

**Comment on**

## **“Governing the Minorities”**

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It is not easy to comment on the paper of Ranabir Samaddar because of its great narrative sweep and depth of philosophical speculation. Samaddar seeks to re-examine the questions of minorities in the rubric of ‘rule, government and governmental rationality’. In doing this, Ranabir traces the history of government thinking on the minority questions from the colonial period looking inter-alia at the issues of rights and sovereignty. He addresses the post-colonial situation by analysing in fair details the Sachar Committee report and the recommendations of Ranganth Mishra Commission.

Was there any notion of a minority during the colonial period? This is a moot question. The author begins with the famous book ‘The India Musalmans’ by the celebrated civilian-historian W. W. Hunter. Hunter was entrusted by the Viceroy to look into the condition of the Indian Muslims, particularly whether their supposed animosity to the colonial government was endemic to their religious creed. The question was relevant, if also important, to the colonial government in the context of the long tradition of the Wahabi movement from the 1930s. The movement merged, if somewhat indirectly, with the Revolt of 1857 to trouble the very existence of the colonial state. It is in the post-1857 period that one finds attempts to look seriously at the question of supposed disaffection of the Muslims as a separate community. Though some Anglo-Saxon and Indian historians tend to see communal conflicts even in the pre-colonial period, communal riots, properly speaking, come only towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, during the Revolt of 1857 Deen and Dharma did coexist in the discourses of many rebel groups. What Hunter did was to provide, as Ranabir correctly puts it, the governmental logic of ‘handling the minorities’ and thus produce a ‘lasting blueprint’ for colonial rule and even post-colonial politics to tackle the minority question. Hunter raised the questions of both identity and development. Thus the argument is that persistent anti-state position obliged the government to look at this particular community and to think about overcoming their backwardness in order to win their support. Such logic continues to inform the policies of governments even today. I have, however, a little problem about the question of identity. The government defined a particular religious community and possibly saw it as leverage against the growing opposition of the majority community. Ranabir takes us through the Bengal partition of 1905 which, in his words, represented the government’s attempt to ‘right size the territory and right shape the population’ to the civil war situation of 1946-7. But the construction of the identity was gradual and incomplete because obviously all Muslims do not share the same ideology.

Did the colonial government try to address the question of a minority or perhaps try to construct one particular (and in this case religious) community against the majority to buttress colonial rule? I raise this question to understand colonial governments’ response to other, and equally persistent, rebellions from the onset of colonial rule. The tribal and marginal people rebelled far too often from the 1760s to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., but they were not considered as minorities. Nor was the problem of their backwardness addressed. The policies of the colonial government with regard to forests and land-revenue, for instance, increased their plight and led

to constant migration of the forest tribes and other marginal groups. The Chuar rebellion of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Lalgarh movement of the present times have a strange resonance. The government's response now, however, is a mix of development and use of force.

Risley's Castes and Tribes of India and Grierson's Linguistic Survey, apart from being intellectual quests, perhaps displayed hidden politico-administrative purpose as well. The wide variety that India had should prevent the emergence of a unified sense of the 'nation'. The colonial administration did not display an anxiety to construct the minorities with a view to ensure their well-being, but simply used them to manage India better. It is seen clearly in the context of the ethnic minorities in the north-east and in Darjeeling. No separate entity was established, yet a separate administrative-legislative set-up was preserved and there was frequent chopping and changing of this status from 'excluded' to 'partially excluded' areas. Thus the consciousness of a minority identity evolved in course of time and the colonial government was not really called upon to address their problems. One does not see any minority group-specific 'development' activities or affirmative actions then. One may also remember the Evangelical activities in these regions as also in the tribal areas which, I would argue, helped the formation of a distinct identity among a section of the ethnic minorities. Evangelicalism, after all, was a major arm of the colonial ideology along with Utilitarianism. The colonial state was keen to manage and control the whole population, and creation of minorities was perhaps seen as a means to achieve that purpose. The whole question has to be seen in the context of the development of the 'national movement'. It was a complex socio-historical and political phenomenon.

Thus it was the post colonial government which was called upon to manage and govern the minorities. The minorities were not just religious in nature; caste, tribal, linguistic as well as religious groups are defined as minorities. There is among them a continuing anxiety that this identity is threatened with erosion. The question of equality, or perhaps lack of it, is also central to the problem. The debates in the Constituent Assembly, as Ranabir points out, clearly showed the lines along which opinions were ranged either in defence of protective measures for the minorities or against it. As one commentator puts it, 'The Nehruvian project of nation-building thus chose to construct an all-India identity by promoting secular nationalism while negotiating with the complex, multi-layered and democratic fabric of India'. The new state was committed to the twin principles of secularism and democracy. While the former would preclude religiously based notions of 'separatism', the latter, through political participation, would undermine solidified ethnic opposition. Though Nehru was aware, as he put it in 1930, that 'there can be no stability or equilibrium in any country so long as an attempt is made to crush a minority or to force it to conform to the ways of the majority', the post-colonial state was quite clear in not allowing any minority movement to question the state and its all-embracing sovereignty. Thus no secessionist movement was to be tolerated; neither would a demand for political recognition to any religious or ethno-linguistic groups to be conceded.

Ranabir makes a crucial point about the difficulties of the state to 'combine individual rights and group rights'. He talks of the 'post-colonial reason of governance, where development, democracy and multi-culturalism must go together, and ...government's legitimacy can be secured only with developmental language meant to develop a community.' In achieving this, the government is often caught in a paradox. How to get out of this?

The government, Ranabir has argued, needs 're-negotiate the question of minorities at regular intervals to maintain sovereign power'. In the context of globalisation, this need becomes pressing. Has globalisation produced insecurities among the more vulnerable communities, leading to 'disempowerment'? The context of globalisation may need to be explored more fully. Perhaps in another essay.