

# Ethnic and religious identities in colonial India (1920s–1930s): a conceptual debate

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The research done so far on the nationalist movements of the 1920s and 1930s has generally focused on a particular region, on a single ethnic or religious community.<sup>1</sup> Evaluation of their role is commonly based on their contribution to the nationalist movement and the anti-colonial struggle overall. While there is an abundance of comparative studies on the contemporary period, the *comparative* aspect of ethnic and religious conflict before 1947 has so far received scant attention.<sup>2</sup> Little is known about the independent motives of these movements and what kind of conditions facilitated their formation and furthered the ascent of ethnopolitical conflict in colonial India. In the context of this paper, religious movements are subsumed under ethnic movements if and when they display characteristic features of clearly delineated regional group structures and identities.

A conceptual debate on pre-independence ethnic and religious identities may be helpful in verifying the contemporary concepts of nationality formation for South Asia which have mainly been developed using the experience of post-independence developments.<sup>3</sup> This paper discusses various approaches towards identity-building in South Asia during the colonial period, tentatively grouping arguments around the catchwords of 'monolithic nationalism', 'religious nationalism', and 'élitist nationality formation', and would suggest a conceptual alternative, called an 'interaction approach'.

## Monolithic nationalism

There is a standard viewpoint which is particularly popular in Indian historiography, that the nationalist movement was comparatively coherent and uniform, meaning that it was mainly a single constitutional process aimed at state building. Cultural and social sub-divisions are relegated to the background. Majumdar stressed that the national awakening of India was based on 'the unity of India as a whole'.<sup>4</sup> Qanungo rejected the notion supposedly implied in the Communal Award 'that India was not a nation but a congeries of groups (religious, cultural, racial, caste, class and interest)'.<sup>5</sup> If it is not overtly assumed that ethnic and religious movements or conflicts were invented or instigated by

the British, it is at least alleged that they manifested themselves mainly after independence when the grand coalition of the nationalist movement broke apart.

There is no reason to deny the profound impact of the all-India nationalist movement on the political project of the *nation state* as embodied in the development of India and Pakistan. The compulsion to confront the colonial administration made it necessary for all opposition forces to unite on a single political platform. However, there was a vast gap between claim and reality.

It is argued here that the high point of the nationalist movement was also the formative phase of the regionalization of politics in ethnic and religious terms. It was in the 1920s and 1930s that the drive against colonial rule over India entered the new phase of mass politics. That period saw not only the rise of the all-India nationalist force to prominence but also the formation of its different composite parts into separate ethnic and religious movements, rivaling each other enviously. This happened both inside and outside the two major parties, the Congress and the Muslim League. The kind of state nationalism that was pursued by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League was closely echoed by regional élites and spurred the rise of ethnic nationalism. Where the nation-state project seemed to attract the all-India political classes with its prospects of power and prosperity, the same goals were followed at the level of local government.

The major nationalist forces, the Congress and the Muslim League, were themselves composed of regional groups which owed their identity to ethnicity and religion. Congress had emerged from three regional organizations, the Indian Association of Calcutta (1876), the Madras Mahajan Sabha (1884), and the Bombay Presidency Association (1885), developing along the lines of the three Presidencies of British rule in India with strong Bengali, Tamil and Marathi overtones. A new upsurge of the *Swadeshi* movement to boycott imported goods in 1905–08 (mainly in response to the partition of Bengal), the major movements of non-cooperation and civil disobedience in 1920–22 (boycott of titles, schools, courts and councils) and in 1930–34 (no-rent and no-tax campaigns, courting arrest, etc), as well as the *Khilafat* movement of the 1920s revealed strong regional and ethnoreligious features and disparities.<sup>6</sup> Since the creation of separate Congress provinces on linguistic grounds as a result of the 1920 Nagpur session, Congress tried to mobilize public opinion through the very means of ethnolinguistic identities, as it saw no alternative to reach the broad, mainly illiterate masses but through the medium of their native tongue and culture. Regional disparities and contradictions were also major features of the Muslim movement and had long prevented the Muslim League from gaining an undivided hold on Indian Muslims.<sup>7</sup> After the Muslim League had been profoundly defeated during the 1937 provincial elections, it had to execute a special mass-contact campaign to overcome the regional divisions and to gain a foothold in the 'majority provinces' where Muslims constituted the bulk of the population.

