Evolving Ethnicity in South Asia With Particular Reference to India

Joseph E. Schwartzberg
*University of Minnesota*

Robert Stoddard
*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, rstoddard1@unl.edu

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Evolving Ethnicity in South Asia
With Particular Reference to India

Joseph E. Schwartzberg
Professor of Geography
University of Minnesota

Introduction

The following survey of evolving South Asian ethnicity generally supports the position of Paul Brass (1991, p. 8), who asserts that:

... ethnicity and nationalism are not ‘givens’ but are social and political constructions. They are creations of elites, who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups, as well as for themselves.

[Further] ethnicity and nationalism are modern phenomena inseparably connected with the modern centralizing state.

I would attach more importance than Brass does, however, to the so-called primordial loyalties that inhere in one’s birth. While these may not be immutable givens, they do represent a reservoir of cultural identifiers from which elites can draw as they assess specific political situations and make a calculus of the costs and benefits of seeking to elicit particular types of support. Among these identifiers are caste, religion, sect (which may be locally important, but which I cannot explore in this brief paper), language, dialect (also not discussed), and regional loyalty. Birth within a particular group does matter. Cultural norms may be plastic, but they are not putty, to be molded at will. They are potent and they tend to endure. Hence, politicians can go only so far in reshaping ethnic identities.

I would also stress more than Brass and other political commentators do the importance of geographic areas. I repeatedly refer in this paper to changes in political boundaries and show that the political actors thrown together within the administrative limits of any newly reconfigured country or state adjust their ethnic agendas accordingly. They base them not only on their own social and economic interests seen in isolation but also on their perceptions of the interests of others in the same arena with whom they must compete for limited political assets. Ethnic groups have sought to advance their interests by a wide variety of means. These include the formation and support of political parties and other organizations; selective support for nonethnic political parties and sympathetic candidates; discriminatory legislation when an ethnic group controls the government at a particular level; and, when the group is out of power, propaganda, strikes, demonstrations, economic boycotts, and so forth. Groups may also deliberately resort to the use of force, even to the point of large-scale insurrection. More often, however, violence occurs when confrontations with other groups or with the government get out of control. Violence has, in fact, at times marked virtually every type of ethnic movement discussed in this paper and has repeatedly affected every major region and virtually every state of India, as well as the other countries of South Asia (figure 9).

The Government of India has responded to the political demands of ethnic groups in ways no less varied than those used by the groups themselves. On numerous occasions, as in regard to state reorganization and the demand for quotas, it has bowed to organized public pressure. At the other extreme, it has often resorted to the use of substantial force, especially in dealing with secessionist movements in its border regions, whether they be of tribals in the northeast or Sikhs or Kashmiris in the northwest. Between these extremes, numerous options existed. At times the government successfully co-opted the leadership of specific groups, made expedient compromises with them, or acquiesced in their control over local politics, provided they did not transcend certain limits. Alternatively, the central government has used its substantial control over fiscal resources and other economic levers to gain favor or punish dissent; it has also interfered in numerous ways in local politics—a cause of particular alienation in the case of Kashmir—declaring certain groups and activities illegal, jailing dissidents, and frequently suspending the elected.
legislative assembly and imposing President’s or Governor’s Rule.

The potential for serious and enduring damage to existing polities from ethnically rooted violence, both intranationally and internationally, is great and appears to be increasing. From 1972 to 1980, India experienced serious ethnic violence in 67 percent of all months, and South Asia as a whole experienced such violence in 95 percent of all months. For the period 1981 to 1990, the figures rose to 94 percent and 100 percent for India and South Asia, respectively. From an ethnic perspective, South Asia is arguably the most complex and one of the most turbulent regions of our planet. Its political map is far from frozen. One may safely anticipate a number of changes in the foreseeable future, many of which will be driven by agendas of specific ethnic groups. Whatever these changes may be, they will, in turn, surely give rise to new manipulations of ethnic identities to suit the needs of new situations.

