

Who Am I ?*

Living Identities Vs Acquired Ones

Madhu Kishwar

EVERY human being is the product of many cross-cutting, multilayered identities. For instance, a vital part of my identity is defined by my gender. But I am also (among other things) a daughter, a sister, a college teacher, a writer, a Punjabi, a Hindu, a resident of a particular neighbourhood, and a citizen of India. Most identities (e.g., those based on nationality, religion, language) are acquired or mutable. A few are fixed and immutable, such as biological parentage. Identities based on native land, village, or locale where a person is born and reared are also fixed.

For the most part, people take these identity layers for granted and they find expression in their appropriate realms at different points of time. However, a group or person may begin to assert a particular identity with greater vigour if it provides greater access to power and opportunities, as happens with caste or gender-based job reservations. Alternately, a person begins to assign a high priority to a particular basic identity if she or he perceives it as threatened or

suppressed, especially if that identity is essential to the person's personal, economic or social well-being. For instance, if the government implemented censorship laws that forbade me as a writer to publish and disseminate my work freely, I would be forced to give greater emphasis to my identity as a writer, and to devote a good deal of my time and efforts to fighting against the censors. This struggle may require working in alliances with other writers, though our other identities and commitments may have very little in common.

When I travel down South, I become aware of my identity as a North Indian, because most people there do not understand the languages I speak, and as a result I feel handicapped. By contrast, I feel culturally much closer

to and communicate much better with Punjabis from Pakistan, even though they are citizens of a state that has a long history of enmity with India. I become acutely aware of my identity as an Indian only when I travel abroad, especially in the West, because of the frequent incidents of racial prejudice and cultural arrogance I routinely encounter there.

Similarly, I become conscious of my identity as a woman only on those few occasions when I am discriminated against or feel special disabilities on account of my gender, for example, when facing sexual harassment or discrimination in employment. Otherwise, my gender identity is only one of my multiple overlapping and crosscutting identities which peacefully coexists with other identities.

If too many women appear to be imprisoned in their gender identity today, it is because of the disabilities society imposes on them due to their gender. For instance, motherhood, which is an enriching experience for many women and a key component of their self identification often becomes a terrible burden for women under current societal pressures. Too often, young girls who are not yet ready for marriage are forced into marriage and early motherhood. Too many women

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cannot decide for themselves when and how many children to have. A woman denied control over her own body might even grow to hate her identity as a woman for want of any prospect of escape from her oppression.

Without these pressures, womanhood would be a far more enriching experience than manhood. Even with all the discrimination they face as females, most women express their identity in benign ways in comparison to men. Women are simply content to be and they show a great deal of flexibility and adaptation to the many social contexts that they participate in during their life cycle, without inordinate strain. Most men, on the other hand, feel compelled to assert one or the other of their competitive identities all the time. Consequently, men become far more aggressive and violence-prone; at the same time their unrelenting need to prove themselves makes their egos more fragile and anxiety-ridden.

Without a Homeland

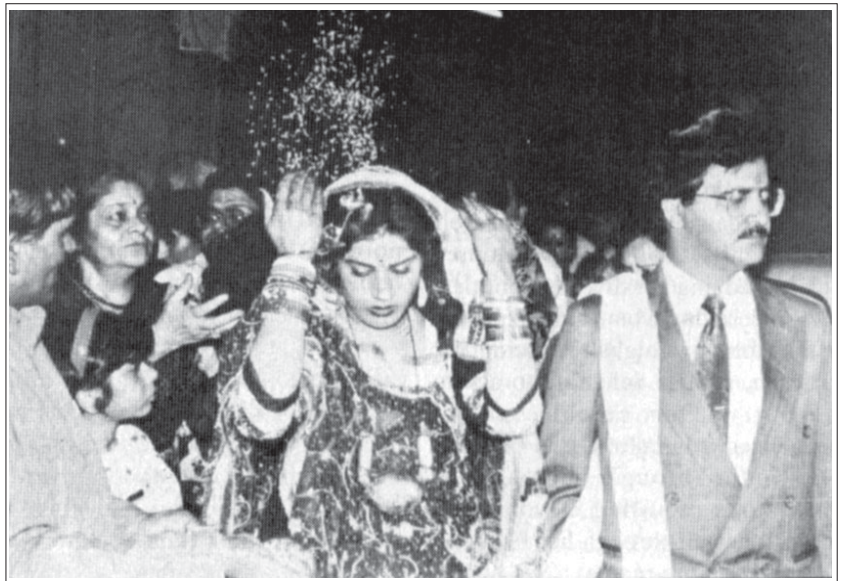
A woman may not be as anxiety ridden about her ego, but her identity is often riddled with a sense of insecurity. This is because in patrilocal, patriarchal societies like ours, she is denied roots even in her parental family — the most primary identity-inculcating unit of society. For men in our society, their parental identity as well as their roots to their place of birth and upbringing are immutable. But in the case of women these two immutable identities are sought to be systematically weakened, if not altogether erased leading to a great deal of insecurity and sense of hapless dependence on men.

In most parts of India daughters are considered *paraya dhan* (an alien's wealth) and excluded from full

membership of their natal families after marriage. They can be reduced to the status of refugees without the occurrence of a war or even a riot. At the time of marriage it is made very clear to daughters that henceforth their basic rights are being transferred to their husband's family. The bride's obligations to others will henceforth be determined by the heads of their marital family. She is uprooted as a necessary concomitant of marriage, as a necessary custom, and is transplanted into someone else's home, someone else's village or *mohalla*, and severed from her close kin and friends to live among strangers. She is expected to adopt her husband's family name to indicate her absorption into their family. These uprootments and changes of identity help make women far more adaptable, sensible, practical, less grandiose and pompous, and capable of handling pain, uncertainties and doubt more easily than men, the negative consequences of such cultural practices are far more devastating to their survival and well being. It makes too many women end up feeling dependent and worthless in comparison to men.

