to the rights of minority groups to their religion and culture had been affirmed in every important policy document of the Congress since the late 1920s. These included notably the Nehru Report of 1928, the Karachi Resolution on Fundamental Rights of 1931, the Sapru Committee report of 1944. See Chandhoke (2002: 210–12).
others. First, while the nationalist vocabulary was accommodating of group rights in cultural matters, these existed in tension with individual rights, and the nationalist emphasis in this period was on the latter. Second, while nationalist opinion frequently reiterated a commitment to the religious, cultural and educational rights of minorities, insofar as such rights involved special treatment for minorities over and above the rights enjoyed by all individuals and groups, their normative basis in the nationalist vocabulary remained unclear. These claims need some elaboration.

The tension between individual and group rights ran through the debates on most religious and cultural rights, with the final form of several articles reflecting an uneasy compromise between the often conflicting demands of the two. For example, after heated debate, the Constitution eventually incorporated an expansive definition of the right to freedom of religion as noted earlier. At the same time, the right to religious freedom was not left unfettered: state intervention was explicitly authorised for upholding fundamental rights to non-discrimination and equality for all individuals, among other reasons.

The balance of nationalist opinion in this period, favoured individual over group rights. The close association of individual rights and nation-building in this period appears to have been crucial here. Equal rights for all individuals were the means whereby the state would weld together a people divided into conflicting groups into one common nation. It was also the defining aspect of the national identity: Indian nationality was articulated in this period largely in civic terms, as consisting of equal citizenship rights for all individuals irrespective of ‘caste, creed, or community’. Their closeness to national unity however meant that individual rights were mostly construed to imply the same rights for all citizens. It was perhaps because individual rights were closely tied to nation-building that these found enthusiasts among ideologically disparate nationalists in the Constituent Assembly, ‘traditionalists’ and ‘modernists’ alike.

30 For a more detailed discussion, see Mahajan (1998: chapters 2 and 3); also Jha (2002).

31 The advocates of a uniform civil code for example invoked individual rights and national unity considerations virtually interchangeably. See the note of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Hansa Mehta and Minoo Masani to the fundamental rights subcommittee dated April 14, 1947 (Shiva Rao 1967–68, 2: 162).
The emphasis on individual rights in this period meant that there were constant pressures to extend the cultural and educational rights of minorities to all citizens, and to qualify these in order to protect individuals.

A second source of justificatory deficit for minority cultural rights derived from the fact that special cultural rights for minorities lacked an adequate grounding in the nationalist vocabulary. Nationalists frequently reiterated that minorities would have rights that guaranteed freedom in matters of religion, language and culture, and protection from discrimination and interference from the state. However, insofar as such rights involved differential treatment for minorities over and above the rights enjoyed by all individuals and groups, their normative basis in the nationalist vocabulary remained unclear. In other words, the move from all groups having rights to pursue their culture, to the special cultural rights of minorities, was not argued for in nationalist opinion.

To put it differently, despite the fact that the cultural rights of minorities were consistent with some elements of the nationalist vocabulary, tensions remained with others, such as justice construed in individualist, difference-blind terms, as well as national unity. In the case of ‘backwardness’, tensions of differential treatment with nationalist ideals were confronted and arguments put forward for how equality, justice, national unity and development were consistent with and indeed required preference for disadvantaged groups. By contrast, in the case of minority cultures, arguments to suggest how for instance, equality or justice might require special provisions for minorities, or why the preservation of minority cultures was a common good, are scarcely in evidence in nationalist opinion. As a basis for group-differentiated rights then, cultural difference, unlike ‘backwardness’, lacked an adequate basis in the nationalist vocabulary.

An important manifestation of this justificatory deficit was an ambiguity in the requirements that minority cultural rights created with respect to state assistance. This appears very clearly in the debate over the article pertaining to the preservation of the distinct language, culture and scripts of minorities. As noted earlier, the wording of this provision was modified by the Drafting Committee, a change opposed among others by several Muslim representatives as a diminution in the protection offered to minorities. The issue was raised in the context of the position of Urdu, the language associated with the Muslims of the United Provinces. Z.H. Lari complained:
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[It implies] only that the minority or a section of the citizens shall be entitled to conserve its own language. It simply means this that a body of citizens will be entitled to use their own language in their private intercourse. But the question is whether they will be entitled to use their own language in elementary education given at the state’s expense...if the state were to establish institutions as it would do — naturally there will be so many minorities which will not be in a position to start institutions on their own — then the question arises, will it be possible for minorities to demand that...elementary education be imparted through the medium of their own language...the clause as it stands is innocuous: it is of no effect at all. It states a truism; it is not a fundamental right at all. Who can prevent any minority or any class of citizens from using their own culture and language to the extent that it is possible for them to do so irrespective of legislation or regulation that may be made by the State?32

Advocates pressed for the inclusion of a constitutional guarantee that minorities be entitled to have primary education imparted to their children by the state through the medium of the mother tongue provided a substantial number of such students were available. The arguments put forward included the claim that state assistance was a requirement of a commitment to the rights of minorities,33 and that recent evidence suggested that unless the provision for state assistance was entrenched in the Constitution, it would be ignored by provincial majorities.