This presentation considers the various historical processes that have shaped ethnic identities in South Asia, concentrating, because of limitations of time and space, on India and on the postindependence period. It also discusses specific bases for establishing ethnic identities and the periods, situations, and locales in which they assumed importance. It also notes the means by which ethnic groups seek to advance their interests and by which governments respond to such efforts. I shall not, however, strive for completeness—the topic is simply too vast. Omitted from consideration here is any discussion of ethnic relations in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Even for India, I shall do no more than touch lightly on the two most troublesome contemporary ethnic problems: the Sikh struggle for an independent Khalistan and the complex struggle in Kashmir being waged simultaneously by forces seeking independence, on the one hand, or merger with Pakistan on the other. Virtually all the empirical data that I shall be presenting are drawn from the updated 1992 edition of the Historical Atlas of South Asia, which synthesizes information from a multitude of sources, only a small part of which are noted in the bibliography accompanying this paper. Although the interpretations of those data are my own, I doubt that any are wholly original.

**Processes of Ethnic Identity Formulation**

Birth into a particular group still matters far more in South Asia than it does in areas of other major civilizations. One is expected to be "true to one’s salt"; one’s essence and traditions are all determined by birth.

*Jati*, which generally connotes caste, translates literally as birth. One is born into a particular caste in accordance with one’s *karma*—the net merit or demerit of actions performed in previous existences. If one properly follows in the present life the forms of behavior appropriate to caste status, one may aspire to rebirth in a higher caste. This axiomatic belief forms the essence of Hindu *dharma*, which may be translated either as duty or religion. These observations are made with specific reference to Hinduism but are equally applicable to Buddhism and Jainism. The behavioral norms on which they are based have strongly influenced communities of other coexisting faiths of South Asia as well, even Muslims, for whom the very notion of caste is theoretically anathema. For example, few Indian Muslims, before the creation of Pakistan, would have hesitated to identify the social group to which they belonged by a name that would conjure up in the minds of their non-Muslim neighbors a particular caste-defined set of roles and a specific *genre de vie*.

For most South Asians and for most of the region’s history, caste was the principal referent of one’s place in society. The vast majority of the population lived in villages in which their appropriate social and economic roles were rooted primarily in caste. Social and intellectual horizons in such a setting were typically very limited, and political action, such as it was, was generally confined to a narrow spatial arena. Affairs of state were the domain of small classes of elite. Although the encompassing sacred realm of Bharat, or India, found a place in the consciousness of Hindus, communal activities at an all-India level were nonexistent. At a regional level, devotion to the cult of a particular deity or to a saintly figure and participation in major fairs and pilgrimages did provide some feeling...
of community, but the sensed bonds of religion, I would argue, were generally weaker, at least among Hindus, than were those of caste.

The unification of India under the British and the accelerating expansion, thereafter, of the transportation and communications network, literacy, the press, and notions of democratic governance brought about a number of important changes in the way that people saw themselves and in their patterns of interaction. While identification with and loyalty to one's caste remained important, other social attributes became increasingly salient as wider arenas of economic and political interaction were established. New, more-or-less Westernized commercial and bureaucratic elites came into being. Although they were mainly Hindu, these new elites drew also from other religious communities and from many linguistic regions. In some situations, especially after the creation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, they formed the nucleus for an emerging PanIndian, nontraditional, nationalism. In other contexts, however, socially and culturally defined groups vied with one another for privilege and power. Thus, in addition to their caste and religious identities, many Indians became increasingly aware of regional attachments that were previously only dimly sensed within areas dominated by a particular language or dialect. The range of politically relevant primordial loyalties—those that form the basis for what we now recognize as ethnicity—was expanded accordingly. In a sense, then, we may say that one's identity—or jati—today means much more than caste alone.