In most communities, daughters are formally disinherited from parental property at the time of marriage. They only have the right to come as occasional guests to their parental home; they are not allowed to take up residence in that home as a full fledged member of the family ever again. This makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse in their marital homes. Many cannot walk out of even violent and demeaning marriages simply because they have nowhere to go. They continue accepting maltreatment to avoid ending up back in their own parental homes which after her brothers' marriages became *bhabhiyon wala ghar* (a house of sisters-in-law) and, therefore, really out of bounds.

Even in her marital home, her rights are fragile. In case of breakdown of her marriage, she can easily be turned out of that home. After all, it is her husband's natal home, not hers. This lack of basic rights in both her natal and marital home contributes enormously to making a woman experience perpetual insecurity,



The moment of *bidai*, the final send off from the parental home

especially in those communities where a woman is kept from owning property in her own name. There is no United Nations High Commission for Refugees which can give disinherited women internationally recognised refugee status. No wonder so many of them emerge from their marital homes battered or even dead.

I believe that the primary responsibility for their plight rests with their parents and our peculiar family structure which seeks to erase the previous identity of a woman upon marriage in ways that destroy her sense of self. Very often this insecurity creates negative consequences in her marital home, generally at the cost of other women in the house. In an effort to establish a place for herself in her husband's home, a woman may make desperate efforts to push a mother-in-law out, or to make her *nanad* (sister-in-law) feel unwelcome and unwanted, even as a short term guest, leave alone someone who comes for long-term shelter in times of crisis. Such are the perverse norms of our family system that women themselves end up playing an active, often even a belligerent role in rendering other women refugees without a shelter and dependent on men for protection.

While Sita did not become Mrs. Ramchandra and continued to be called Janaki (daughter of Janak) and Maithili (daughter of Mithila), as well as a host of other names acknowledging her diverse identities, our modern day women are expected to transform overnight from being, for example, a Miss Sehgal, into a Mrs Kapoor. Our colonial rulers introduced this culture and practice into India through bureaucratic procedures requiring a woman to identify herself through her father or husband's family name. (See article by Ruth Vanita on naming

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practices in Issue No. 39) We slavishly spread it because such a form of address for dependent women within the family, accords with our contemporary culture's desire to make women become identified as the wife of some man after her marriage, rather than to provide her the option of retaining her original identity of her natal home.

Many women write and ask us at **Manushi** whether after their marriage they can retain their maiden names, i.e., their father's surname. They are distressed at the thought that without any choice in the matter they would henceforth cease to have the identity they were given while growing up. While assuring them that legally there is nothing to prevent them from retaining their present name, I tell them the exercise is somewhat meaningless if other rights do not come with retaining their father's surname. For instance, I see little point in a woman sticking to her father's name if right of residence in that home and inheritance rights there are going to be denied to her. It amounts to *dhobi ka kutta, na ghar ka na ghat ka* — belonging neither here nor there. If she expects her husband and/or in-laws to provide a share in their inheritance, she may as well adopt their family name and strengthen her roots there. However,

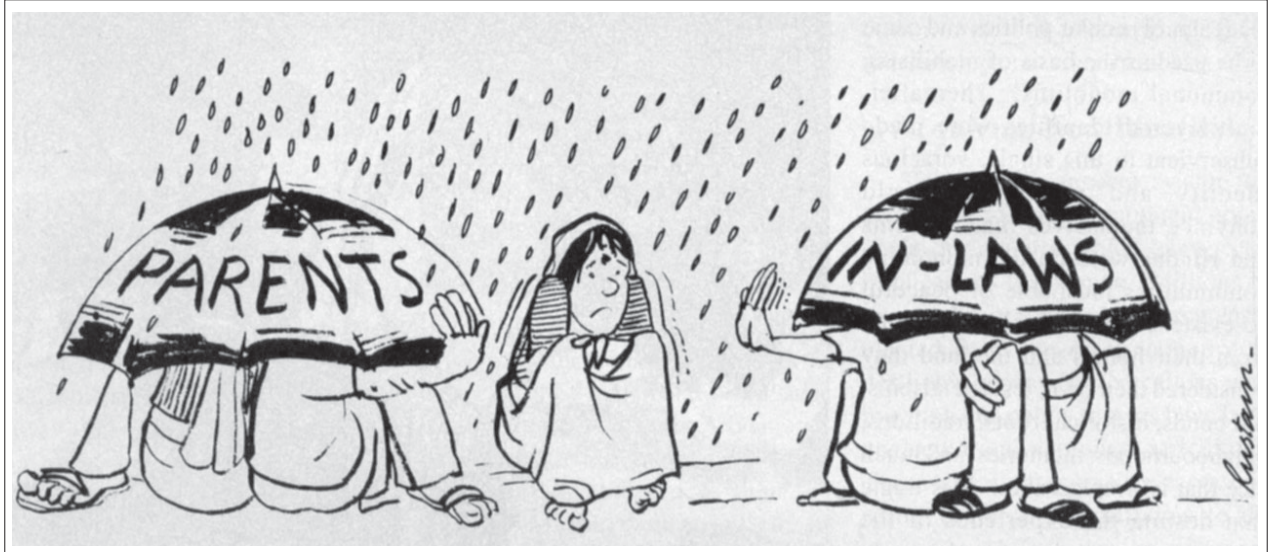
it is unrealistic to expect husbands and in-laws to unconditionally offer the new bride economic security if her own parents have systematically denied it to her. Therefore, women should prioritise securing and strengthening their rights in their parental home instead of pitching all their expectations of security onto the husband and in-laws.

