

[Chetan Bhatt](#)

Secularism and conflicts about rights

Book section

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SECTION I: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Secularism and Conflicts about Rights

Chetan Bhatt

Department of Sociology at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

During the period of the mass black, Asian and anti-racist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, one of the common slogans that was used in a number of campaigns was 'We are here because you were there'. That slogan is important because it said that migration in the 1960s and 1970s – against which there was a vicious mobilization by some mainstream politicians and neo-fascist movements alike – is part of an historical process. The histories of migrants did not begin in Britain but were shaped by British colonialism, plantation slavery, expansion and exploitation.

The demand that black and Asian people in the UK should be seen as part of an historical process is something that racism effectively denies. (Gilroy, 2002). It is an important demand. It means that we have to address fully the histories – including the political histories – of people before they arrive in the UK or Europe. These histories have many consequences that travel well beyond the characterization of people simply as victims of racism or producers of benign and colourful cultures, or people who only become significant when they need help.

One consequence is that some progressive discussions about racism and migration can be very narrow, since these only look at the history of migrants once they have passed through immigration control at Heathrow or Stansted or Dover. It is a paradox that progressive anti-racist discussions also reproduce a narrow kind of British nationalism that can be largely unconcerned with the world outside Britain, unless it can be related to Britain and its history of colonialism. Progressive anti-racism can also produce a kind of 'racial' victimhood that is outside history and politics.

We need to also consider the way that racism has changed over the last two decades. These new ideas around racism can challenge the understanding of racism that has been shaped by postcolonial

migration since the end of the Second World War. When we talk about postcolonial migration, we are talking about processes that largely occurred up to more than half a century ago. In terms of patterns of movement and settlement, post-war migration was highly predictable and largely consistent. One knew where a Kashmiri or Gujarati would come from. You knew not just the town, but probably also the village. You probably knew their sub-caste or sect and a range of other affiliations as well. You could probably tell with some certainty where they were going to reside or settle in the UK.

The human geography of movements of people across the globe today is very different. It often occurs through the paths and enclaves that sanctuary seekers are forced to use or because of other varied movements of people. The East African Asian migrants to the UK in 1968–74, for example, had already moved once and had made homes and families in another continent far away, well before coming to Britain. Many went on to have families dispersed across several continents. So we are not talking about the one-directional movement that is quite common in migration studies – for example from rural areas into the city and from the periphery to the metropolis. So we need to ask: Are terms such as migration and migrants always relevant? Do these terms adequately address the variety of movements of people today across the globe, often as a consequence of war and conflicts.

Equally important, for many sanctuary seekers, is the changed nature of militarism, humanitarianism, war and conflict. We do not yet have adequate languages to grasp the variety of movements of people today across the globe, or the transformations of war and regional conflict since the late-1980s that have caused many of these movements.

Many dominant understandings of racism that have been shaped by the Asian, Caribbean and African experience may not necessarily be valid anymore,

or at least not valid in the way that is commonly thought. Partly this is about being alive to new forms of racism and fascism that have very little historical relationship with the movements of the 1920s and 1930s. These are fascisms that don't look at all like the fascism we are familiar with. Yet they are often skilful philosophical projects whose loathing can be as intense as that of older fascism.

If the lives and histories of migrants are considered as much more than the struggle against racism in the UK, and if their histories are considered in their fullness, in a way that a genuine antiracist approach has to, then other issues arise, like religion and faith. If we start talking about religion or about civil society, and about what makes a desirable civil society and what should be the place of religion within it, then this is inevitably where our disagreements start. We might begin to disagree about the relations between religion and the state and religion and public policy. We might begin to disagree about the role of religious organizations in progressive initiatives or as allies of progressive movements. I would be surprised if progressive people didn't 'appreciate and value diversity in a positive way'. But I expect that some of them might be wary of being asked to respect diversity independently of other considerations of equality, of women's rights, and of human rights.