The British rulers recognized the latent potential for disunity inherent in the social and cultural complexity of the subcontinent, and they responded fitfully and often grudgingly to Indian demands for greater control over their own destinies. In each of a series of major constitutional reforms, such as the Indian Councils Act of 1909 and the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935, they acknowledged the claims of specific minorities to separate electorates to guarantee some semblance of fair representation in the evolving legislative apparatus. At first only the Muslim population was accorded special recognition. Subsequently, concomitant with an expanding franchise, elected seats were reserved also for Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, and Scheduled Castes as well as for such special interests as Indian commerce and industry, European commerce, landholders, labor, and even women. Whether the course adopted was an attempt to gradually establish a liberal representative democracy or a cynical policy of “divide and conquer” depends on whose version of history one chooses to believe. In any event, a policy of recognizing the en bloc claims of particular constituencies to a share of the political pie was set firmly in place, thereby reinforcing ethnic sensitivities.

The establishment of quotas remains a part of the political modus operandi to this day, although the rules for fixing quotas varied from one context to another. Some quotas are in strict proportion to population. Depressed groups—officially designated “Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes”—are guaranteed certain numbers of seats in national and state legislatures, of positions in various lower and middle levels of government employment, and of acceptances to institutions of higher education. Rules of this type are institutionalized in the Constitutions of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Other informal quotas for places on party tickets, for participation in state and provincial ministries, or for a share of the economic largess over which certain agencies of government have control, are more flexible and situation-specific. These informal quotas are often determined by deals made by party bosses in response to promises of support or various pressures by specific groups. Institutionalized religious quotas are presently unthinkable within the secular democracy of India, but the Muslim voting bloc—roughly one-ninth of the total Indian electorate and much more than that in several regions—retains an informal claim to a share of power. In Pakistan the small Ahmadiya sect, which the Constitution has declared to be outside the pale of Islam, has been allotted reserved seats in both the national and provincial legislatures, as have other minorities and women.

Sociocultural identities in South Asia have never been fixed. The corporate mobility of particular groups, some ascending and others descending in the local
social hierarchy, has been abundantly documented. So too has been the frequent creation of new groups through fission of older ones and the less common amalgamation or fusion of groups when that suited a particular purpose. While these processes have operated since ancient times, the pace of change has accelerated greatly over the past century. Many new forms of identity have been socially, and often deliberately, constructed in response to the evolving corporate agendas of would-be players on the political stage. The institutionalization of democracy and the attendant politicization of more and more previously inert groups underlie these changes. Clever politicians have recognized that “pushing the right buttons” to elicit some sort of ethnically rooted response—whether based on religion, language, caste, tribal affiliation, or regional sentiment—was the most efficacious way of attracting a following and attaining power. Temporary alliances of convenience with others playing the same game were often established. This strategy was especially common in regions where few persons held deep ideological convictions.

Types of Ethnic Identity in the 20th Century

Emergent Nationalism
Two political parties acted as the vehicle for the expression of emergent Nationalism during the pre-independence period. The creation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was an outcome of a newly nascent Indian nationalism. The Congress quickly became the principal Pan-Indian vehicle for the freedom struggle. When the Muslim League came into being in 1906, however, it embarked on a more parochial course. It set its agenda as much by its perceptions of the likely effects of Congress activities on the welfare of India’s Muslim community as on its views of the British raj. Not surprisingly, the League vacillated between periods of cooperation with the Congress and periods of fierce opposition to it. As powers were devolved toward the provinces, the importance of success in electoral contests gradually widened the rift between the two parties. Yet it was not until 1940 that the die was irrevocably cast in favor of establishing a separate state for India’s Muslim community. The requisite ethnic rationale invented for that state was Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s “two-nation” theory. It was the idea that India’s population consisted essentially of a Hindu nation and a Muslim nation whose core identities and goals were so fundamentally different that there was no hope that they could coexist within a single independent state without serious adverse consequences for the Muslim minority. In 1947, Jinnah’s dream of an independent Pakistan was fulfilled. At the same time, the Congress dream of a secular, all-embracing Indian nation was shattered.