I have come to firmly believe that for a woman, having a roof over her head which she can call her own is a key element for a secure identity. If those parents who can afford it would ensure this vital asset for their daughters instead of providing them with exorbitant dowries, women would not be as vulnerable to marital abuse and a sense of worthlessness in cases of marriage breakdown.

Havoc of Nationalism

On a personal note, there is only one level at which I have felt the pangs of an uprooted identity and being a refugee remains a permanent, inescapable predicament for me. No amount of effort on my part can change that. I am from a Punjabi family which was forcibly ejected from what is now Pakistan during the Partition of 1947. Even though it did not take too long for my family to settle down in Delhi, the city I was born in, it has been a constant source of annoyance and pain that whenever someone asks me "Where are you from?", a simple but important question that is a key element in defining my identity, I have no real answer. My reply is something like an explanation of my uprooted status rather than an answer: "My father is from Lahore, my mother from Peshawar and I was born in Delhi."

I have never been comfortable calling myself a *Dilliwali*, but only a person born in Delhi, because the real



Dilliwalas do not recognise me as one of them. One can easily become a New Yorker by simply being born there or living there for some time, but one can't become an Andhraite by being born in Andhra. That has to do with our special rootedness in regional identities (among others) in the subcontinent. Neither can I claim to be Lahori or Peshawari.

However, I grew up yearning to see and visit Pakistan. Whenever in school they asked us to write an essay on the place we would like to visit most, my classmates would write about exotic foreign lands. My essay always contained the desire to visit Pakistan — especially Lahore and Peshawar. Yet the two times I briefly visited Lahore in recent years caused me immense emotional distress. I was supposedly in a foreign country but unlike visits to other foreign countries, it was not my Indian identity that asserted itself. I felt I was a Punjabi returned to her homeland which had been usurped by many who had no right to it. I was seething inside with unexpected rage which had never found an outlet all these years because for Hindus to yearn for their homeland in what is now

called Pakistan is considered politically incorrect. I think Hindu refugees are perhaps among the few groups anywhere in the world who are denied the right to even yearn and mourn for the homeland they lost.

At the Pak-India Amity Forum that I attended in Lahore, my soul rose in revolt when I heard many a Pakistani delegate tell us self-righteously that they feared India because they felt Indians had not made peace with the idea of Pakistan — that we still harboured secret fantasies of *Akhand Bharat* (undivided India) and had imperialist designs on their *mulk* (nation). I certainly am not willing to make peace with a Partition which permanently robbed me of my regional identity, while driving millions of

Hindus and Muslims from their homes through terror, violence, murder, rape, and plunder.

However, when I say that I don't accept the Partition, I don't advocate undoing it by another war. All I mean to say is that it was based on a false idea that Hindus and Muslims are not just two communities but separate irreconcilable nationalities. In fact, I consider most nationalistic identities to be dangerous and poisonous. They have caused enormous bloodshed all over the world, including the recent recrudescence of this poisonous creed in its birthplace, Europe, where ethnic cleansing is the new term for this worldwide murderous epidemic that has made hundreds of millions of people homeless in their own homelands. What happened in our subcontinent in 1947 is merely one instance of this European disease.

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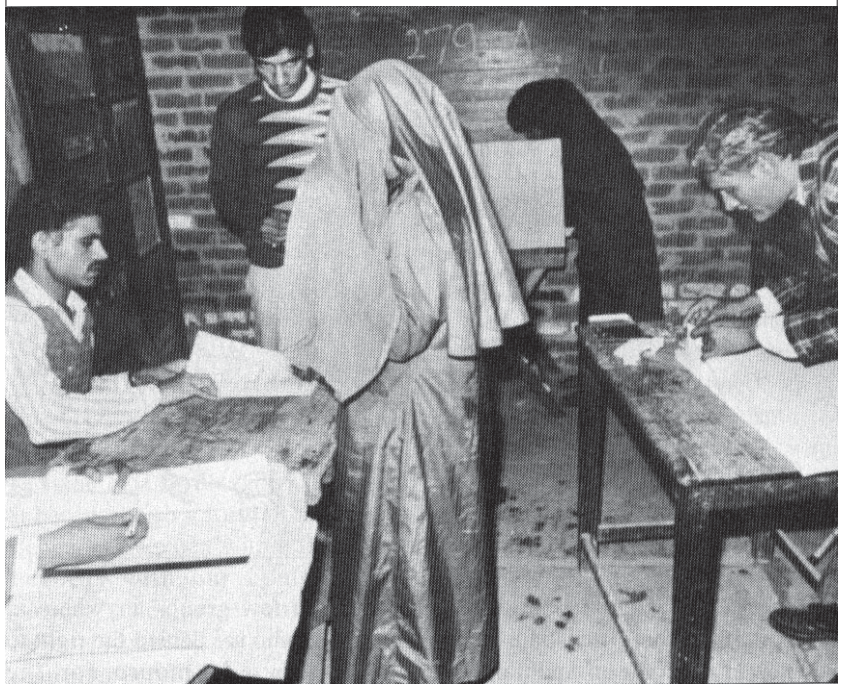
In the subcontinent, as long as Hindus and Muslims believed that they were two religious-cultural communities living and sharing a common soil, they could easily work out decent traditional norms for co-living on the basis of other common layers of identity such as language,

village, and culture. The moment the virus of ethnic and secular nationalism invaded us from the West, religious differences began to be dragged into the realm of secular politics and came to be used as the basis of mobilising communal monoliths. Thereafter, multilayered identities were made subservient to this single, voracious identity and politicians could convince themselves that Muslims and Hindus were hostile monolithic communities incapable of peaceful co-existence. Millions were uprooted from their homes and the land they considered their own, lost friendships, old bonds, historical roots, traditions, neighbourhoods, memories, and much else that is irreplaceable. It is tragic that despite the experience of the Partition, we continue on the same disastrous path of making people refugees in their own country as is happening in Kashmir.