We know the areas of disagreement well. For some, religions and faith organizations are seen as tools for 'cohesion' or manifestations of inalienable rights or the basis for legitimate political action. But for others, they are deeply divisive. When gender-based discrimination or violence is considered, these disagreements multiply. We have a clear division between secular universal human and women's rights on the one hand and authoritarian versions of religious faiths on the other. We also have an ethos of secularity that some may wish to see in civil societies and this is vigorously opposed by others in favour of a supposed cohesiveness that is brought about by religion. These types of issues are typical in British debates.

Let's take this outside Britain for a moment. In Gujarat in 2002, there was a large-scale pogrom in which some 2000 Indian citizens, mostly Muslim, were killed and up to a quarter of a million people displaced from their homes. The ensuing carnage, which is often called the Gujarat genocide, was undertaken by movements of the Hindu religious right. Members of UK affiliates of those same Hindu religious right organizations have been involved in a variety of inter-faith initiatives in the UK, including at the highest levels of government. Those

sympathetic to the Hindu Right and those who have defended the Hindu Right have been, among others, a government appointed commissioner on social cohesion (Gilligan, 2007). The chief minister of Gujarat state, widely thought to have played a key role in the 2002 violence, is regularly invited to the UK – though secular south Asian political groups have frequently sought to prevent his arrival here.

More broadly, the involvement of the religious right in policy areas is a common pattern, and it says something about the way the state in Britain relates to religion and culture. It also demonstrates how minority groups in civil society are conceived in policy terms. The state seeks 'community leaders' for minority groups (and creates them if they don't already exist, especially with Asian populations). For example, Lord the Goldsmith's report on citizenship in 2007 (Goldsmith QC, 2007) listed as having been consulted – as you would expect – politicians, academics and policy experts, groups that are specialists in some way or another on citizenship and migration areas. But the remainder were religious organizations and many were figures that were sympathetic to the religious right. How does civil society become 'substituted' by a collection of religious groups, many of them claiming marginality and therefore demanding representation? One can go very far in claiming that one is marginal, but what are the consequences of the religious rendering of civil society in these consultations?

I want to consider another example, from another vantage point. In 1971, in what was East Pakistan and is now Bangladesh, there was a monumental genocide with estimates regularly putting the number of people killed at between 2–3 million and in the war that led to Bangladesh's independence. It was a systematic genocide targeting intellectuals, communists, progressive journalists, feminists, lawyers and so forth. Religious militia acting with the Pakistani army were directly involved in the genocide. After Bangladesh's independence, some members of the militia or members of the political party that spawned the militia could not stay in Bangladesh for obvious reasons. Some of them came to the UK (along with numerous others who were refugees from the war and genocide itself) and later became involved in inter-faith and policy activities at the highest levels in the UK. Some were even implicated in war crimes and other atrocities. They are regularly opposed by secular Bangladeshi groups in the UK, all left-wing but who have no left-wing allies to speak of since many on the UK Left are aligned with the same religious right party that was implicated in the genocide. Now for the Left in

South Asia, it is very clear what real dangers the movements of the religious right represent. These religious movements are not inexperienced, but have been in existence for some 60–80 years. They are often massive and well-organized movements with a large number of wings – youth, women’s, education wings and so forth. They are part of the histories of several of the countries of South Asia. It is then a paradox that the Left in the UK works with the UK representatives of the same movements that are attacking Left groups in South Asia.

Now I want to give a local example that illustrates other changes since the 1980s. Some of you will remember the terrible racist murder of Altab Ali in Tower Hamlets in 1978 and the subsequent rise of Bengali youth movements. Various conflicts occurred between the local community and the neo-fascist National Front or the British movement. In the 1980s and 1990s there were various campaigns and struggles concerning discrimination in housing and other public sector provision and the rise of several women’s organizations. One of the key characteristics of the movements, groups and organizations, and the immense variety of cultural youth activities that emerged from that anti-racist period was that they were virtually universally secular in orientation. In this period, let’s say, from the 1970s right through to the early 1990s, the term ‘Asian’ was a secular term of common affiliation.

