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WHY REFER TO THE HINDUS IN BANGLADESH AS A “MINORITY”?¹

ABSTRACT

In this paper I problematize the notion of majority/ minority and try to argue that much of this construction can be shown to have links with forms of colonial governmentality in South Asia. Using relevant literature, the paper discusses how categories such as “minority” or “majority” came into being and were normalized through different technologies of power in post-colonial states such as ours. Such constructions, when taken uncritically, can pose problems for the communities to which they refer. The paper indicates that nomenclature is an important issue and one needs to be careful about the terms they use, as they may have a far-reaching effect.

Keywords: Colonialism, Governmentality, Communalism, South Asia

¹ The current piece is a revised version of an article written in Bangla on communalism.

To change the world, one has to change the ways of making the world, that is the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced.²

1. How one should refer to the Hindu population in Bangladesh, a country where to-day almost 90% of the population is Muslim? I have been thinking about this question for a while. In ordinary discourses, I often refuse to use the term “minority” or even when I use it, I use it within scare quotes. Of course this is a practice I stress when I am discoursing amongst the middle-class, educated people whom I meet in seminars and symposiums, and of course in the classrooms of the university. In today’s Bangladesh, the Hindu community constitutes about 9% of the country’s population. However, recently researchers have claimed that this number has been declining ever since 1947 (when Bengal was divided) as an effect of *desh bhag*.³ In a context such as Bangladesh, where the question of Hindu population and their persecution and decreasing number is an ongoing phenomenon, how should we speak about these people? My friends who are more familiar with transnational discourses of “minority rights” see almost no alternative to the term “minority.” I differ. Why not use the very term Hindu? Why do we need to use the word “minority” (which of course assumes the presence of a “majority”)? Is it absolutely essential that we use these terms?

Some of my reservations about this very term are precisely expressed in a letter titled ‘The Identity of the Community’ published on 13 January 2009 in *The Daily Prothom Alo*, a widely read Bengali newspaper published in Bangladesh. The writer of the letter, A. M. Kayes Chowdhury, a Muslim as the name suggests, provided some observations on the identity of the community (i.e. the Hindus of Bangladesh). The author observes, *A number of different communities of different religious faith orientation live in Bangladesh. Since the Muslims are dominant in number, the followers of other religions are called minority. They are referred as “minority” Hindu community, Christian community, Buddhist community etc. Referring to the minority, thus, is an expression of inferiority complex, which creates class division. This hampers citizen’s rights too* (emphases and translation mine).

Although slightly scattered, this letter caught my attention. While reading it, I was thinking about Bangladesh’s national elections of 2008 when the word “minority” was being used and aired repeatedly in the country’s various electronic media. The word was being used by TV journalists due to the necessity of giving information on the Hindu voters from different parts of the country. For those who are not completely familiar with Bangladesh, the country’s Hindu population often find themselves in a precarious situation whenever a general election is held in the country. Thus, a special mention on

² P. Bourdieu, ‘Social Space and Symbolic Power’ in idem, *In Other Words. Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. by M. Adamson, Stanford 1990, p. 137.

³ The Bengali phrase often used to refer to 1947 which divided Bengal as well as the Indian subcontinent. The phrase literally means division of the country.

the security of the Hindu voters in Bangladesh unfortunately becomes necessary during election times.

The observations made in this letter bring forward some important questions. The fact that the terms majority-minority are not merely a demographic description/reality is made somewhat clear in the letter. Certainly, this is not an inevitable reality that the citizens of a “nation-state” have to be introduced through categories such as “minority” or “majority.” On the contrary, what is essential to note is how postcolonial nation-states continue to shoulder the weight of this statistics, historically imposed by the colonial states.⁴

2. In this connection, I was thinking of how categories such as “minority” or “majority” came into being and were normalized through different technologies of governance in post-colonial states such as ours. I suppose a similar set of questions is raised by Faisal Devji in his recent book. Reviewing the book, Navveda Khan wrote that Devji’s intent is to deconstruct some obdurate truisms of South Asia: “why must we submit to the inevitability of representative democracy in India? What is a majority or a minority group in a region riven by so many conflicting modes of affiliating and self-dividing?”⁵ These questions have been taken up at greater length by a group of scholars who are mostly known as the subaltern historians in India. Adopting and somewhat extending Foucault’s concept of governmentality, the process I look into, has been defined as the effects of colonial governmentality by a number of these scholars.⁶

Partha Chatterjee argued that postcolonial citizens often carry the legacy of the colonial governmental forms and effects, which amounts to what he calls a misery of living in a postcolonial state.⁷ On “communalism” for example, Pandey writes, it is a *form of colonialist knowledge. The concept stands for the puerile and the primitive – all that colonialism, in its own reckoning, was not.*⁸ For Pandey the term “communalism” is *loaded and obfuscating.*⁹ Then why he still uses it without inverted commas? Pandey explains: *...needs of communication, and of convenient shorthand, have dictated this. The term has passed into the political and historical vocabulary in India: and while we can, and in my opinion must, question its use, finding other ways of talking about the experiences and idea sometimes described as “communalism” is not easy.*¹⁰

⁴ Historically, the state has always benefitted from the development of Statistics as a knowledge system. For a discussion see D. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity. Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, Delhi 2002.