Women Carry the Load

In the ongoing conflict in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, a large number of innocent people have already been uprooted from their homes by the brute actions of the Indian armed forces as well as the terror brigades of Islamic militants. The BJP-RSS wants to convince us that only Kashmiri Hindus have been driven out as refugees, whereas the sad reality is that the actions of the Indian government and Pakistani terrorists have caused many more Muslim families to flee Kashmir and seek refuge in safer places. In my own area of Lajpat Nagar thousands of Kashmiri Muslim families have come as refugees, purchased houses and shops because business and normal life has been badly hit in the Kashmir valley.

There is something to be learnt from the fact that when Kashmiri men want



Women carry the burden of men's identity assertion

to launch their *jihad* against the Indian government they cross the border to get arms training and weapons from Pakistan, but when they want to move to a safe place with their families to earn a livelihood, they come to Delhi and other cities of India. Pakistan obviously does not seem like an attractive destination for those Kashmiri Muslims seeking security for their families and businesses. Are women determining the latter choice — the choice of their refuge?

Coming and living in cities like Delhi at the height of anti-India insurgency

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in Kashmir, is an important statement of trust in the Indian people even while the government of India is hated and mistrusted. Living in Delhi in Hindu majority neighbourhoods, they seem to feel no danger to their Kashmiri identity. However, living in Kashmir among fellow Kashmiris, they felt a serious threat to their Kashmiri identity because of the hamhanded manner in which the various governments at the Centre tried to install puppet chief ministers in Jammu and Kashmir, eroding whatever little federalism that existed in our constitution. There was no religious or cultural persecution of Kashmiris. In fact, several crumbs were thrown at them as “concessions”, but this one major political irritant became the basis of identity assertion which took on the form of a terrorist separatist movement.

Kashmiri women have suffered indignities and violence from both sides. There have been frequent reports of rape, molestation, and

abduction of women by the Indian armed forces as well as by Muslim militants. An important strategy of this *azadi* movement comes out clearly in the way it has tried to enslave women as a first step towards establishing the militants' writ. Kashmiri Muslim women who had no tradition of being pushed behind *burqas* have been threatened into wearing them; beauty parlours have been attacked, acid thrown on women wearing un-Islamic clothes or wearing make-up. The regime of terror has devastated the social and cultural life of Kashmiri Muslim women. It is ironic that whenever men get enamoured with a particular kind of identity assertion, women usually have to carry the burden of implementing it by taking on more restrictive ways of life and cultural markers like dress codes.

Modern western dress for Muslim men is no problem, but Kashmiri women have to wear *burqas* in order to prove that they are good Muslims. However, nothing is sadder to witness than the hostility some Kashmiri Muslim women now express towards Kashmiri Hindu women and vice versa, even when they are both refugees. Too often gender identity is voluntarily suppressed by women in favour of community identity when they feel that their group is under siege or attack. Their primary concern then becomes the safety of their children, men and homes. In this situation, they are often

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unable to empathise with the pain and suffering of women from the other community on the basis of their common gender identity. In fact, the divide is harsher because it is not of their making. Neither is the process of reconciliation in their hands. It is far easier for Advani and Shabir Shah to sit down and sort out their political differences than for Kashmiri Muslim

women in Delhi to build bridges of communication with Kashmiri Hindu refugee women as long as women allow men of their community to determine their relationships to other groups..

Acquiring New Identities

There is yet another systematic process of identity uprootment going on in our country which has special implications for women. Millions of men and women are being regularly ejected from the rural economy as destitutes because of the callous way in which our policy makers have both neglected and exploited agriculture. These destitutes come as economic refugees from our villages to do menial work in cities — rickshaw pulling, stone breaking on construction sites, rag-picking, working as domestic servants, and so on. Among landed families, women, old parents, and children are left behind to take care of the frequently neglected and impoverished land, while men come to earn in cities. Thus family lives are disrupted, women are overburdened with impossible loads of work and responsibility and as a result lead emotionally insecure lives. While residing without their families in relatively anonymous communities in the cities their men might take second wives, or blow what they earn on liquor or gambling.

Those who migrate to cities with their husbands don't fare much better, condemned as they are to live in unauthorised slums, patronised by *goondas* and criminal mafias who, in



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league with police and politicians keep the populace, especially women, in perpetual fear and insecurity.

In a small slum near my house, women are afraid to sleep out in the open even in hot summer months when their windowless, non-ventilated little *jhuggis* are worse than ovens. Their skin breaks out in severe prickly heat and they spend nights without sleep, due to heat and lack of air. Denied space for any privacy for bathing or toilet, they get up at unearthly hours even in cold winter months to bathe before anyone else is up. In these migrants' new lives their previous identities are erased — they merely become an anonymous mass of *jhuggi* dwellers. They are referred to as *jhuggiwali Madrasinein* or *Madras maiyyan* (domestic help from Madras) — never mind whether they are from Andhra or Kerala or other districts of Tamil Nadu. To many North Indians for whom these women do domestic labour, they are all *Madras log* (a generic term for anyone from South India) whose identity is derived from their perceived function — to clean middle class homes and to wash their utensils for low wages. Otherwise, as far as the settled middle class housewives are concerned, these women should disappear after their work is done and not dirty the city with their ugly *jhuggis* and what northerners perceive as their dirty living habits. It is sad to observe how quickly this soul-destroying treatment of people as “objects of service” is internalised. Many begin to talk of fellow *jhuggi* dwellers in similar derogatory terms and refer to themselves as *Madrasis*, even if none of them are from Madras.