At the same time, autonomous regional ethnic and religious movements had emerged which operated in a framework of their own, irrespective of their

interaction with Congress or with the Muslim League. The Sikhs and the Pathans, for instance, developed autonomous movements in the 1920s. In both cases these movements constituted a particular cultural response to the capitalist transformation of the colonial society. Since 1921 the Sikhs were fighting against the Mahants, a particular sect which was looking after the Sikh temples and the shrines. Under the British, they had come to regard these religious places as their property and started using them for commercial purposes. In many areas the Mahants closely collaborated with the local authorities. The Sikhs who in Punjab mainly hailed from agricultural castes such as the Jats had also come under severe pressure as a result of the agricultural policies of the colonial government. Rising taxes and a slack in crop prices left them with little surplus. In addition, Sikh political pride was greatly hurt when those who had fought prominently in the Anglo-Indian army during World War I had returned to India not to a hero's welcome with a promise of an independent India but to political repression and suspicion embodied in the Rowlatt Act. After the Sikhs had been 'gainfully' employed to defend the British Empire they were now made redundant. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 that aroused wrath all over India naturally stirred the Punjab as well. In this way the Sikh movement for temple control was a regional response to growing social and political polarization.<sup>8</sup>

The Pathan movement of the Red Shirt volunteers was the political offspring of the Congress-led civil disobedience campaign, scheduled to start in 1930. Though it aligned itself with Congress, those links were rather formal and it retained its distinct ethnocultural identity throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Originating in the countryside, it also strongly featured social reform. When its leader, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who had taken to politics with the *Khilafat* movement in 1919, compared the situation of the Pathans to the status of other peoples and regions in India he saw backward social customs like the permanent tribal feuds as the main reason for the weakness of the Pathans.<sup>9</sup> The brigades which were formed in many villages acted as a sort of social worker. They judged feuds and promoted schools and sanitary living conditions. Similar to the Sikh movement, the Red Shirts mobilized their followers, ie mainly small farmers and landless labourers, against a social group on which the British relied heavily for their rule over the province, the rich and big Khans. Economically, agrarian unrest in the Frontier Province reflected the concern over increased revenue assessments by an average of 22% and a drop in agricultural prices by 50–70%.<sup>10</sup> Politically, the Afghan war of 1919 had left behind a great deal of tension and discontent in the Frontier province where the British had massively deployed troops not only to fight the Afghans but also to suppress tribal discontent and resistance.

The South Indian non-Brahmin movement did not originate in the countryside. Its leaders came from the new urban professions which had been patronized by the British. They felt threatened by the prospect of the Congress movement gaining the upper hand. They regarded the Congress as Brahmin-dominated and sought the protection of the British-Indian administration against it. Though coming from an urban background, the movement depended on landlord finance.

Its social base was the intermediate castes, not confined to urban professions. E. V. Ramaswami Naicker, who joined the Justice party in 1935, conducted a Self-Respect movement in the 1920s that sought to put an end to Brahminism and became particularly known for its atheistic marriages without Brahmins. He tried to associate peasants, weavers, and local merchants with the movement.<sup>11</sup> In the non-Brahmin movement the regional appeal at first was hardly recognizable. But the treatment of Brahmins as 'foreigners' and outsiders from the north provided the link and a convenient base for a South Indian, Dravidian regionalization of the movement. When Congress had dislodged the Justice ministry in the Madras Presidency in 1937, its Hindi-first policy combined with growing popular discontent over agrarian and urban economic problems in the aftermath of the Great Depression hastened the resort to Dravidian and Tamil slogans in the course of the anti-Hindi movement led by the Justice party. In 1944, it was transformed into the *Dravida Munetra Kazhagam*.

The movements to create the linguistic provinces of Andhra, Assam, Orissa, Bihar and Sindh, which—with the exception of Andhra—were subsequently granted by the British through the re-demarcation of the provinces, also betrayed a strong sense of identity. Ethnonationalist sentiments ruled movements in Bengal, in Baluchistan and in Kashmir.

The sudden flowering of political diversity confirmed that secular nationalism was never monolithic. The dichotomy of state and ethnic nationalism showed the ambiguity in identity-building: On the one hand, a sense of community among Indians of various ethnic groups and religions was real. Time and again, syncretism manifested itself in daily life, particularly in the villages, when people of different communities took part in cultural ceremonies, and sometimes even adopted them. On the other hand, increased political awareness almost always drew on a heightened sense of 'native' ethnic identity to contrast with the 'alien' colonial polity.