In dominant nationalist opinion, while the desirability of children receiving primary education in their mother tongue was not denied, there was opposition to the inclusion of a constitutional obligation of state aid for minorities. Cultural rights of minorities were largely interpreted as negative liberties. Chairman of the Drafting Committee Dr B.R. Ambedkar said that the proposed amendment was unnecessary: ‘we should be satisfied by the fact that it is such a universal principle that no provincial government can justifiably abrogate it without damage to a considerable part of the population in the matter of its educational rights.’ While supporting the general principle, he nevertheless endorsed a restricted interpretation of the duties that

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32 CAD (1946–50, 7: 894). See also the speeches of Begum Aizaz Rasul and Pandit Hirday Nath Kunzru.
the right required of the state, limiting these to forbearance from interference, rather than also implying duties to protect or aid minority cultures.\textsuperscript{34} As per the constitutional article, there was

\ldots no burden cast upon the State. The only limitation that is imposed... is that if there is a cultural minority which wants to preserve its language, its script and its culture, the State shall not by law impose upon it any other culture which may be either local or otherwise.\textsuperscript{35}

A more robust defense of a limited interpretation of the right came from the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant. Speaking of ‘the duty of the State to the general body of citizens and the obligations that the State owes to the vast majority of people living under its protection’ (CAD 1946–50, 7: 916), he said:

We...owe a duty to all citizens who live in this land and we have to do things in such a way as would enable us to make the maximum use of the resources... Mr Lari cannot expect us to feed the fad of anybody at the expense of the tax-payer. In our country, vast numbers are illiterate and they have to be given the benefit of at least primary education. Primary education, in order that it may be made even universal, will cost millions and millions...If every school should have two or three sets of teachers, one knowing Nagari and the other knowing Urdu, indiscriminately regardless of the number of students interested in either are we capable of providing for that financially? If such a policy were followed, then we would not be able to introduce universal primary education, not to talk of compulsory primary education, till Doomsday.\textsuperscript{(ibid.: 913–14)}.

Here, the preservation of minority languages was cast as a non-basic right. The interest of minorities in receiving education in their mother tongue, it was suggested, was an expensive taste of a few, outweighed in the utilitarian calculus by the basic needs of the many; it was not sufficiently weighty to create a right to aid from the state. The underlying normative appeal here was to the principle that each person’s welfare should count equally; the protection of minority languages it was suggested involved an illegitimate departure from the equal treatment of all individuals. Responding to complaints about the status of Urdu in Uttar Pradesh, Pandit Pant stated:

\textsuperscript{34} On the multiple duties of avoidance, protection and aid involved in the fulfilment of rights, see Shue (1980).

\textsuperscript{35} Dr B.R. Ambedkar in CAD (1946–50, 7: 924).
...where substantial numbers of such students are available, arrangements should be made; where the numbers are not substantial, then we cannot incur such expenditure. Can anything be more equitable, can anything be more generous? The fundamental right that we are adopting here does not require us to make any provision like that at all. It only gives freedom to the followers of a language which is different from the national language, from the State language, to preserve their language. It does not require the government to make any special provision for them. But we have gone much beyond that, and we have given special privileges (CAD 1946–50, 7: 916).

The right of minorities to preserve their language and script was thus construed as requiring mainly negative duties of non-interference from the state. The state would refrain from imposing on minorities a language other than their own, and allow minorities freedom to pursue their culture. The right was not seen as requiring positive actions from the state to set up institutions to enable the preservation of minority culture and languages. While the article did of course leave open the possibility of state aid for minority educational institutions, as the speech cited suggests, such assistance was likely to be regarded as a concession that went beyond the requirements of the right, rather than a duty required for its fulfillment. That state aid for minorities was likely to be considered as such was indicative of the fact that the protection of minority cultures lacked an adequate justificatory basis in the nationalist vocabulary.

Conclusion

An examination of the case of cultural rights of minorities during Constitution-making suggests the following. Unlike political safeguards, these were supported by elements of the nationalist vocabulary. Notably, secularism was construed as implying freedom for individuals and groups in religious and cultural matters, and as recognising the importance of religion and culture in people’s lives.

36 See Mahajan (1998). It is, however, hard to see how the right could be fulfilled by the state even in the negative terms of forbearance from harm. The survival and flourishing of minority languages would inevitably be harmed as a result of a state decision to expand primary education, where the medium of instruction in most cases would not be a minority language. On the general point, see Shue (1980).
Rights were seen as a means whereby individuals and groups could pursue their culture unhindered by state interference; rights were seen to adhere to both individuals and groups. While cultural difference was rejected as a basis of political representation, it was recognised for purposes of religious, cultural and educational rights. That cultural and educational rights of minorities would survive in the Constitution, unlike political safeguards, is not surprising.

Nevertheless, special rights for minority cultures lacked a robust normative basis in the nationalist vocabulary. Unlike in the case of preferential treatment for ‘backward’ groups, how the protection of minority cultures fitted into the nationalist scheme was rarely articulated. How secularism, justice, democracy, national unity or development might be conducive to special treatment for minorities in cultural matters was not spelt out. The gaps in their justificatory basis help us better understand the kinds of attenuation that minority cultural rights underwent during Constitution-making. Most notably, the protection originally offered to minorities came to be narrowed somewhat as rights were extended to all citizens, and mention of the state’s duty to aid minority educational institutions was dropped. Minorities were free to protect their culture at their own initiative with the possibility of, but not a constitutional entitlement to, assistance from the state. This was in contrast with the case of ‘backward’ groups, where the duty of the state to render assistance was written explicitly into the constitution. While the Partition might have been a trigger for these changes, this article has suggested that there were longer-term factors to do with the ideology of Indian nationalism that predisposed this outcome. In the liberal nationalist vocabulary, special treatment for cultural protection suffered from a greater justificatory deficit than that for relieving socio-economic disadvantage. Its illegitimacy from the standpoint of nation-building was reinforced by liberal concerns for secularism and individual rights.