An important aspiration of this new identity group called *jhuggi* dwellers is to acquire ration cards and have their names included in the voters' list so

they have proof that they are citizens of India, an identity which means to them little more than this simple assurance — if their *bastis* are bulldozed to the ground in one place, they will have the right to protest and demand of their local political *neta* who they vote for that they be settled elsewhere, or at least occupy another piece of unauthorised land. This ensures that they do not have to live in terror like another group of economic refugees who aren't supposed to be on the voters' list. For example, illegal Muslim migrants from Bangladesh who live in constant fear of being forcibly deported. Bangladeshi migrant women often attempt to dress up like North Indian Hindu or Muslim women, take to wearing *bindis*, and desperately pick

The Indian part of NRI identity is like a wound that never gets a chance to heal and which they are not allowed to forget or ignore as others are constantly rubbing salt into it

up a smattering of Hindustani so that they can pass as North Indians when they go garbage picking for a livelihood. When I see them trying to pretend that they don't know Bengali and generally avoid talking to strangers to escape detection, I wonder what this process of acquiring a fictitious identity along with fictitious ration cards does to their sense of personal identity.

The Willing Migrants

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the interesting example of Indians who went as migrants to wealthy western countries in search of

better economic opportunities. Those who went to the US as poor unskilled migrants in low paying jobs invariably stayed close to their regional groups (e.g. Punjabi taxi drivers, Sikh farm workers on the American west coast, Gujarati newspaper kiosk owners) and chose to live in neighbourhoods that had many others from their region whose support they could count on. They spoke among themselves in their mother tongue and have remained close knit communities who continued seeking brides for their sons from their own region and caste group in India.

The enormous effort they put in to ensure that their children marry spouses from families “back home” is a way of reinforcing their cultural identity by bringing in fresh recruits. However, they often end up becoming more culturally rigid than their counterparts in India because they perceive change largely in terms of westernisation and loss of cultural identity, while those living in India do not view themselves in danger of losing their identity when they adapt to changing times. Many tragedies for young brides can result from these cultural misperceptions. A young Sikh or Gujarati woman seeking to marry a non-resident Indian (NRI) in the USA or Canada, hoping for a freer and more “modern” lifestyle, often ends up in an NRI family who in the name of “tradition” and retaining their cultural identity, impose far more repressive norms on her than anything she experienced in India.

On the other hand, those who migrated as highly skilled professionals, such as doctors, scientists or engineers, tended to merge with the mainstream western culture. Until very recently, they chose to live in predominantly white middle class neighbourhoods where their contact

with members of their own community became minimal. Thus, often their children learned no other language but English and thereby became estranged not only from their respective regional cultures, but also from their own parents who they see as representatives of that culture.

In recent years many among this group have become nervous about the loss of their cultural identity and have become easy prey to the substitute syndicated “Indian” identity being offered by the RSS-VHP type of outfits. They too are now seeking to protect their Indian identity by encouraging, and often forcing their westernised kids to attend summer camps organised by RSS-VHP to pick up a smattering of knowledge of Indian religion and culture, almost like you learn a foreign language. But trying to acquire Gujarati or Tamilian culture through English language lectures and books is as absurd as learning to swim by reading books without getting into water. Cultural values are imbibed by living in that culture rather than “learning” them by attending courses as you would learn to operate a computer or pick up a weekend hobby.

As part of keeping their Indian identity, the westernised NRI children are often expected to marry spouses imported from India — mostly found through newspaper ads instead of the traditional community networks which many of them discarded long ago. This demand for arranged marriages with spouses from India leads to enormous inter-generational conflict and

resentment as well as stressful marriages. Their peer groups look down upon them for succumbing to this cultural pressure, so they feel estranged in both worlds. The self-given nomenclature ABCDs (American Born Confused *Desis*) appropriately sums up their predicament.

There is another interesting aspect to the NRI identity. During my various



Salaam Khan

trips to western countries, I experience two kinds of responses to my presence in the house of fellow Indians. A frequent response is a barrage of contempt and condemnation of India: its bureaucratic corruption, filth, squalor, disease, the inefficiency of Indians, and so on. Many of their complaints are legitimate, though they are often not counterbalanced by an equal comprehension of the good things that come from belonging to diverse Indian cultures. For many of

these NRIs, being Indian is merely thought of as being a cultural carrier of various negative qualities. I’ve often responded to these complaints by asking whether all these negative epithets apply to the complainants, as well. The question is usually evaded. The obsessive nature of these harangues would make me wonder why those who seemed well settled in opulent foreign lands remain so obsessed with India and its problems. Why don’t they simply ignore India if they find the country so annoying and hateful, especially since they live so far away from it? It took me years to figure out that no matter how “well-adapted and adjusted” to western ways they become, even after they procure American or Canadian citizenship, most people around them do not let them forget that they are Indians, and that, too, in mostly negative ways.

For instance, the rare occasions the western media carry any news and features on India they tend to bolster the negative stereotype that most westerners have of India — bride burning, child marriage, communal riots, epidemics, corruption, and so on. No matter how westernised these Indians might be, for their western colleagues and neighbours they are representatives of a culture that the West considers somewhat “uncivilised” and “barbaric”, or at least “backward”. These are issues on which they are often questioned by their western colleagues and friends whenever India comes up in conversation. Hence, the Indian part of their identity is like a wound that never gets a chance to heal and which they are not allowed to forget or ignore

as others are constantly rubbing salt into it. In defence, many respond by becoming even more aggressive in their criticisms of India than the westerners whose acceptance they seek. Others increasingly are becoming easy targets for the recruiting efforts of the various components of the Sangh Parivar in order to shore up their sense of self and their cultural identity.