### **Religious nationalism**

Secular nationalism was mainly territorial nationalism, based on the reference to India as a nation-state. This concept was introduced into India from Britain and France after the French Revolution and the era of 'Enlightenment' in the 18th and 19th centuries. Contrary to territorial nationalism, or rather in addition to it, the Indian nationalist movement developed nationalist variations in which a sometimes dispersed religious community was taken as a reference basis for nationalist aspirations instead of an ethnic group or a political territory with comparatively fixed boundaries of geographical settlement. Religious nationalism, which had long outlived its utility in Europe, had become a very important and efficient tool for mass mobilization in South Asia since the middle of the 19th century. When the nationalist ideas reached South Asia at the beginning of the 19th century it was Hindu social reformers like Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) who defined nationalism in terms of a renewal of religious tradition. Nationalism and religion thus became intertwined right from the outset of the nationalist

movement. At first the *Brahmo Samaj*, inspired by Rammohan Roy, tried to reform Hinduism on a unitarian, universalist note which was actively propagated by Keshub Chandra Sen. After the *Brahmo Samaj* split in 1866, its conservative wing, the *Adi Brahmo Samaj*, then turned to the defence of cultural nationalism. Its leader, Rajnarian Bose (1826–99), lectured on the superiority of Hinduism to all other religions.<sup>12</sup>

The *Arya Samaj*, whose founder Swami Dayananda (1824–83) wanted to combat the influence of Christian missionaries more actively and who tried to rationalize Hinduism and free it from idolatry, became the proponent of a Hindu nation.<sup>13</sup> Dayananda even dreamed of a world order in which the *Arya* (Hindu) nation would assume the leadership of all other nationals and *Aryavarta* (India) would have sovereignty over all other countries.<sup>14</sup> This concept was aggressively advanced by the *Hindu Mahasabha* after the 1920s. The latter demanded a universal and undivided Hindu Raj in the subcontinent. On the Muslim side of the political spectrum the religious approach corresponded to Muslim nationalism that mainly took its roots from the *Aligarh* movement. Saeed Ahmad Khan (1817–98) had strongly pleaded in favour of a separate Muslim nation and demanded that Muslims be treated equally with the Hindus, grossly inflating the actual weight of Muslims in India, who constituted roughly 20% of the population. In Muslim politics there were mainstream nationalists as well, like Abu Kalam Azad, regarding Indian and Congress culture as a composite culture. They had the emphasis put on an all-India nationalism and were called nationalist Muslims.

It was the vehicle of religion that brought the idea of the mainstream freedom movement down to the masses of the Indian villages when the high-sounding statements and ideas were transformed into simple symbols of mainly religious tradition. In his book *Young India*, written in 1915, Lala Lajpat Rai, Congress politician and activist of the Hindu revivalist *Arya Samaj*, explains that ‘this interpretation of the old images of gods and goddesses has imparted a new meaning to the current ceremonialism of the country, and multitudes, while worshipping either *Jagatdhatri*, or *Kali*, or *Durga*, accost them with devotion and enthusiasm, with the inspiring cry of *Bande Mataram*’.<sup>15</sup> He describes ‘neo-Vedantism’, a refined, reformist variation of Hinduism, especially popularized by Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), as the ‘spiritual note of the present Nationalist Movement in India’.<sup>16</sup> The Muslim point of view, though apparently diametrically opposed, was actually quite on par with the Hindu-nationalist position, as far as the appropriation of religion for nationalist sentiments was concerned. The Famous poet and politician, Mohammad Iqbal, remarked that ‘the construction of a polity on Indian national lines, if it means a displacement of the Islamic principle of solidarity, is simply unthinkable to a Muslim’.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Iqbal embodied the layered and composite nature of Indian identity as he had supported the essential unity of India on many earlier occasions.

The influence of the religious heritage was so strong that secular nationalism based on territorial loyalties could not free itself from the generic influence of religion. Many of the territorial nationalists, ie, proponents of an Indian nation-

state, derived their justification of it from religious sources. They preached nationalism and meant Hinduism or Islam.<sup>18</sup>

Even radical nationalism would occasionally, though unwillingly, lend credence to the claims of religious nationalists. The radicals had some definite convictions in common with 'religious nationalists' like Jinnah, Malaviya and Lajpat Rai. All of them aspired for single political representation of their nationalist group at an all-India level and regarded each other as the main impediment towards this goal. Bipan Chandra argued in his *Communalism in Modern India* that 'the national movement did succeed in overcoming or making passive, at least for the time being, all other antagonisms but the communal one. Moreover, among all such divisive ideologies and movements, communalism was the only one that was all-India in its scope'.<sup>19</sup> Rejecting sub-national and ethnic divisions in India, this viewpoint practically supported the claim of religious movements to a special status, alongside with all-India nationalism.