The justificatory deficit has not resulted in the absence of state assistance for minority cultures in the post-Independence period. Governments have often funded minority educational institutions

37 A directive was introduced in 1956, stating that it ‘shall be the endeavour of every state and every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups’ (Mahajan 1998: 98).
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and religious activities. It has, however, meant that such support has been seen as an act of generosity towards minorities, a discretionary concession rather than as a requirement of rights to cultural protection. Minorities claiming assistance from the state have appeared as wards dependent upon state largesse, demanding a larger share of resources than is their due. The influential Hindu nationalist critique of ‘minority appeasement’ — the view that state assistance for cultural protection constitutes unjust favouritism, motivated by electoral considerations with little principled basis — is a product and symptom of the justificatory deficit in the case of minority cultures.

In the post-Independence period, policy-makers have attempted to justify the differential treatment of minority cultures. The most common argument in this regard has sought to locate minority cultural protection in India’s ancient traditions of embracing diversity and dissent. The accommodation of minorities has been described as the distinguishing feature of India’s secularism and national identity. Although this is not a claim that I can develop here, in legislative debate, this argument has relied largely on evidence from India’s Hindu past. Special treatment of minorities then is vulnerable to being cast as a gift of Hindu benevolence, and turned against minorities, as witnessed in the Hindu nationalist critique of secularism. The justificatory deficit of minority rights that attended the founding of the Indian nation-state remains to be adequately addressed by policy-makers.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to blame the Constitution-makers, if nothing else, for missing a creative opportunity to frame a robust normative basis for minority rights. That, however, would be historically naïve: the challenge of building a nation-state out of the ruins of the Partition and prevailing beliefs about the role of minority safeguards as its primary cause were not conducive to the elaboration of strong justifications of minority rights. To read this solely in terms of bad faith or prejudice against minorities would be too narrow. Both liberal and national aspects weighed against the elaboration of strong multicultural arguments within Indian nationalism of the late 1940s. Subsequent history in India and elsewhere demonstrates that multicultural policies are compatible with, and indeed often required for nation-building and state stability. The fashioning of

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38 For this argument in the Shah Bano debate, see Bajpai (2002).
political arguments for the protection of minority cultures in terms of a common good, of benefit to all citizens, is a task that needs renewed effort, from defenders of minority rights and the Indian nation alike.

References


That the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) should be applied to the whole of India has been an aspiration that emerged in the Constituent Assembly Debates (CAD). The aspiration, however, was not received without apprehensions, notably from the Muslim community. While there has been no initiative on the part of the legislature to bring about a UCC, the Supreme Court of India, in the last 20–25 years has been at the forefront in stating that it should be made applicable to the whole of the country.

A standard suggestion of the Supreme Court in dealing with cases of violation of individual rights under the guise of group rights of a minority community has been to have a UCC. This is because a UCC is seen as a panacea for all ills perpetrated in the name of group rights and personal laws. The debate gained visibility in 1985 with the Shah Bano case. The judgement by Justice Y.V. Chandrachud went on to state that, ‘It is a matter of regret that Article 44 of our constitution has remained a dead letter. It provides that “The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India.” A belief seems to have gained

*I am grateful to Shaikh Shoaib Budan and several people who belong to the Muslim community in Goa for sharing their thoughts with me on the Uniform Civil Code and enriching this article.

1 See particularly the views of Mohammad Ismail Sahib, Naziruddin Ahmed, Mahboob Ali Baig Sahib Bahadur and Pocker Sahib Bahadur in CAD, Book II, Vol. 7.

ground that it is for the Muslim community to take a lead in matter of reforms of their personal law. A common civil code will help the cause of national integration by removing disparate loyalties to laws which have conflicting ideologies. No community is likely to bell the cat by making gratuitous concessions on this issue. This raised several reactions explaining why it was not yet time to implement a UCC effectively.

Not surprisingly, the same judge had upheld the existence of a UCC in Goa as an exemplary case in 1979, six years before he sat in judgement over the Shah Bano case. Addressing a conference titled ‘Family Laws of Goa, Daman and Diu’, organised by the Goa, Daman and Diu Advocates Association, Justice Chandrachud went on to state, ‘It is heartening to find that the dream of a Uniform Civil Code in the country finds its realization in the Union Territory of Goa, Daman and Diu only’ (Fernandes 1984:10).

It is in light of these two statements that this article tries to examine certain provisions of the UCC as in force in Goa — the manner in which it deals with the Muslim community in Goa and how the community has tried to accommodate its implementation.

Visibility of Minorities and Minority Rights

A community whose cultural practices need protection is generally perceived as vulnerable vis-à-vis other groups that may subsume it or delegate it to the fringes of society. The strongest argument in favour of the existence of group rights in multicultural democratic societies is the minority status of the concerned group. That is to say that religious and cultural groups are vulnerable and need protection because they lack numerical strength. While a minority, in the context of multicultural societies more often than not does refer to a numerical minority, what makes the case for group rights is the vulnerability of the group — numerically or otherwise. As Leslie Green (1994) states, there is nothing about minority status as such that generates rights. The most vulnerable sections of society are those with the least power and resources at their disposal, and they are often, though not invariably, in the minority. Minority status, therefore, is one imperfect correlate of social marginality.