The other common response I experience when I visit NRI homes is the expression of nostalgia for “home” and India. They begin recounting the warmth they miss in social interaction, the richness of family life, neighbourhood ties, their mothers’ food, their grandparents’ affection, the family get-togethers, and easy walking in and out of people’s homes without having to take prior appointments.

One such person, full of nostalgia, a successful doctor, gave me the most revealing answer when I asked her, “What is it that comes to your mind when you think of India?” She said without a moment’s hesitation: “The faces of my father and mother.” She has a truly heart-warming closeness to her natal family. All year round she yearns for the few weeks she will get to spend with them in India. For her, each trip to India is like emotionally recharging her batteries and coming back rejuvenated. Even though in most other respects, her two sons are as American as the kids with whom they study and interact, she has been able to build for them a close relationship with their maternal grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins living in India. She is looking forward to the time when she can come back and live in India after her children are somewhat older. Neither she nor her Americanised children seem to feel obsessed by the filth and squalor to be seen in many parts of India. Instead, her children seem to feel lucky to be the recipients

of a great deal of unconditional love and affection from a large number of Indian relatives and friends. For them being Indian is a positive identity — something that gives them an emotional richness not easily found in the USA.

By contrast, her husband hates going back to India and has mostly negative memories of it. On probing a bit more, I found that he doesn’t have much fondness for or closeness with his family and has not maintained regular contact with them. In fact, he looks down upon most of his relatives as being uncultured and backward. I suspect a good proportion of those NRIs who hate their “Indian” identity are likely to have more fragile emotional ties with their families, due to their own negative experiences of family life. They have deliberately distanced themselves from their relatives who they perceive as backward, envious, and greedy for *firangi* gifts, rather than as sources of love and affection. Hence being Indian or Bihari or Tamilian does not bring memories they cherish, but a past that they have escaped for a more opulent and free lifestyle. Therefore, they are more prone to think of India in negative terms. However, those who are rooted in their family and have retained close friendships are not as obsessed with or demoralised by the political culture, even while the

corruption and squalor bothers them no less.

Politically Acquired Identities

It is precisely the emotionally and culturally uprooted people who are most prone to seeking political identities. Let me illustrate this with an encounter I had with a young NRI of Tamilian origin. A couple of years ago, after a lecture at Columbia University in New York, a group of Indian students suggested that we continue the discussion over a cup of coffee. Having been away from India a couple of weeks, I was a bit homesick and feeling somewhat tired of having to constantly use English. Seeing myself in the midst of so many Indians, I slipped into intermixing Hindi sentences in our discussion. While most of them seemed perfectly comfortable at this switch, a young woman suddenly interrupted the conversation rather rudely and burst out saying something like: “This is what I hate about you North Indians — your Hindi chauvinism!” All of us were a bit taken aback at the vehemence of her interjection, including a couple of other South Indians present in the group. I apologised for assuming she understood Hindi. To my surprise she answered: “I do understand your Hindi but why should you impose it on me, a Tamilian? In this respect, I am a real Tamil chauvinist.” This got us into an interesting exchange which, as I recollect vividly, went something like this:

When you say you are a Tamil chauvinist, what exactly do you mean?

What I mean is that I would never allow Hindi to be imposed as a national language on us Tamilians.

Do you read and write Tamil?

It was not as if Hindi was to substitute for Tamil as the regional language; it was only to take the place of English in inter-state communication. Nevertheless, the leaders of anti-Hindu agitation made it out as if Tamil identity was under attack.

No, I never really studied Tamil. I can't really read Tamil books or periodicals.

What language do you speak at home with your parents?

Mostly English. But they do occasionally use bits of Tamil among themselves.

When do you ever get a chance to use Tamil?

Oh, when I visit my grandparents' home in Madras. My grandmother knows no English so I have to use whatever little Tamil I know to communicate with her. And then of course, one has to deal with servants in the house as well as shopkeepers and hawkers in the street.

What happens after the death of your grandmother? Won't Tamil then become a language of servants and hawkers for you rather than a language of self-expression and interpersonal communication?

That is not the point! I am a great lover of Tamil and, therefore, won't allow Hindi to be imposed in Tamil Nadu.

But why does your love of Tamil get expressed only in terms of opposition to Hindi? Why not in using it? Or in reading the great classics of Tamil literature and seeing Tamil films? (She seemed to have never read a Tamil book and admitted that they did not have a single Tamil book in their home.) Why should English have so taken over even your domestic life if you so love Tamil?

But English is both an international language and a link language for India.