Both camps regarded their brand of nationalism as indivisible. Indivisible nationalism first and foremost was a claim to power which was not to be divided or weakened by competing demands. Congress considered the Indian national movement indivisible which meant that its stake to power was also indivisible. This prevented Congress leaders from coming to terms with the Muslim League in 1937 and thereafter, until it was too late for an amicable settlement. Things were made even more complicated because leaders like Nehru and Gandhi, no matter how sensibly and carefully they behaved in most cases, or how hard they tried to unite all Indians and all religions on a common platform against colonialism, could not shed the religious cloth of their nationalist aspirations entirely. Gandhi, on a unitarian note, incorporated Hinduist values like non-violence and the reverence of the *chakra* (wheel) into the nationalist movement which helped it spread out among the masses, but which also gave political leaders of religious movements a pretext for confrontation. Gandhi argued that the practice of religious pilgrimage which involved the visiting of sacred centres in various parts of India, linked people from many regions into a cultural unity. 'We were one nation before [the British] came to India.'<sup>20</sup> Indian civilization, culture and nationhood all predated the British arrival. 'India . . . has nothing to learn from anybody else.'<sup>21</sup> India did not cease to be one nation because different religious groups or foreigners lived in it, he maintained. India 'must have a faculty for assimilation'.<sup>22</sup> He supported the introduction of Hindi in either Persian or Devanagari characters as a compulsory medium of instruction with optional English courses all over India.<sup>23</sup>

And Nehru, explaining the 'Psychology of Indian Nationalism' in a Swiss newspaper in 1927, declared:

The modern idea of nationhood is of recent growth even in the West, and India in the past certainly was not, and is not even now wholly, a nation like France or England is today. It was too vast a country to develop on those lines before the advent of the modern methods of communication. But even in the remote past there has always been a fundamental unity of India—a unity of a common faith and culture. India was Bharata, the holy land of the Hindus, and it is not without significance that the great places of Hindu pilgrimage are

situated in the four corners of India. . . Sanskrit was the language of the learned throughout the length and breadth of the country and the provincial languages in the North were all derived from Sanskrit and were closely allied, the four principal southern languages being greatly influenced by Sanskrit.<sup>24</sup>

Jinnah's case was probably somewhat different. Unlike Nehru, he did not refer to religion as the unavoidable and natural form of social consciousness in India but as a political weapon to wrench his share of power, his 'pound of flesh', from Congress. On the basis of the concept of 'Muslim nationalism' (which is not to be discussed in detail here) he argued that India was not homogeneous, but consisted of two nations, Hindus and Muslims. Muslim nationalism was operating on the same level as 'monolithic nationalism': beyond the religious Hindu-Muslim polarization it did not recognize any further divisions. Once, competing claims would cut into the flesh of the League or were prone to create additional problems for the League, for example, in the case of the demand for Azad Punjab by the Sikhs, or the demand for Dravidanadu by the Justice Party. Jinnah rejected these, or at least declined to support them. And, once Pakistan was created, he was the first in the subsequent line of leaders who tried to put down the sub-nationalist aspirations of the Bengalis in East Pakistan, also of the Pathans in the Frontier Province. He extorted his countrymen that they 'are now all Pakistanis, not Baluchis, Pathans, Sindhis, Bengalis, Punjabis and so on'. They should be 'proud to be known as Pakistanis and nothing else'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Elitist nationality-formation**

The standard western approach to ethnicity and nation-building seems to contrast starkly with 'monolithic nationalism' and 'religious nationalism': plurality is widely accepted. While historiographic concepts of 'monolithic nationalism' and 'religious nationalism' could easily be traced back to particular political trends on the ground, the fact, that the pluralistic approach was also manifest in some way in the Indian polity was often overlooked. It was the British administration that vigorously contended that the Indian races were too diverse to ever unite, a position which suited the imperial interests of the British at the time. On the subject of Indian Councils reform back in 1861, Sir Charles Wood maintained in the House of Commons that an Indian electorate was bound to be so deeply divided as to preclude the emergence of a recognizable political consensus. He insisted that 'you cannot possibly assemble at any one place . . . persons who shall be the real representatives of the Native population of that empire'.<sup>26</sup>

Modern historiographic debate in the light of sociocultural plurality tends to revolve around the polarization between the 'structuralists' or 'primordialists' like Francis Robnson, who attached major importance to the 'givens' of the human conditions like birthplace, kin, religion and language, resulting in a life

attachment of man's personality to these values,<sup>27</sup> and the 'instrumentalists', who saw ethnicity like Brass 'as the pursuit of interest and advantage for members of groups whose cultures are *infinitely malleable* and manipulable by elites'<sup>28</sup> (emphasis added). Discussing the issue on the factual basis of developments in South Asia, one feels that both approaches are highly selective. They reflect important, mutually complementary features, which alternately dominate one or the other situation.