Partition and the massive population transfers that followed still left roughly a third of South Asia’s Muslims in India; this concentration continues to provide a basis for ethnic tensions. The more than 100 million Muslims in India today constitute by far the world’s largest ethnic minority. Few parts of the country are without a significant Muslim presence. Within the Indian-held portion of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, Muslims form a substantial majority. The dispute over Kashmir has been the cause of two wars between India and Pakistan, and the area also figured prominently in the war that led to the independence of Bangladesh. Within Kashmir a bitter multisided insurrection is now in progress as some separatists seek an independent state and others union with Pakistan. Sustained Indo-Pakistani enmity periodically makes life precarious for India’s Muslims despite the country’s constitutional commitment to a secular state with religious liberty for all.

Muslims, of course, are not the only significant religious minority in India. Five of India’s 25 states have Sikh, Christian, or animistic majorities (figure 10), and, with the exception of the mainly tribal state of Arunachal Pradesh in the far northeast, all have been scenes of bitter ethnic struggles in the postindependence period. The most intense of these struggles is that of Punjab’s Sikhs for an independent Khalistan, waged intermittently since 1981. The present period is one of relative quiescence, but the problem remains unresolved. I shall defer till later discussion of the ethnic struggles of several tribal regions.
Figure 10
Distribution of Non-Hindus in India, 1981

Leading Religion in Area of Non-Hindu Majority

- ANIMIST
- BUDDHIST
- CHRISTIAN
- MUSLIM
- SIKH

Areas in which non-Hindus comprise 25-50% of population

State or union territory boundary

Figures in each state or union territory indicate non-Hindu proportion of total population as of 1981
Linguistic Affiliation as an Organizing Principle

Language, formerly of relatively little political importance, has since 1947 emerged as a potent political force in Hindu-majority areas despite the lingering role of religion as an aspect of ethnicity in postpartition. As a matter of organizational convenience, the Congress Party, beginning with Bihar in 1908, began to organize itself into linguistic provinces, even though most of the provinces of British India and several of the larger princely states were multilingual entities. It was not until 1920, however, that the Congress Party established linguistic units throughout British India and made the creation of linguistic administrative provinces a plank in its platform for political reform. As Congress saw it, the arbitrariness of the political map that resulted from the unplanned history of British territorial acquisition in India was an affront to the natural aspirations of India’s major linguistic groups. In any event, the call for linguistic provinces was overshadowed as an issue by the more inclusive agenda of Gandhi’s noncooperation movement. Conceivably, an unstated motive in the Congress Party’s call for linguistic provinces was to divert popular attention away from communally based politics.

The first postindependence demand for a linguistic state came from Telugu speakers, the largest among several major minorities in the then Tamil-dominated state of Madras. The demands persisted, and Congress conceded by establishing the new Telugu-speaking state of Andhra in 1954. This opened the floodgates to calls for additional states based on linguistic criteria. The government then established a States Reorganization Commission to study the problem, and ultimately the States Reorganization Act of 1956 led to a radical redrawing of the political map. The 1956 Act, however, failed to divide the essentially bilingual state of Bombay and the putatively bilingual state of Punjab. These intentional departures from the new linguistic state norms were short lived. Bombay was partitioned in 1960 to form the Marathi-speaking state of Maharashtra and the Gujarati-speaking state of Gujarat. In 1966, Punjab was also partitioned, allegedly on a linguistic basis, but in actuality on communal grounds; when the government acceded to the Sikh demands for a reconfigured Punjab, the reduced area of the new state was one in which Sikhs became an absolute majority. Figure 11 reveals the extensive changes wrought by linguistic reorganization over the period 1951–72.