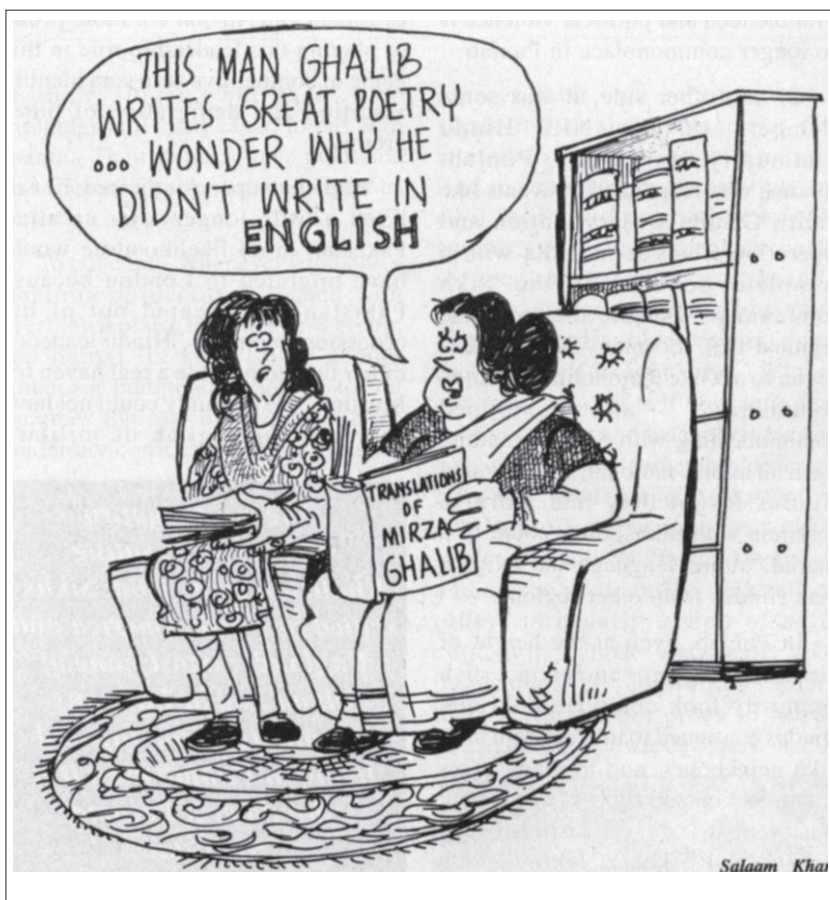
Who does it link you with in India? Maybe two percent of the educated elite? Can you communicate with a Maharashtrian farmer in English? Or a Gujarati fisherwoman? Even in Tamil Nadu itself, what status has

Tamil got? A person who knows no English is not likely to get even a clerical job in Tamil Nadu, let alone a well-paid one.

Our conversation remained inconclusive because, to her mind, learning Hindi was synonymous with political subjugation to North Indians, while English carried no such stigma. I need to clarify that this attitude is not due to her living in New York; I have experienced similar hostility to Hindi and a servile fascination for English among educated elites based in Tamil Nadu. There were serious language riots in Tamil Nadu in the 1960s, accompanied by a fierce movement demanding secession from India when Hindi was sought to be introduced as a national link language. It was not as if Hindi was to substitute for Tamil as

the regional language; it was only to take the place of English in inter-state communication. Nevertheless, the leaders of anti-Hindu agitation made it out as if Tamil identity was under attack.

That negative reaction remains alive today, especially among the Tamil intelligentsia, who somehow see no threat from English to their Tamil identity — English which limits their communication with fellow Tamilians as well as with the majority of Indians. English is so sought after by Tamil nationalists because it is the language of opportunities and upward social mobility for the few who manage to learn it, both within India and in the West. Hindi brings no such comparable advantage and, therefore, it is easy to despise it.



The absurdity of people being aggressive about their linguistic identity without really knowing their own language, or in a situation where English continues to dominate their lives, demonstrates how identities can become harmful and generate needless conflicts when they are politically acquired for other purposes beyond cultural integrity or when they are only asserted in a competitive spirit.

We would do well to remember that the most vigorous support for creating Khalistan came from Sikhs settled in North America and England, almost none of whom had or have any intentions of coming and living in Punjab even if it should ever become Khalistan. Many of them are still pursuing their vision by financing American senators like Dan Burton in the hope that America can help them achieve Khalistan, since Sikhs in Punjab do not seem as enamoured with the idea and political violence is no longer commonplace in Punjab.

On the other side, it was some members of the NRI Hindu community, especially Punjabi Hindus, who responded to events like Indira Gandhi's assassination and Operation Bluestar in India with a complete boycott of the Sikh community. Despite their diverse regional ties, too many NRI Hindus began to act like a monolithic "Hindu community" and stopped communicating with Sikhs, branding them all as anti-national. The Punjabi Hindus forgot they had more in common with Sikhs, on account of a shared culture, language and religion than Hindus from other regions.

In Punjab, even at the height of the Khalistan movement, no such animosity took complete hold and Hindus continued to interact with their Sikh neighbours, and in many cases got protection and support from them.

What remains of the schism between Hindus and Sikhs is taking much longer to heal in North America than the Hindu-Sikh estrangement in Punjab and the rest of India.

Unidimensional Identities

The moment a person or a group begins to subjugate multilayered identities in favour of one particular identity, especially if that identity is acquired politically and asserted as a nationality primarily in opposition to some other group, rather than used for self expression and internal cultural bonding, it becomes a sure recipe for civil strife and inter-group enmity likely to tear any society asunder. In this regard it is quite revealing that those who lead such movements are often those who do not live at the center of their community's cultural life. Rather, westernised, culturally uprooted, and alienated people such as Jinnah and Advani are more prone to playing this leadership role in this game of competitive zero sum identity assertion and denigration of other groups.

Had the super-Anglicised Jinnah lived a little longer after creating Pakistan, in all likelihood he would have migrated to London because Pakistan was created out of his obsession to one-up "Hindu leaders",

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rather than to provide a real haven for Muslims. He certainly could not have survived the regime of military dictators and religious fundamentalists that he helped bring to power in the name of creating a land for the *pak* (pure). In the process he jeopardised the safety and well-being of millions of Muslims whose identity he claimed to safeguard from "Hindu domination".