⁵ See N. Khan, ‘Review of Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 119, No. 5 (2014), for a review of the book.

⁶ See works by P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton 1993 (*Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History*) and D. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity...* for this scholarship.

⁷ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments...*

⁸ G. Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Delhi 1990, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. iix.

¹⁰ For Pandey, however, the term “communalism” is a heuristic device; that both the term and the politics

According to these scholars, the colonial rule has altered much of our social system, especially the relationships between different communities. As a result, in today's Bangladesh-Pakistan-India, the *difference* between communities is more highlighted than the *proximity*. Scholars try to argue that this construction is recent and it developed in colonial times. In this connection, B.S. Cohn, widely known as “an anthropologist among the historians” (following the title of one of his books), has some interesting observations. In Cohn's analysis, the people in colonial India did not generally know who were necessarily the “majority” and the “minority” people in a particular region before the introduction of census statistics in colonial India. A great number of censuses conducted over the many decades of the colonial period made this “knowledge” possible. Cohn in many of his essays argued that the idea of *Varna*-based identity became stronger and consolidated through the census operations in colonial India. Census operations forced people in India to answer certain questions for the first time and the participation was obligatory. A good example of what I would like to call the operations of the “conduct of the conduct” is found in the following pamphlet which I reproduce from Cohn in table 1:¹¹

Table 1

Remember!
Census Operations Have Begun

Question	You should answer!
Religion	Vedi Dharm
Sect	Arya Samajist
Caste	Nil
Race	Aryan
Language	Arya Bhasha

The reproduced leaflet from 1931 shown above was distributed in Lahore, Pakistan by a census committee called Arya Samaj. In this leaflet, the committee attempted to guide the respondents as to what answers they should give to the enumerators. From my perspective, this constitutes an example of the “conduct of the conduct” – a phrase used by Foucault to define his concept of modern governmentality. Foucault's modern governance refers to, *the conduct of the conduct – that is, to all those more or less calculated and systematic ways of thinking and acting that aim to shape, regulate, or manage the comportment of others, whether these be workers in a factory,*

and attitudes that it seeks to encapsulate have a history which can be charted; and that the boundaries separating these attitudes and politics from others existing at the same time are not as clear as has generally been supposed. Ibid., p. iix.

¹¹ B.S. Cohn, ‘The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia’ in idem, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi 1987, p. 250 (Oxford India Paperbacks).

*inmates in a prison, wards in a mental hospital, the inhabitants of a territory, or the members of a population.*¹²

The members “of a population” in this case belonged to “Arya Samaj” in Lahore. Thus, this constitutes an example of how the population is marked by the colonial census.

This theme of an undeniable mark imposed by modern power on the colonial subject is also discussed in a set of literature which focuses on the history of “communities” from the pre-colonial to the colonial period of India. Sudipta Kaviraj, a political scientist and a pioneering scholar in this field, argues that pre-colonial Indian society can be likened to a *circle of circles of caste and religious communities* and that it loosely articulated *social order made for... fuzzy identities*. Kaviraj argues that in the middle of this “circle of circles” sat the largely ceremonial state. The state refrained from intruding into the daily life processes of the community, or taking on any fundamental restructuring of social relations. On the contrary, the state was mainly concerned with rent extraction and with demonstrating the magnificence of kingly power. The *(f)ixation of identities had to await the colonial practices of enumeration*.¹³ The colonial process, Kaviraj argues, rendered an “enumerable” sense of community at the expense of the impoverishment of the earlier “fuzzy” sense, and here by the term “fuzzy” Kaviraj suggests vague boundaries that do not admit of discrete either/or divisions.¹⁴

Gyandendra Pandey tried to show how in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century when India saw the development of “modern” politics (emphasis in the original) which included nationalism and communalism, the relationship between Hindu-Muslim changed. Pandey writes, *I have stretched back into the early nineteenth century to examine the record of Hindu-Muslim relations at an earlier stage, and how this was written about; and I have stretched forward into the 1930s and even 1940s where this helped to show how the character of “nationalism” and “communalism” has changed in the subcontinent – at times dramatically*.¹⁵ Pandey reminds us that, *For the generality of colonialist writers, nationalism, nation-ness, was a Western attribute, unlikely to be found or easily replicated in the East. In its developed form, this perspective was established fairly late, only towards the end of the nineteenth century, when nationalism had emerged clearly as the discourse of the age and strong nationalist stirrings against colonialism were beginning to be felt in India*.¹⁶ He points out that before this period, *terms like “race,” “nation,” “nationality” and “class” (more commonly in the plural form) were regularly used by the colonial writers and administrators in the subcontinent to describe groups as diverse as Rajputs, Sikhs, Muslims and Bhils*. Even as late as 1890s, coolies recruited for tea

¹² J.X. Inda (ed.), *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics*, Oxford 2005, p. 1.