The government’s conciliatory attitude in regard to linguistic reorganization did not mollify linguistic groups sufficiently to guarantee their loyalty to the Union government. Within Madras, in particular, a demand arose for an independent Dravidian nation—sometimes dubbed “Dravidistan”—to comprise the four new linguistic states in which Dravidian languages were spoken. As matters transpired, the three other Dravidian states of South India showed relatively little enthusiasm for a Tamil-led Dravidian nation, and the movement lost its momentum. But one lasting outcome was the rise to power of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a Tamilian ethnic party established in 1949. Alone or at the head of a multi-party coalition, the DMK has ruled Madras, or Tamil Nadu as it was renamed in 1969, for all but six years since it first came to power in 1967. Arguably, the prudent willingness of the Congress Party to allow ethnically minded Tamil politicians to enjoy the rewards of power did as much as the lack of separatist ardor in neighboring Dravidian states to blunt secessionist demands. Had the movement succeeded, it would almost certainly have led to the Balkanization of India.

Demands for reorganizing the political map of independent India were not all rooted in linguistic consciousness. Several newly created linguistic states contained regions that lagged notably behind others in levels of economic and social development. As a rule, areas that had formed a part of British India were generally more advanced than those previously ruled by the less progressive princes, such as the Nizam of Hyderabad. Regions lagging behind the political core areas of the states to which they were joined soon sensed that the state was not doing enough to rectify the ill-effects of past neglect. This, in turn, led to several demands for separation, fueled by local politicians who sought to harness local discontent as the vehicle for furthering their own political ambitions. To what extent those politicians and their followers were
Figure 11
Linguistic Minorities in India

Linguistic Minorities as a Percentage of State or Union Territory Population

Percent

90
50
25
10
0

Uncensured Areas and Sikkim

--- State or union territory boundary
able to construct a regional sense of ethnicity cannot readily be determined, but none of these attempts to achieve a separate state succeeded.

Another outcome of states reorganization was the escalation of what have been called “nativistic” movements. In such movements the dominant linguistic group of a particular state, styling themselves as “sons of the soil,” sought, by a combination of legal measures, intimidation, and violence, to limit the opportunities of immigrant groups from other states—and sometimes of indigenous Muslims as well—and, in some instances, to create legal obstacles to their settlement. The strongest of these movements were in Assam and Maharashtra.

**Tribal and Caste-Based Ethnicity**

A number of tribal groups who aspired either to statehood within the Indian union or to full independence were disregarded in the initial phase of the linguistic reorganization. In the mineral-rich Chhota Nagpur, in the northeast of peninsular India, tribals had established a forerunner of the present-day Jharkhand Party as early as 1939. The party has campaigned intermittently for a tribal state since the parliamentary elections of 1957. Other groups, most notably the Nagas and later the Mizo in the northeast of peninsular India, have also formed parties. The demand for statehood has been sparked by the desire for better protection of their land rights and cultural heritage. The Indian Government’s attitude in dealing with tribal demands was generally less conciliatory than it was in respect to other ethnic groups. Ultimately, however, through a combination of military suppression, co-optation of compliant leaders, and other tactics, accommodations were reached with elements of each of the rebellious frontier groups, and many new, tribally dominated administrative units—either union territories or fullfledged states—were established. The much more numerous, but also more pacific, tribal groups, however, continue to find their political aspirations frustrated.

The role of caste in the postindependence period has changed considerably. In the past, power at the local level was typically shared by the dominant landholding group and the ritually supreme Brahmans. Each group legitimized the role of the other in its appropriate sphere. With the coming of democracy, however, numbers, rather than ritual ascendency or other claims to elite status, became increasingly important determinants of power. Throughout India, at all levels of government and across the political spectrum, parties appealed to particular types of caste constituencies to gain support. Local magnates—believed to control large “vote banks” of their caste followers—offered their support to specific parties in return for a place on the ballot. Single castes rarely composed an absolute majority of the electorate; alliances among various caste groups were therefore common.