While numerical weakness is a potent argument as a correlate of the vulnerability and marginality for seeking minority rights, simultaneously, such a group must have the numerical strength needed to be visible enough to qualify as an important minority. That is, for a minority to seek cultural protection, it has to be in a majority enough position so that its vulnerability is visible and, more specifically, so that the group can be recognised as vulnerable. In addition to this the group must possess a sense of shared history that can give it a feeling of pride and self-esteem, and the will and desire, therefore, to protect its distinctness. A minority group that is numerically miniscule is likely to confront an invisibility of its vulnerability and the consequent non-recognition of its cultural distinctness. This invisibility is compounded if in addition to its miniscule numerical strength, the group also lacks a sense of shared history and identity.

The Goan Muslim community is an instance of a minority group with such a description. It is different from the Muslim community in the rest of the country in that in Goa it is a miniscule minority, unlike in the rest of the country where it is a ‘major’ minority. This is true not just in numerical terms, making it visible enough, it is also a ‘major’ minority at a pan-India level by virtue of being bigger than all other religious minorities. The Muslim community in Goa, from being around 3 per cent of the population at the time of Liberation to around 6–7 per cent during the 2007 Goa Assembly Elections, in comparison to the 65 per cent-strong Hindu majority and a 28 per cent-strong Catholic minority, far from being recognised as a vulnerable minority, hardly even qualifies as a visible minority group.

Muslim Identity and the Portuguese Reign

Since the UCC came to Goa under Portuguese rule and stayed on as a legacy of it, the mentality and plight of Goan Muslims under the Portuguese has a bearing on their presence (or the lack of it) in the UCC.

4The Goan Muslim community has a much higher literacy rate than the Muslim community in the rest of the country, commensurate with the high literacy rates in Goa as compared to the national average. However, though there are no official figures, the community acknowledges that the literacy level among Goan Muslims is marginally lower than the literacy rates of non-Muslim Goans.
The presence of Muslims in Goa can be traced back to the mid-fifteenth century and this came to be a dominant presence in the late fifteenth century under the rule of Adil Shah. In 1510, the Portuguese, under Admiral Alfonso de Albuquerque, fighting on behalf of a local sovereign Timayya, defeated the ruling Bijapur king, Yusuf Ali Adil Shah. It was a gruesome battle that terminated with the massacre of a majority of the Muslims. This was accompanied also by the destruction of several mosques, especially in Old Goa. Muslim women were married to the Portuguese soldiers and their children converted to Christianity. The Muslim population that survived fled Goa to what later came to be called the New Conquest. This was followed by the Inquisition of 1560 and the persecution of non-Catholics. The initial years of the Inquisition forced the retreat of the Muslim community further into oblivion. Interestingly, a large part of the Muslim community has striven to retain their Goan Muslim identity.

The nineteenth century saw the waning of the influence of the Catholic Church over Portugal. The Inquisition that came in 1560 was finally abolished in 1812. With the Inquisition at bay and the abatement of religious persecution, the Muslim population began to trickle back into Goa. Memories and fears of the massacre that had followed Adil Shah’s fall, however, still lingered and the Muslim community tried to stay invisible by keeping its religious and cultural identity hidden.

With the diminishing role of the Church and monarchy in Portugal and the undeniable growth of the numerical and cultural presence

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5 There are claims that Islam was introduced to Goa in the first century of Islam itself. The Kazi family from Ponda in Goa claims to trace its descent from the Prophet.

6 The Portuguese conquest of Goa is usually divided in two eras. The first era was during 1510–43, when the areas of Tiswadi, Salcete, Mormugoa and Bardez came under Portuguese control and came to be known as the Old Conquests. This era witnessed the Inquisition and the intolerance of non-Catholics. The second wave, around 1780–90, saw the expansion of Portuguese control over the areas of Bicholim, Satari, Pernem, Ponda, Sanguem, Quepem and Canacona. These areas came to be known as the New Conquests. The end of the eighteenth century also saw the withering of the Portuguese zeal for religious conversions. By 1835 the Hindu majority were allowed to practice their religion. As a result, the New Conquests, by and large, retained their Hindu identity.
of Hindus, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of legal amendments to recognise the customary laws of Hindus in Goa. In 1840, religious freedoms assured to the people of the New Conquest were codified and safeguarded against the changes introduced in the lives of Hindus during the Old Conquest. By the late 1860s, all Hindus had been brought under a common law (see Pinto 2007). There was a thus move from a theocratic Catholic rule to the recognition of religious and cultural differences.

The first clear separation between ecclesiastical and temporal spheres of life in the then Portuguese Civil Code came in 1910 with the end of monarchy and the advent of Republicanism in Portugal. As Carmo D’Souza states, ‘in the twentieth century, uniformity of law was achieved, which was nothing but Portuguese jurisprudence as influenced by the civil law system of Western Europe. Much of the codification that applied to Goa was a follow-up step of its experimentation in Portugal, influenced by similar earlier processes in France and elsewhere in Europe. Progressive legislation was thus implemented without demand from the local level’ (1995:4).

Marriage was considered a purely civil contract and it was established that

ey every Portuguese citizen shall celebrate marriage before the proper civil registry official, subject to the conditions and in the form established by civil law, and only such marriages shall be valid. With this it was declared that only civil marriages were valid. In order to prevent the religious beliefs and feelings of some individuals leading them only to celebrate religious marriages, thus giving rise to situations of true concubinage in the eyes of civil law, the 1911 Civil Registry Code prohibited the celebration of religious marriages without the prior celebration of a civil marriage (Lima 1997:40).

