Secularism and communalism in the UK

LSE's Chetan Bhatt analyses how minority groups in civil society are conceived in policy terms.

During the period of the mass black, Asian and antiracist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, a common slogan that was used in a number of campaigns was 'We are here because you were there'. That very simple slogan was necessary because it said that migration in the 1960s and 1970s – against which there was a powerful mobilisation by some mainstream politicians and neo-fascist movements – was part of an historical process. The histories of migrants did not begin in Britain but were shaped by Empire, plantation slavery, expansion and exploitation.

This demand that black and Asian migration to the UK should be seen as part of an historical process that includes colonial history was important because racism effectively denies that history. However, some varieties of UK anti-racism and multiculturalism also remove minorities from historical processes. Histories have many consequences that travel well beyond the mono-dimensional characterisation of people simply as victims of racism, producers of colourful cultures, or people who only become significant when they need help.

The human and political geography of movements of people across the globe today is very different from that of post-Second World War postcolonial migration. It often occurs through the paths and enclaves that sanctuary seekers are forced to use or because of other varied movements of people. What used to be called 'settlement' is a dynamic and transnational process that can include further and complex movements and transnational family associations. However, our political languages are still controlled by concepts, some from the 1950s and 1960s, regarding 'immigration', 'host', 'minority', 'tolerance', 'integration', 'assimilation', 'accommodation', 'incorporation' and the like.

What might our progressive approach to the inexorable and unpatterned global movements of people be were we to dispense entirely with the 'host'/migrant metaphor and its associated cluster of concepts? 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? Is an eighteenth and nineteenth century conception of 'tolerance' to remain the basis for the grandest vision of optimistic hope for Europe, its societies and their place in the world that we can offer today?

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 anti-racist approach has to, then other issues arise, like the political histories of religion and faith. Once we start talking about what makes a desirable civil society and what should be the place of religion within it, then disagreements inevitably begin. We might disagree about the relations between religion and the state and religion and public policy. We might disagree about the role of religious organisations in progressive initiatives or as allies of progressive movements. (How will sections of the UK left view their strong alliances with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Bangladeshi and Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami when these are plainly to the far-right of a party political spectrum in the Middle East and South Asia that includes an opposing secular left at the other end?)

In the UK, we know many of the areas of disagreement well. For some, religions and faith organisations 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 those who claim secular universal human and women's rights on the one hand and authoritarian versions of religious faiths on the other that seek to deny many of these rights.

Let's take this outside Britain for a moment. In Gujarat in 2002, there was a large-scale pogrom in which some 2,000 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 organisations have been involved in a variety of inter-faith initiatives in the UK, including at the highest levels of government. The current British government is seeking to normalise relations with Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, the same state that was heavily implicated in the 2002 violence.

The involvement of the religious right in UK 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 thinkability of Asians in Britain has become inseparable from the view of them as communal groups that need representation from unelected leaders. This form of recognition advances in a deeply asymmetric way the political interests of those groups that wish to make communal claims. The state seeks 'community leaders' for minority groups (and generates them if they don't already exist, especially in Asian populations). For example, the Goldsmith's report on citizenship in 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 organisations 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?

From the 1970s right through to the early 1990s, the term 'Asian' was a secular term of common affiliation. In the 1980s and 1990s there were various campaigns concerning discrimination in housing and other public sector provision and the rise of numerous women's organisations. One of the key characteristics of these was that they were virtually universally secular in their orientation. Secular Asian anti-racist and women's groups were important in facing down the real threat from organised 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 equally 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 movements 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. Some younger religious right activists seek to replace this history with a chauvinistic politics of religious identity.

The transformation of official anti-racist initiatives 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 associated with counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism, just as a renewed, vicious assault on 'multiculturalism' was unleashed across Europe. If the living histories related to South Asian migration to the UK are apprehended in the fullest sense, they constantly escape the political boundaries, official or otherwise, that otherwise seek to contain them. It is perhaps here that the somewhat partial debates on secularism and secularity in Europe might learn from the varied, dense and often fraught debates in South Asia.

For the complete discussion on this topic, see Chetan Bhatt (2012) "Secularism and conflicts about rights". In: Nira Yuval-Davis and Philip Marfleet, (eds.) Secularism, racism and the politics of belonging. Runnymede perspectives. Runnymede, London, UK.

Dr Chetan Bhatt is Professor of Sociology and Director of LSE's Centre for the Study of Human Rights.