Middle class Muslims of Uttar Pradesh analysed by Robinson, may be psychologically more constrained by their ties of religion and language (script) than Punjabis who could sometimes choose to be either Hindi- or Punjabi-speaking, either Hindu- or Sikh-oriented, in order to cater to their social and political needs, as analysed by Brass. However, both concepts proceed from the assumption that ethnicity is decided by the actions and ideas of the élite; in the case of the structuralists it is the élite which would accept the inherited pattern of loyalties, and in the case of the instrumentalists it is the élite that would initiate action, according to its needs.

Yet, could they appeal just to any loyalty? How wide would their choice, their room for manoeuvring have been? In order to get effective mass support the leader was constrained in his or her choice of ethnic and religious symbols by the loyalties known to the masses and accepted by them, which meant by the inherited loyalties. The leader was also constrained by the symbols and loyalties known to and accepted by him or her personally. Thus, symbols and loyalties, though changing over time, tended to be comparatively stable at any given moment. And it was social intercourse which itself was inseparable from a regional economic cycle of production, distribution and consumption, that made symbols and loyalties known to people and accepted by them. That means that leaders would have been further constrained in their choice of symbols by economic regionalization which often tended to correspond to ethnic settlement patterns.

Sumit Sarkar in his history 'from below' gave several examples of this kind of interaction of socioeconomic and political as well as ideological factors. The 'tumult' of the Munda tribes around 1900 was the discernible result of the erosion of the traditional land system of joint holdings by tribal lineages through merchants and moneylenders coming from the northern plains. The Moplah revolt largely resulted from the British insistence on landlord rights. This re-established and vastly enhanced the position of the Hindu upper-caste Nambodri and Nair, but worsened the situation of the mainly Muslim leaseholders and cultivators locally known as the Moplahs. The bulk of the 15,506 Akali volunteers listed in a government report of January 1922 came from the Jat Sikh peasantry who were dissatisfied with their indebtedness to mainly Hindu moneylenders, with low returns from sales to Hindu traders etc. The Dravidian movement reflected discontent with the dominant position of Brahmin castes in the Madras Presidency.<sup>29</sup> Moneylenders, revenue collectors, newly made landlords and administrators often belonged to separate ethnic and/or religious and/or caste groups.



**'Interaction approach': a conceptual alternative?**

Given the wide range of often contradictory concepts, the correlation between identity-building and socioeconomic factors needed further exploration. For this purpose a theoretical approach was required that would explain the context of ethnic and religious polarization, both under conditions of independent development and under colonial rule. Coming from a background of Marxist-related research it was felt that a careful analysis was needed to understand what parts of the Marxist theoretical legacy could be discarded or retained and where this fitted into the conceptual framework on ethnicity and identity-building evolved in the West. Georg Elwert has discussed various concepts of ethnic and religious identity-building and radical instrumentalism (*Nationalism and Ethnicity, on the formation of identity-groups*, 1989), and has identified the influence of the Marxist legacy. It was Otto Bauer (1881–1938) who discussed this nexus of economy and consciousness in his 1907 work *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie* (*The Nationalities Question and Social Democracy*). 'But because of his Marxist reference scheme established research (which reacts to Marxism rather allergicly) quoted him only from secondary sources'.<sup>30</sup> A Marxist theory on ethnicity and nationalism worth the name never came into being. It was rejected and twisted by orthodox Marxism of later years, including the mainly tactical and political approach which Lenin took towards ethn-nationalist movements, as temporary political allies in the struggle for power inside the Soviet Union and on a global scale against Western imperialism.

Bauer had been severely criticized by many Marxists and socialists for his cliché of the *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate) being the essence of the nation by which he was supposed to have fallen into the trap of bourgeois nationalism, mythologizing the substance of the nation. Because of the political implications of this approach at his time, his underlying concept was overlooked by both critics and supporters alike. What he meant was, in fact, the commonality of experience, of shared history which was the result of the interaction of a group of people over a period of time. For his thesis, Bauer referred to Immanuel Kant's understanding of the community (*Gemeinschaft*) as being constituted by continuous interaction of its members (*durchgängige Wechselwirkung untereinander*).<sup>31</sup> Taken in this context, Bauer's idea of the *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* did not look static any more. Fate was embodied in common history, in the circumstances of living together.