While this legislation firmly prevented any persecution or discrimination on the basis of religion, it also initiated a difference-blind equality. The Catholic community, which had a hegemonic presence in the late nineteenth century, managed to convey its displeasure. The exclusive validity accorded to civil marriages was not very well received in Catholic circles. With the signing of the Concordata,7

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7 The Concordata is an international treaty signed between Vatican and Portugal, on 7 May 1940, which provides for various matters in the religious and social sphere between the two states, one of the most important pertaining to the canonical marriage and its civil effects.
Catholic marriages once again produced civil effects. A duality was avoided by ensuring that a Catholic marriage was only available to those who were also capable of celebrating a civil marriage. The celebration of the Catholic marriage thus takes place only after obtaining a no-objection certificate from the office of the civil registrar, to confirm that there are no impediments as per civil law.

The Muslim community on the other hand, impoverished both numerically and culturally, could barely muster enough presence in terms of numbers as well as distinctness to effectively assert their cultural difference. At the time of Liberation in 1961, Muslims not only constituted just around 3 per cent of the population, their cultural identity too was a dormant aspect of their personality. Even though they were Goans, living in the fear of becoming visible as Muslims imbued them with what many in the community call an ‘immigrant mentality’ — prompting them to be grateful for whatever they could get rather than accepting it as a matter of entitlement.

**UCC in the Indian Constitution**

Oblivious to the dynamics of Muslim identity in the rest of India and making a conscious attempt not to highlight their difference, the Goan Muslim community complied with the UCC. Does this mean, however, that the aspirations of the UCC — an apprehension of several Muslim members in the Constituent Assembly Debates — has manifested itself in acceptance from the Muslim community in Goa?

To be able to answer this question conclusively we need to be clear about the meaning of a UCC in the Indian Constitution. Under Article 44 of the Indian Constitution the Uniform Civil Code is mentioned in the following manner: ‘The state shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a Uniform Civil Code throughout the territory of India.’ What can be inferred from this depends on the interpretation attributed. Broadly, there are two kinds of interpretation of the UCC in the Indian Constitution, instantiated in the views of D.D. Basu and Justice Deshpande.

According to Basu, ‘The subject of this article is to introduce Uniform Personal Law for the purpose of national consolidation. It proceeds on the assumption that there is no necessary connection between religion and personal law in a civilized society’ (cited in Usgaocar 2000). This strand of interpretation sees Article 44 as divesting religion of any necessary involvement in social relations and personal law (see Basu 1984, 2007).
In 1975, Justice Deshpande, erstwhile Chief Justice of Delhi High Court, while delivering the welcome address at a seminar organised by Indian Law Institute, Delhi, said:

Article 44 of the Constitution does not (however) make any distinction between law and personal law. In India, however, historically, the expression personal laws has obtained a narrower connotation as being law applicable only to a distinct religious community such as Hindus’ (cited in Usgaocar 2000:82J).

If personal laws are to be viewed as laws applicable to a certain category, in India it is understood as the category of a religious community. The crucial and operative question is whether personal laws can refer to laws applicable to a category that is not a religious community. Viewed from this angle, it can be the law personal to any one state in the Indian federation. According to this understanding the UCC of Goa is also the personal law of Goa.

How is one to decide what qualifies as personal law? Going back to the Constitution, Article 372(1) states that: ‘All the laws in force in the territory of India immediately before the commencement of this Constitution shall continue in force therein unless altered or repealed or amended by a competent Legislature or other competent authority.’ Article 372(3) further provides: ‘The expression “law in force” in this article shall include a law passed or made by a Legislature or other competent authority in the territory of India before the commencement of this Constitution and not previously repealed, notwithstanding that it or parts of it may not be then in operation either at all or in particular areas.’

The two qualifications needed for a legal code to be classified as personal law that emerge from this are: (i) being part of the ‘laws in force before the commencement of the Constitution’, (ii) whereby ‘laws in force’ includes laws passed by a legislature. Are these conditions fulfilled by the UCC in Goa in order for it to be termed as Goan personal law? The content of personal laws is covered under Item 5 of the Concurrent List in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. It lists as within the jurisdiction of both the centre and the States: ‘Marriage and divorce; infants and minors; adoption; wills, intestacy and succession; joint family and partition, all matters in respect of which parties in judicial proceedings were immediately before the commencement of this Constitution subject to their personal law.’ However, Goa was not a part of the territory of India.
at the time of the commencement of the Constitution. It became part of India on 19 December 1969, whereas the Constitution came into force on 26 January 1950. Whether the civil code in Goa is the personal law of Goa or the Uniform Civil Code as enshrined in Article 44 of the Constitution of India cannot be gauged, therefore, on the basis of Article 372(1) and 372(3).

It is Section 5 of the Goa, Daman and Diu Administration Act, 1962 that sanctions the continuation of the UCC in Goa by implied recognition and by not repealing it expressly. According to Section 5(1), ‘All laws in force immediately before the appointed day in Goa, Daman and Diu or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or repealed by a competent Legislature or other competent authority’. There is, however, an ambiguous time gap between the Liberation of Goa and the coming into being of this Act. The Goa, Daman and Diu Administration Act, 1962 was passed on 5 March 1962. The period between 20 December 1961 and 5 March 1962 was a period of interregnum.8 The question that arises is — what is the legislative sanction to validate the laws operating in Goa prior to 19 December 1961 to continue being held valid?

No explicit sanction can be derived for the continuation of the family laws drawn from the UCC in Goa either from the Constitution of India or from the Goa, Daman and Diu Administration Act. The closest explanation is that while non-personal and administrative laws were extended to Goa by replacing or expressly repealing the laws under the UCC prior to 19 December 1961, family laws, which covered the topics under Item 5 of the Concurrent List of the Indian Constitution, were saved by implied recognition. It is in this sense that the UCC of Goa is viewed as the personal law of the state. This interpretation is closer to Justice Deshpande’s interpretation of the UCC.