¹³ N. Chandhoke, Review of Chatterjee, Partha, *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays* and Kaviraj, Sudipta, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010, pp. 1-2, at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30477>>, 3 August 2010.

¹⁴ S. Kaviraj, ‘The Imaginary Institution of India’ in P. Chatterjee, G. Pandey (eds.), *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. 7: *Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi 1992.

¹⁵ G. Padney, *The Construction of Communalism...*, pp. iix-ixx.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

plantations of Assam were being described as belonging to various different nationalities – Bhojpuri, Chota Nagpuri, Bengali, and so on. Pandey claims that comparatively, the bland term “community” came to be in use in consequence of this phenomenon, although it did not of course replace the notions of races, tribes, and nationalities altogether.

One of the important conclusions of these scholars is that the colonial state in India was first and foremost a “modern state”¹⁷ and one of the most outward signs of this modernity was India’s technique of government, which was *very closely tied to techniques of measurement* (i.e. statistics). Elaborating on this measurement technique, Dipesh Chakrabarty¹⁸ noted that from conducting surveys on land and crop output to prospecting for minerals, from measuring Indian brains (on behalf of the false science of phrenology) to measuring Indian bodies, diets and life spans and thus laying the foundation for physical anthropology and modern medicine in India, the British had the length and breadth of India, its history, culture and society, mapped, classified and quantified in detail that was nothing but precise even when it was wrongheaded.¹⁹ This process, he noted, constituted (through the modern means of measurement) *a structure of political representation tied to notions of proportionality*.

3. In Chakrabarty’s *Habitation of Modernity* we find a very interesting story and analysis of proximity and identity between Hindu and Muslim communities during the heydays of nationalist movement in Colonial Bengal. The story takes place in Faridpur, a district located in East Pakistan and later Bangladesh. Chakrabarty took the story from Mrinal Sen, a renowned film maker of West Bengal, India. Sen’s family settled in West Bengal after partition from East Bengal (i.e. now Bangladesh). The time frame of the story is set in the 1920-1930s. Sen was growing up in a Congress-oriented family in the district of Faridpur of then undivided Bengal. Sen recalled that during that time there was not much mixing with the Muslims. His elder brother, a schoolboy at the time, once invited a Muslim friend of his, in order to show his poetry to his father. Impressed, the father told the son to bring his friend home more often. In the course of time the boy became very close to the family. Nicknamed Sadhu, this boy was poet Jasimuddin, who turned out to be a famous Bangladeshi poet in later years. In Sen’s memory, Sadhu was just like a family member. It was only after he grew slightly older that he realized that Sadhu was not their brother.

According to Chakrabarty, Sen’s narrative shows how in a time of political turmoil (the demands for the creation of Pakistan were being made during that time), the putative kin relation gets unsettled and divided. Jasimuddin himself was influenced by a Bengali Muslim sentiment, so was Sen’s father. There was a discursive shift in the politics of Bengal. In Sen’s memory, although Faridpur was calm as far as the communal riot was concerned, there were other places where the communal riot was taking place

¹⁷ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*....; P. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*...

¹⁸ P. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*...

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

and this was having an impact on Faridpur as well. For this reason the elder people were advised to remain cautious. Sen also remembers that whenever there was a communal riot, his father would adopt what he calls a “Hindu attitude” and Jasimuddin would side with the Muslims. Chakrabarty’s story shows how the organized political discursive shift limited the scope of proximity (between the Hindus and the Muslims) and forced people to represent themselves along the religious lines.

4. More generally, the discussion on identity formation in social science has been growing in importance from the late 1980s and one cannot say that it is declining. The reason for this theoretical impetus came from many directions. Above all the “tribal” conflict in Rwanda in the last century, the violence in the Balkans, and South Asian communal violence and politics – all of these constitute important contexts. The scholars have looked into the following issues with much care: how the relationship between communities rapidly changes from proximity to antagonism. These questions are as much valid for the Balkans as they are for different religious groups and communities living in nationally controlled spaces. In the context of South Asia, the question may be of the following nature: how the relationship between one community and the other turn from tolerance to violence? In anthropological circles too, a similar theoretical interest can be found.

Let us get back to the letter I referred to at the beginning of this piece. The writer was suggesting how one can address a group using other description than the Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh: all citizens can be addressed as Bengali Muslim, Bengali Hindu, Bengali Buddhist, or Muslims of Bangladesh, Hindus of Bangladesh etc., he opined. I am not sure whether this debate will end any time soon. But surely, the writer does not suggest terms such as majority or minority. In relation to this letter, I have tried to locate a theoretical position in this piece. This position is against the ideas of rigid difference or classification. I have tried to show that categorization is a problematic idea and that the idea of “majority” and “minority” is not merely a demographic substance. Categorization relates to power. But who can categorize who is important and who is not? Following the violence of the Balkans and South Asia, Hayden (2002) wrote that a theorist’s work is to stress the fluidity and changeability of identity so that one can create logic against any use of past in a racist, sexist and other oppressive objective. Much of what I have discussed here is a prelude to this objective.

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