Responding to the dilemma of choice between different factors that determine conflict patterns and identity, an 'interaction approach' is suggested that would want to avoid a stagnant assessment and try to understand the interaction of various factors in the course of a dynamic process.

*Ethnicity and society*

The first assumption is that all people simultaneously belong to socioeconomic and ethnic structures. The terms 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' are interpreted

here in their widest possible sense as dynamic, sociocultural group formation connected with identity-building, including non-linguistic forms like occupational groups, that is castes, marriage classes, tribes etc. Changes occurring in one set of affiliations were bound to affect the other and vice versa. Or, to put it in the terms of Karl Deutsch's dictum, modern ethnoreligious group formation is a function of social mobilization. In India, political movements based on ethnicity and religion have always worked through a particular social group that tried to adjust itself to changes and challenges, for example the small Khans in the Pathan movement, the landholding commercial peasants (or Jats) of Sikh faith in the Punjab movement for the control of Gurdwaras, or the emerging urban élite in Tamilnadu in the cases quoted above.

### *Ethnicity and power*

It is a truism by now that ethnicity is also the function of political power. Yet the general deficiency of Western (not only Marxist) thought on nation and ethnicity was its one-sided attachment to the European model where the nation state seemed to coincide with the ethnic core nation (though in reality this was often not true). While in Europe the ethnically non-homogeneous nation state was considered to be rather the exception or the anomaly, it became the rule of state-building with multiethnic societies in the East. State and nation were no longer one. It was more true to speak of a nationalities state.

Under these conditions ethnicity and ethnonational identity retained a large degree of independence from state and administrative units, which is the second assumption here. This resulted in two major dichotomies of nation-building:

First, group consolidation went on side-by-side at the national level and at the level of local government. Even where they did not conform with ethnic groups, local government units over time could take on features of ethnicity. This was clear from the legacy of the administrative units which existed under colonial rule and which later disappeared; for example the case of the princely states of Bahawalpur and Hyderabad, whose separate political identity created problems for the consolidation of the independent Punjab in Pakistan and of Andhra Pradesh in India. A more recent example was Haryana where the artificial state identity which came into existence after the partition of the Indian Punjab in 1966 is now used as a reference symbol during state elections.

The consolidation of the independent nation states of India and Pakistan did not presuppose the eradication of ethnic sub-identities, but could and had to build on them.

Second, ethnic identities and movements kept transcending administrative boundaries, particularly where they did not converge. There have always been ethnic movements like those of the Marathis, the Tamils, Telugu, Pathans and Baluchi, who persisted or even consolidated irrespective of and beyond their home province or Union state.

*Ethnicity and communication*

The third and central assumption is that ethnicity and national identity are directly related to a regional circulation of goods and ideas. It was Marx who indicated that a common market may well create the nation, as in the case of the Germans in the 19th century (and, supposedly, even now). But he did not elaborate on the mechanism of this consolidation. Identity-building does not proceed on its own. No person alone, or, for that matter, no community in itself possesses any identity if it is not compared to the distinctly different identity of other individuals or communities. People become aware of their identity only in contact with other groups. Therefore, the process of communication and circulation of goods, services and ideas among people appears to be instrumental to the scope, speed and intensity with which the identity of a group is recognized by its members and by others. This circulation process has important economic components of the market nexus. It also contains the overlapping networks of education, information, cultural interaction, communication, transport, etc. Or, coming to the central point of my assumption, it is the interaction of people that creates a sense of identity. The pattern of interaction is often dominated by economic requirements as well as social changes and exchanges. Cultural and religious interaction patterns do not always correspond to economic developments. This is where the clustering of different interaction patterns acquires a certain meaning around which the group formation finally occurs. The areas of dense interaction which are surrounded by relative discontinuity of exchange determine group boundaries. If a whole new set of social groups emerges, for example those connected with the commercialization of agrarian and urban India before independence, interaction patterns are likely to change and intensify, giving a stronger impetus to group formation and identity building.

*Ethnicity and political culture*

A fourth assumption is that the geographical and social reach of group identity building was also significantly determined by the operation of the political culture. Identity-building has very much to do with a code of values that is available to both the élite and the masses. This code does not remain static, though it can hardly be changed overnight. A significant precondition for the élite to succeed in imposing a new code of its own on the masses is the creation of an infrastructure of influence through which it can relay and impart its new cultural code, a function which may either be fulfilled by a political party/movement or by a new administration such as that of a newly created province.