When considered in this manner, the issue is not so much about the Muslim community in Goa and the UCC as about the Goan Muslim who complies with the UCC as the personal law of Goa.

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Premises of the UCC:
Separation of Religion and Law

There is in one respect in which the UCC in Goa is different from the personal laws recognised in the rest of the country and closer to the interpretation put forth by Basu, and that is with regard to the premise of the separation between religion and law. The separation of religion from law is evidenced in the very first article of the UCC that lays down that it is only the individual who has rights and obligations, and this is his juridical capacity and legal personality. Stated differently, in the UCC in Goa, a citizen’s juridical capacity is understood in terms of one’s identity as an individual, not as a member of religious community.

However, the state does recognise the role of religion in constituting the identity of the individual. This recognition was first accorded to the Hindus in Goa in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It was felt that the

Usages and customs…being strictly connected with the rights and family organization of Hindus, it is neither possible to completely abolish them immediately nor to modify them beyond the limits permitted by their beliefs and habits…since there is no reason either on grounds of justice or convenience also to not safeguard, as a matter of right, their usages and customs which in fact they are observing, the religion and the organization of the family, being in both cases identical in all respects (Usgaonkar 2004:155).

With regard to the Catholic community, the first clear separation between the Church and the state was made in 1910, under the then existent Portuguese Civil Code. According to the Family Laws of 1910, read with the Code of Civil Registration, only marriages performed before the Civil Registrar would be considered valid. Marriages solemnised according to any religious ceremony, previously seen as valid, were no longer to be recognised by law. This included Catholic marriages solemnised in church. In 1940, the Concordata came into being. One of the provisions that modified the equation between the Church and the state was Article XXII of the Concordata that states:

The Portuguese State recognizes the civil effect of marriages celebrated according to canonical law, provided that the marriage document is transcribed in the proper (civil) marriage register (quoted in Lima 1997).
Such recognition, however, stopped with the Hindu and Catholic community. The Muslim community, far from securing similar treatment in the UCC, was not even mentioned.

It is not clear what criterion the state has used to separate religion from the civil rights granted under the UCC in Goa. This ambiguity is evidenced in the provisions relating to polygamy. Under the UCC, polygamy is an offence in Goa. Even conversion to a religion that allows polygamy does not legitimise it in the eyes of the law. The tendency is to think immediately of the Muslim community, where a man is allowed to have four wives under the Shariat. In Goa, regardless of what the Shariat says, no Muslim man can have more than one wife at any point, for any reason. The striking turn comes with the exception the UCC makes for Hindus in Goa. The relevant provision reads as follows.

The marriage contracted by a male Hindu by simultaneous polygamy shall not produce civil effects, except in the following cases only:

1. Absolute absence of issues by the wife of the previous marriage until she attains the age of 25 years.
2. Absolute absence of male issue, the previous wife having completed 30 years of age; and being of lower age, ten years having elapsed from the last pregnancy.
3. Separation on any legal grounds when proceeding from the wife, and there being no male issue.
4. Dissolution of previous marriage...

This difference in treatment can be seen in matters of adoption as well. Goa, like the rest of the country and regardless of the UCC, does not have a civil law of adoption. Adoption is allowed only if one’s community allows it. As a result, the legally recognised reason for adoption is religious. What this translates into is that only Hindus can adopt and that too only a male child. The relevant provision reads as follows:

In the absence of legitimate male issues, Hindus of any caste are permitted to adopt a male in accordance with the ceremonies prescribed by his/her religious rite.

This is qualified by the provision that in case there exists one adoptee, the adoption of another is prohibited.
Goan Muslims and the UCC

Goan Muslims, by and large, comply with and are willing to continue with the UCC of Goa. Most of them even prefer it to Muslim personal law. An interesting reason that Goan Muslims put forward for complying with the UCC is that they do not have a strong enough sense of shared history as a religious community to offer an alternative system. In the last four-and-a-half centuries the historical identity of the community in the state has all but dissipated. The last chapter of the Quran was translated in Konkani only around 2004.9 Oppression since the beginning of Portuguese rule, coupled with numerical vulnerability vis-à-vis Hindus and Catholics, have led to a mindset that prefers the safety zone offered by oblivion. The relatively lower socio-economic position of Muslims vis-à-vis other communities has also contributed to making the average Goan Muslim strive for an invisible presence. This invisibility is seen by many in the community as a source of security.

Awareness among Goans in general, including the Muslim community, regarding civil registration of marriage, divorce proceedings and matrimonial property transactions is high. Most Goan Muslims insist on the registration of even those marriages that are contracted by Goan Muslims with non-Goan Muslims in Goa. Even the clergy and the jamaat insist on civil registration before solemnising the nikah. Almost no nikah is solemnised by the clergy till the concerned parties obtain at least a no-objection certificate from the civil registrar. On the rare occasion when the nikah is solemnised without prior civil registration, the jamaat withholds the nikahnama certificate till the civil registration formalities are completed. This is noteworthy, specially given the general tendency of a minority that lives under a law that does not take any steps to protect its distinctiveness to practice and maintain its cultural and religious practices with greater zeal, regardless of whether it is recognised by the civil law or not. Even otherwise, the nikahnama certificate is not acknowledged as proof of the solemnisation of marriage by the state. Only civil registration is seen as proof of marriage in Goa; the nikahnama is more of a validating document within the community. So fervent is the community’s insistence on compliance with civil registration that

9Conversations with Abdul Wahid Khan, then President (2007) of the Goa branch Jamaat-e-Islam Hind.
it actually withholds the nikahnama document, significant within the community, to ensure that members of the community get their marriages registered with the civil registrar.