There is a powerful history of secular Asian anti-racist and women’s struggles over almost the past 30 years or so. These groups were important in facing down the real threat from organized fascism in the 1970s, as well as consolidating an independent political sphere that was well sustained right up to the 1990s. Such histories are written out of the discourses of multiculturalism and the faith agenda. They are also erased by the Asian religious Right who wish to impose an altogether different understanding on those histories – histories that they played virtually no part in. In this remarkably neglected history of secular Asian struggles in Britain, the ferocity of the racism that Asians faced and fought is at risk of being forgotten entirely by younger Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. For some of those people, the term ‘Asian’ evokes disgust. They are instead keener to celebrate the supremacy of their religions, monuments or civilizations. We can mourn the loss of the memory of that history, or we can attempt to rescue it, but I doubt that there is a strong secular presence anymore that can challenge the ceaseless communalization of Asian politics in the UK.

Some people on the Asian religious right wish to

replace this history with the politics of religious identity. It is one of the peculiarities of this period that some young Hindus, for example, vehemently ‘oppose colonialism’ by claiming to be the real Aryans, just as some young Muslims claim that a Crusader-Zionist-Hindu conspiracy governs the world. Opposing racism and fascism can dovetail with other ideologies of communal purity.

We often hear of the transformation of official anti-racist initiatives, which started in the 1980s after which they became something like an official multiculturalism and then, more recently, multifaithism. At some point multifaith initiatives and other initiatives around social cohesion became linked. After 2001, more insistently after 2005, these linked initiatives became unevenly associated with counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism. At a different, community level communal identity politics increasingly became the naturalized norm. The issue becomes not ‘How are we Asians going to live with each other?’, but instead ‘Who am I? How can I be purer in who I want to be?’ This becomes the register for thinking about anything to do with south Asians in the UK. Why should this be so?

Why indeed is the thinkability of Asians in this country inseparable from the view of them as target communities that need representation from unelected leaders? Minority populations receive institutional recognition primarily as communal groups. This recognition takes a form that advances the undemocratically-derived political interests of those groups that wish to make communal claims. Those groups tend to be dominated by the political parties of the South Asian and middle-Eastern religious right. So what is the democratic deficit here? Is this a kind of inferior citizenship?

Particularly after the 2001 disturbances in the Northern towns in the UK, some Hindu and Sikh groups demanded not to be addressed as ‘Asians’, and instead to be recognized as high achievers in employment and education, and as loyal, model minorities committed fully to Britishness. Here one can see how the rush to embrace British nationalism can link with ideas of communal purity. In this same process, class divisions in Asian populations came to be articulated as religious divisions, with some successful Hindus and Sikhs claiming to be a world away from the Muslims they rubbed shoulders with daily: the ‘good’ minorities against the ‘bad’, an absolute border created between the most proximate of peoples.

These communal dynamics pose other issues

about relations between so-called migrant groups not just in Britain but across Europe. For example, when and how will the second generation Turkish woman in Frankfurt be seen as a European by a second generation Indian woman from Leicester? Are both more at ease with seeing themselves as German or British rather than seeing each other as European? What might be the Europeanness that each might identify in the other? Or are there other transnational dynamics, including religious ones, that will ultimately be more critical?

The rise and impact of the transnational religious Right can be a difficult area for the Left. Issues of security and citizenship, policing and militarism are being raised today in the context of sustained political demonization of Muslim populations. We can recognize the difficulties that many progressives face in which, aside from the 'global war on terror' and the invasion of Iraq, there is an intense anti-Muslim bigotry of a systematic kind across Europe. This bigotry has become linked to immigration and border controls in the most insidious of ways – for example, by enforcing gender and sexuality rights against members of religious groups coming to Europe. In Britain, the association between belonging and patriotism or between social cohesion and patriotism is particularly troubling.

The political terrain is a peculiar one in many other ways, but one particularly powerful political configuration is between conservative tendencies and the supposedly liberal ones, both often proposing views that are pro-Israeli, anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. And we see the use of the languages of liberty and freedom, women's and sexual emancipation directed against Muslim populations as a test of their acceptance of certain values. In concluding, our political choices are much wider than those offered by either the right-wing and libertarian anti-Muslim alliances on the one hand, or the different alliances of the Left with sections of the religious Right.

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