Where does this approach differ from other established conceptual thinking? Being reminiscent of Marxism, it differs from its more orthodox forms by rejecting the determinist nature ascribed to class and market relations, for the pattern of cultural interaction is considered equally important here. It picks up on the communication theory used by Karl Deutsch<sup>32</sup> and Jürgen Habermas<sup>33</sup> to explain social conduct and extends it to all forms of interaction including

economic cooperation. Supporting Karl Deutsch in his efforts to look for the mechanics of community-building, in which he speaks about the 'cluster patterns' formed by 'channels of social communication and economic intercourse',<sup>34</sup> it rejects his assumption that assimilation of multiethnic groups is the prerequisite of nation building and points to various levels of identity building. In this it shares the notion of competing loyalties which Paul Brass evolves and it affirms the composite nature of identities. It rejects the extreme consequence of instrumentalism (that all our identities are figments of our imagination and, therefore, if they are constructed, they can also be taken apart), which was considered indispensable for stable nation states to emerge from multiethnic societies of Asia and Africa.<sup>35</sup> While Terence Ranger came round from the invention of tradition<sup>36</sup> to its imagining<sup>37</sup> as proposed by Benedict Anderson,<sup>38</sup> the stress still falls heavily on the willfulness of the cultural construction called group identity, in terms of ethnicity and religion. We may well assume that a shaping of identity comes closest to reality in a process where the agent of change is a particular élite that is constrained by the background of the group they are aiming at and they themselves come from. For the conditions of colonial India, the interaction concept allows for the maximum number of agents of social change: colonial government, local élites and the masses who actively joined in the process of identity formation where it held out to them the perspective of the elevation of their social and economic status.<sup>39</sup>

After independence was achieved, attention of ethnic and religious élites shifted towards gaining control over certain territories and provinces or states and, even more important, to getting a maximum share of state funds and resources in terms of employment, credits and investment. Though ethnic and religious conflict has become much more intense since, it is felt that its foundations were laid in the 1920s and 1930s when mass politics against colonial rule were born.

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### Notes and references

1. Cf David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam, Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916–29* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969); K. V. Narayana Rao, *The Emergence of Andhra Pradesh* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1973); Roland E. Miller, *Mappilah Muslims of Kerala, A Study in Islamic Trends* (Madras: Orient Longman, 1976); Jürgen Lütt, *Hindu-Nationalism in Uttar Pradesh 1867–1900* (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1970); Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875–1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984); C. A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics, Allahabad 1880–1920* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) and many others.
2. Cf various works dealing with comparative analysis of ethnic and ethnoreligious groups in a wider perspective by R. A. Schermerhorn, *Ethnic Plurality in India* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978);

- Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (London, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1974), *The Politics of India Since Independence* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Delhi: Sage, 1991); Joytirindra Dasgupta, *Language Conflict and National Development—Group Politics and National Language Policy in India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970); D. Taylor & M. Yapp (eds), *Political Identity in South Asia* (London: Curzon Press, 1979); F. R. Frankel & M. S. A. Rao, *Dominance and State Power in Modern India, Decline of a Social Order* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, Vols I, II, 1989–90); and more specific studies of ethnic and religious conflict by Partha Sarathy Ghosh, *Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in South Asia* (London: Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1985); Asghar Ali Engineer (ed), *Ethnic Conflict in South Asia* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1987); Urmila Phadnis, *Ethnicity and Nation-building in South Asia* (Delhi and Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990); and Dagmar Bernstorff, *Political Transition in South Asia* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1991).
3. See, for instance, Paul R. Brass on the process of nationality formation in north India in *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, *op. cit.*, pp 403–434.
  4. R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Raychaudhuri & Kalikinkar Datta, *An Advanced History of India* (Vol II, 3rd ed., Delhi: Macmillan India, 1973), p 883. Chapter IX, 'The struggle for freedom', is written on the same note: *Ibid.*, pp 976–992.
  5. S. N. Qanungo, 'The struggle for Purna Swaraj', in *A Centenary History of the Indian National Congress (1885–1985)* (Vol II 1919–1935, Delhi: AICC(I): Vikas Publishing House, 1985), p 262.
  6. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp 125–135, 210–226, 296–308.
  7. Cf Ian Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1990).
  8. For a more elaborate account of Sikh politics between 1920 and 1940 see K. L. Tuteja, *Sikh Politics, 1920–1940* (Kurukshetra: Vishal Publications, 1984).
  9. Cf Abdul Ghaffar Khan's autobiography, *Badshah Khan, my life and struggle* (Delhi: Orient Paperback, 1969).
  10. For a more detailed discussion of the Pakhtun movement and its social background cf Stephen Rittenberg, *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Pakhtuns: the independence movement in India's North-west Frontier Province* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1988), esp. pp 51–64.
  11. On the social background of the non-Brahmin and the Self-Respect movements of Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India*, pp 1–27, and *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s* (Madras: Cre-A, 1986), pp 81–107.
  12. David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p 181.
  13. Cf Lala Lajpat Rai, *The Arya Samaj: An Indian Movement* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1915), p 106.
  14. P. N. Chopra (ed), *Religions and Communities of India* (Delhi: Vision Books, 1982), p 28.
  15. Lala Lajpat Rai, *Young India* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1916), p 191.
  16. *Ibid.*, p 193.
  17. Quoted in M. Saeed Sheikh (ed), *Studies in Iqbal's Thought and Art* (Lahore: Bazm-i Iqbal, 1972), p 383.
  18. A typical example is the argument advanced by Nilakanta Sastri and Srinivasachari in their chapter on 'Indian nationalism': 'From the age of the mantras, to the Hindus India had been the land from the Himalayas in the North to Cape Comorin in the South, although the country may have been split up into innumerable independent kingdoms . . . Hindu resistance to foreign invasions had always been nationalistic in character.' K. A. Nilakanta Sastri & G. Srinivasachari, *Life and Culture of the Indian People* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974), p 113.
  19. Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (Delhi: Vikas, 1986), pp ix–x.
  20. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1944), p 21.
  21. *Ibid.*, p 32.
  22. *Ibid.*, p 23.
  23. *Ibid.*, p 55.
  24. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works* (Vol 2, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972), p 261.
  25. M. A. Jinnah, *Speeches as Governor-General of Pakistan 1947–1948* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 1976), pp 158–159.
  26. Charles Wood's speech in the House of Commons, 6 June 1861, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (Commons) (1861), volume 163, columns 640–1, quoted in Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860–1947* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1991), p 55.
  27. Francis Robinson, 'Islam and Muslim separatism: a historiographical debate', in *Communal and Pan-Islamic Trends in Colonial India* (Delhi: Manohar, 1985), p 375.
  28. Paul R. Brass, 'Elite groups, symbol manipulation and ethnic identity among the Muslims of South Asia',

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- in D. Taylor & M. Yapp (eds), *Political Identity in South Asia*, p 39; see also the first chapter in Brass' *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*.
29. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp 46–47, 50, 57–58, 210.
  30. Georg Elwert, *Nationalismus und Ethnizität, über die Bildung von Wir-Gruppen* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1989), p 9.
  31. Otto Bauer, 'Die nationalitätenfrage und die sozialdemokratie', in *Werkausgabe*, (Vol 1, Wien: Europa Verlags-AG, 197), pp 172f. See also Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1971), p 302.
  32. Cf Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (New York: MIT Press, 1953).
  33. See his theory of communicative action: Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1981).
  34. Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, pp 21ff.
  35. Deutsch believed that for all nation states 'the interest in a common culture and language becomes a political interest'. Karl Deutsch *The Analysis of International Relations* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1968), p 5. He thought that the differential rate between social mobilization and assimilation will either lead to political integration or to a separation of dissenting groups and regions.
  36. Cf Terence Ranger, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in E. Habsbawm, T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp 211–262.
  37. In a public lecture at the University of Pennsylvania on 6 April 1992, Terence Ranger acknowledged that since he first used the term of 'invention' its eventual political connotation has become much clearer. While 'invention' suggested that identities were man-made and could be undone, subsequent developments showed this was not the case. He, therefore, supported the usage of the term 'imagining' introduced by Anderson.
  38. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York: Verso, 1991).
  39. Eugene Irschick quotes examples of groups which were eager to use the Self-Respect movement to introduce social reform and to enhance their status like *Nadar* shopkeepers, *Agamudaiyar* peasants or *Sengunthar* weavers. E. Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s*, pp 95–99. Rafiuddin Ahmad talks of the Bengal Muslim groups which almost spontaneously used the Census to massively return themselves in higher categories of the noble Muslim *ashraf* groups. Rafiuddin Ahmad, *The Bengal Muslims 1871–1906: A Quest For Identity* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp 115ff.

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