Most members of the Goan Muslim community acknowledge that a clear benefit of the UCC over Muslim personal law is with regard to the position of women. Goan Muslims believe that Muslim women are safer under the UCC for two reasons — absence of polygamy and equal share in property inheritance — both of which are vulnerable issues under the Muslim personal law. Many in the community are apprehensive that the polygamy provision under Muslim personal law — a provision that is allowed in a qualified and limited way and not advocated — will be misused against Muslim women. Indeed, many feel that compliance with the UCC is a way to keep Muslim personal law away from the community.

The benefits of the UCC, as mentioned above, include an equal share in property to the wife. The default regime that governs property among spouses is the communion regime of property. (The marriage contract can also be registered under the ante-nuptial agreement.) Nearly 98 per cent of marriages in Goa are registered under the communion regime. According to this, each spouse owns half the property brought into the marriage and acquired during the subsistence of the marriage regardless of having contributed or not to the accumulation of such property. In case of divorce, the wife is entitled to demand half of the share of the matrimonial property. This is viewed as a safeguard for Muslim women as against the lesser share they would be entitled to under Muslim personal law.

While the level of compliance with the UCC is very high among Goan Muslims, the same cannot be said with regard to their voluntary invocation of the code in assertion of their rights. While most of them insist on civil registration of marriages, in no case does it mean that the nikah ceremony can be altogether done away with. A marriage that has been registered with the civil registrar but not solemnized through a nikah (a rare rarity) is looked down upon within the community. Since the nikah ceremony cannot take place between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, if one of the spouses is a non-Muslim and wishes to be accepted within the community and qualify for the nikah ceremony, the non-Muslim spouse will have to convert to Islam. This is irrespective of the fact that religion is not a consideration at all for the civil registration of marriages.

The same logic applies to divorce proceedings. While a divorce must take place before a civil registrar, it is acknowledged within the community only after the community’s norms have been adhered to.
So while a triple *talaq* cannot end the civil status of marriage, a civil divorce without a *talaq* or *khula* is not considered favourably within the community. This can lead to certain uneasy situations, for instance, when the wife obtains a civil divorce but is not given a *talaq* by her husband. In this case the wife is free to marry again and register the marriage with the civil registrar. However, since she has not been given a *talaq*, and polyandry is not allowed within the community, her chances of marrying within the community and validating such a marriage with a *nikahnama* are remote. The husband, on the other hand, is free to marry again both as per the UCC, since the divorce has been registered with the civil registrar, as well as per the norms of Islam, because polygamy is allowed.

The state under the UCC in Goa believes not just in the separation of religion from law, but also works on the principle of non-intervention with regard to issues of rights of members of any religious community. Redressal mechanisms are available only with regard to the civil aspects of one’s life. So while a Muslim woman can fight for or contest a civil divorce, she cannot invoke the UCC for her rights within the community. The state considers it beyond its jurisdiction to insist on the right of the wife to marry again as per community norms.

## Demand for Muslim Personal Law in Goa

There are voices within the Muslim community who want the Muslim personal law to be introduced in Goa. These voices invoke the Indian Constitution’s Right to Freedom of Religion. They feel that in being denied the Muslim personal law, the Indian state is discriminating against Muslims in Goa vis-à-vis Muslims in rest of the country. These voices view the UCC as not only anti-Islamic but also anti-national for they are a part of Goa’s Portuguese legacy.

The first public debate between the proponents of the UCC and those demanding the Muslim personal law came to light in the early 1980s. In 1981, the Congress government of Goa, as part of the ongoing work of replacing Portuguese laws with Indian laws, appointed a committee to consider the extension of the country’s various personal laws to Goa. This sparked a debate on the merits and demerits of Muslim personal law. A majority of the Muslims opposed the move and collected under the platform of the Muslim Youth Welfare Association (MYWA) and the Goa Muslim Women’s Association. The MYWA’s main objection to the imposition of Muslim personal law was the application of an outmoded, patriarchal
and oppressive system in the name of religion. According to Shaikh Abdul Ahmed, the association’s executive committee member, ‘Talak and polygamy as they are now used, rather misused, are totally unfair to women....Mind you, we are not against Shariat Law as expressed in the Koran. It is the personal law’s piecemeal, male distortions that we don’t want.’ Rashida Muzawar, the president of Goa Muslim Women’s Association also stated in the same vein, ‘Let Shariat Law in its true form be implemented and we will have no complaints’ (see Fernandes 1984).’ On the other hand, some even felt that ‘without appointing the Committee the government suo moto, could have decided the issue as was done in case of many other Portuguese laws which were gradually, but successively repealed and replaced by their counterpart Indian laws’ (Navhind Times, 23 August 1984).

When the matter came before the legislative assembly, it was decided in favour of the continuation of the UCC. Public debates and strong support from many in the Muslim community in favour of the UCC legitimised its application to the Muslim community in Goa. There are a few but distinctly audible voices in the Muslim community who feel today that the demand for Muslim personal law was lost because there was not enough awareness about Islam. The self-willed isolation of Goan Muslims from the Muslim community in the rest of the country propelled the continued absence of shared history and identity as one community.