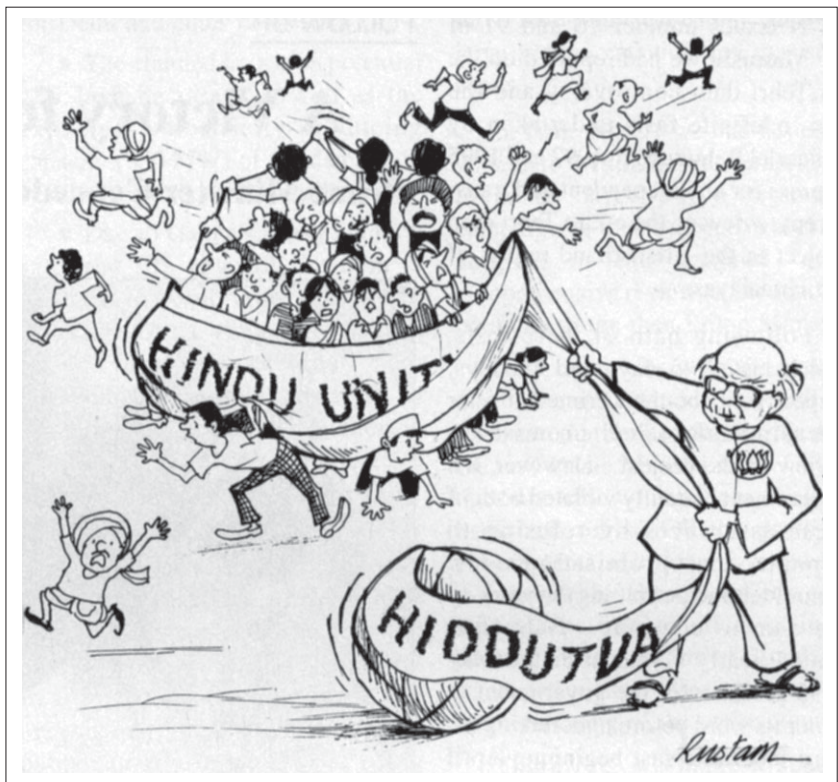
Today, Indian Muslims, who make up 12 percent of the population, are a vulnerable and mistrusted minority in India, whereas in the unpartitioned India the 25 percent Muslim community would have had tremendous bargaining power. The idea behind the Partition was that Muslims could not live in a Hindu-majority India. But the Partition devised by Jinnah left many more million Muslims living in India than could be absorbed in Pakistan, even after the near total ethnic cleansing of Hindus in territories that became Pakistan. Had leaders like Gandhi accepted the Jinnah world view of identity assertion, many more millions of Muslims would have been uprooted and murdered as a tit-for-tat measure by Hindus.

It is no coincidence that the Urdu-speaking Muslims of India who were the most enthusiastic supporters of the demand for Pakistan are virtually at war with the nation-state of their own making, as also with other ethnic communities of Pakistan. They are still called *Mohajirs* (migrants), indicating that they continue to be treated as aliens and provoke a great deal of hostility in Pakistan. In the 1940s it was their Muslim identity which came to dominate all their other identities, leading to their demand for a Partition. Subsequently, in an all Muslim state, it is their identity as migrants from India which has pitched them in a murderous

battle against other groups in Pakistan. As we see in Pakistan and in many other parts of the world, the process of ethnic cleansing is inherently unstable. Pakistan's Muslims soon came to perceive dangers to their own group from other Muslims with other criteria to establish additional diverse identities: Sindhis, Mohajirs, Baluchis, Punjabis, Shi'ites and Sunnis. This begins a never ending process of division. In India, BJP's *Hindutvavad* has led to far more aggressive assertion of caste identities among the Hindus.

Thus the Jinnah mode of identity assertion ended up harming large sections of the Muslims no less than it harmed many Hindus. Unfortunately, this ideology of identity assertions has gained greater legitimacy among sections of the Hindu community, thanks to the politics of the Sangh Parivar. Their *Hindutva* campaign has hardly anything positive to offer Hindus because it is simply based on fear and hatred of Muslims.

For instance, while the VHP-RSS-BJP leaders delighted in pulling down the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in the name of reclaiming the locale of a Ram Mandir supposedly destroyed by a Muslim invader, hardly any of them ever went to do *puja* or made any offerings in the various Ram Mandirs in Ayodhya — not even the Ram Janamsthan Mandir that existed adjacent to the Masjid. In fact, they destroyed ancient and sacred temples like Sita ki Rasoi in the process of pulling down the Babri Masjid. Their riotous behaviour after pulling down the mosque shows that they were not really inspired by *Rambhakti* but motivated by the desire to humiliate and harm the Muslims. That is why their Hindu nationalism has come to play a terribly divisive role in Indian politics. They exhort the Hindu



community to be proud of their Hindu identity. *Garv se kaho hum Hindu hain* (Say with pride we are Hindus) is their slogan, but their hate campaigns fill many of us Hindus with shame. Their politics have polarised and fractured our polity in dangerous ways.

To conclude, whenever someone's assertion of identity is loaded with overblown praise for one's own group, and hatred for some other group, whenever competition and tit-for-tat becomes the real motivating factors in identity consolidation and political struggle in nations, whenever our leaders try to make us paranoid or aggressive vis a vis others in asserting a particular aspect of our identity (whether based on caste, religion, gender, language or region), we should subject such ideas and leaders to thorough scrutiny and check out whether we are being manipulated into imagining dangers from others or is

there a real objective basis for it. Such leaders are in all likelihood goading us towards harming others to achieve their own self-determined goals rather than protecting our legitimate interests. Such assertions lead to increasing fragmentation and civil strife without real benefit to anyone. And the moment we begin to succumb to hate propaganda against another group, it is important to pause and subject ourselves to thorough self-examination. Why is our own sense of self so fragile that we need to fear and hate others merely because they are somewhat different from us? Predominance of negative ethnocentric sentiments against others is a sure sign of a fragile, fractured, and uprooted identity. Hatred of others is usually a sign of self-contempt. Those who really like themselves, are comfortable being themselves, are not prone to hatred and aggression towards others. □