Though the civil code was strongly supported by the community, the perceived benefits of the code are almost never realised in full. This is because the community rarely invokes it. On the few occasions that it is invoked, the divorced wife, for instance, generally agrees to settle for a far lesser amount than is suggested, at times nothing. This is often done to avoid long, tedious and expensive court proceedings. Also, considerations of gaining custody of the children at times carry greater weight than property acquisition and the wife often decides not to pursue the latter. Property titles are in fact manipulated to show that the husband owns no property at all. This is done because the wife’s equal share in the property is only with regard to her and her husband’s property; it does not include the husband’s family’s property. As mentioned earlier, even after obtaining a civil divorce, if the husband refuses to give a *talaq* to his wife, she cannot marry within the community as per community norms. In such a situation, the wife has to choose between exercising her right as an individual under the UCC, and the need to belong within the community as a good Muslim woman waiting for a *talaq* to be given by her husband.
Though the community insists on practices like *nikah* and *talaq*, since Muslim personal law is not recognised by the state, many other practices that can be used as safeguards within the community are practised only in an extremely diluted form. This, according to the proponents of Muslim personal law, stops them from effectively applying the safeguards provided under the Shariat to the women of the community. For example, the amount given as *mehr*, which as per the Shariat the wife is entitled to receive in case of a divorce, is usually a nominal amount. While the community insists on the payment of *mehr*, such a nominal sum can hardly qualify as maintenance. Those in support of the Muslim personal law state that if the amount to be given as *mehr* can be decided upon more realistically, they can ensure that the divorced wife gets at least that much money as maintenance. The money may well be less than half the share promised by the UCC but at least it is more realisable. This is considered important since there is no Wakf board as yet in Goa from which funds can be claimed to support divorced women with no means of maintaining themselves.10

Goan Muslims Today

The last five to seven years have seen a quiet change take place in the Muslim community in Goa. There has been a growing consciousness among Goan Muslims with regard to the religious aspect of their identity. The search for a sense of their ‘Muslim self’ has been fuelled also by the negative stereotype of Muslims carried by the media as well as propagation of the faith by channels like Qtv, combined with the more orthodox Islamic lifestyle of the growing number of migrants. Many in the community agree that there has been a visible increase in the use of *bijabs*, *sherwanis* and skull caps. They acknowledge the awareness of a subtle yet a certain ‘otherness’ regarding their perception among non-Muslim Goans. Many have expressed a need to (re)discover ‘their’ culture and identity, which had been dormant in their consciousness for so many years. This is also seen as an aspect

10 Wakf is a permanent dedication of movable or immovable properties for religious, pious or charitable purposes, as recognised by Muslim law. The Wakf institutions deal with the religious, social and economic life of Muslims. The Central government is responsible for the implementation of the Wakf Act. The Wakf Act, 1954 had provisions for the survey of Wakfs, constitution of a Central Wakf Council and State Wakf Boards, etc.
of redefining and reiterating their self-esteem and pride, of asserting the Muslim part of their Goan Muslim identity.

However, far from seeking the recognition of their Muslim identity, most Goan Muslims endorse the non-interventionist attitude of the state in matters pertaining to the community. Many still go out of their way to stress that they are fully in favour of the UCC. What is disconcerting is their reluctant admission that as a miniscule minority they have no other choice. Many feel the safest way to survive as a Goan and as Muslim is to be invisible.

If the basic intuitive premise of the UCC is the separation of religion and law, it can be evaluated on two criteria: whether the exploitation of individuals by the community in the name of religion is being prevented; if there is no discrimination regarding the religious identity of the individual or group vis-à-vis other religious groups. Let me examine the first criterion — exploitation of the individual by the community. The very first article of the civil code views the citizen, in his/her capacity as an individual, as the basic unit of juridical personality. The civil rights of an individual are protected regardless of similar recognition (or the absence of it) from the community. The prevention of discrimination on the basis of religious identity is the second stated criterion. A preliminary step to prevent discrimination would be to accord equal recognition to all communities. As discussed earlier, the Muslim community, far from being recognised, is nowhere even mentioned in the civil code. This is in sharp contrast to the specific mention of the Catholic and Hindu communities.

What complicates the matter further is the Goan Muslim community’s unwillingness to highlight its presence. Most feel that doing so and demanding recognition for their cultural practices (as accorded to Hindus and Catholics in the civil code) may lead to being viewed as separatists by the other communities. Even if the state does consider a demand for recognition of the community norms of Goan Muslims, the community fears that such visibility may lead to animosity from other communities and consequently greater insecurity for the Muslim community. Non-recognition of cultural practices, on the other hand, at least gives them a protective cloak of invisibility.11

11 This illusion for many was shattered in the March 2006 Sarvodem riots.
Not highlighting their presence also allows them to maintain their self-willed isolation from the Muslim community outside Goa, evidenced in the opposition to the Wakf Act.\textsuperscript{12} This isolation enables them to maintain their identity as Goan Muslims, distinct from Muslims in the rest of the country.

Unlike the Muslim community outside Goa that looks at the state (tinged with assertion as well apprehension) and the Constitution as a guarantor of its religious and cultural rights, the Goan Muslim community complies with the minimal rules of the UCC to stay out of trouble and ensure its existence and practices beyond the ambit of the state. Far from aspiring to be equal with other religious communities, the question for Goan Muslims seems to be ‘when is one situation worse than another with respect to inequality’ (Temkin 1986:99).

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\textsuperscript{12} The Panaji (Goa) bench of the Bombay High Court has recently passed a judgement (February 2008) to implement the Wakf Act in Goa. However, many in the community are opposed to it and see it as an intrusion in the lives of Goan Muslims.
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