Anti-Brahmanism had become a potent political force in some regions even in the preindependence period. The appeal of Charan Singh to a wide spectrum of middle-level peasant castes over much of the Hindi-speaking area of India was a key factor in catapulting the Janata Party to power in 1978, following the period of emergency rule initiated by Indira Gandhi in 1975. The desire for empowerment among middle-level groups found expression during the period of Janata rule in the creation of the Mandal Commission, which drew up a report in 1982 suggesting a new set of quotas for the numerically strong so-called Other Backward Castes (OBCs) similar to those that the Constitution already guaranteed to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Although the Janata Party did not remain in power long enough to implement the provisions of the Commission’s report, the decision to do so by a new National Front government in 1990 touched off a wave of violent protest over large parts of India and contributed to the government’s collapse shortly thereafter.

Below the OBCs in India’s social hierarchy are the Scheduled Castes, formerly untouchables, who compose roughly a sixth of the nation’s total population. Their struggle for equality before the law and for humane treatment by traditionally superior groups has
been a difficult one, reminiscent in many ways of the American civil rights movement in respect to blacks. In some parts of India, especially Bihar, the peasantry—for whom the Scheduled Castes mainly work as landless laborers—have responded with incredible brutality to attempts by Scheduled Castes to better their lot. In other areas, most notably Maharashtra, large numbers of the group have adopted a new ethnic identity by conversion to Buddhism, employing a social dynamic comparable to that of the Black Muslim movement among blacks in America. Other Harijans have been converting to Islam.

Hindu Nationalism

Hindu ethnicity sank roots even before the turn of the present century. Within the Congress Party there emerged the powerful conservative voice of a Marathi Brahman, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who perceived in the increasing Westernization of India’s elite the seeds of the destruction of Hindu culture. He sought, sometimes violently, to oppose the British presence. No less conservative in some respects, but far more tolerant of non-Hindu perspectives, was Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi’s commitment to nonviolence and his fruitful collaboration with the liberal and secular-minded Jawaharlal Nehru lessened the following for Tilak’s brand of Hindu nationalism for decades but could hardly extinguish its appeal. Even before Tilak’s death in 1920, Hindu nationalism was institutionalized in various guises, beginning with the Hindu Mahasabha, founded in 1907 in part as a reaction to the creation of the Muslim League. Although never posing a serious challenge to Congress, the Mahasabha was particularly influential in the period before and just after partition in fomenting anti-Muslim activities and in giving credibility to Jinnah’s aforementioned twonation theory. Also noteworthy is the militant and fascistic Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Association), one of whose members assassinated Gandhi in 1948. Founded in 1925, it remains a potent force, especially in Maharashtra, the region of its inception.

Despite their high visibility and local prominence, no Hindu nationalist party in the postindependence period even came close to gaining control over any state legislature, not to mention Parliament, until 1990. The Bharatiya Jan Sangh, however, gained heightened respectability by being admitted into the hodgepodge anti-Congress Janata coalition that swept to power in 1977. The period 1990-91 witnessed a dramatic rise in the strength of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), successor to the Jan Sangh. This was especially marked in India’s conservative Hindi heartland.

Some observers of the Indian political scene anticipate that the BJP will be able to form the next government, either alone or at the head of a new anti-Congress coalition. The changed fortunes of the Hindu nationalists may be attributed to a variety of factors. Among them are the termination of the Nehru family dynasty, the decline in public confidence in the long-ruling and increasingly corrupt and scandal-ridden Congress Party, and the failure of any other ideologically based party to win the allegiance of a major segment of disenchanted Congress supporters. No less important has been the BJP’s ability to project the sense that it stands for the true India. It appeals mainly to the landed, albeit nonelite, segments of the rural population and to the lower middle class of the urban population. Neither of these groups has previously enjoyed a large share of political power over any sustained period. Implicit in the appeal of the BJP is a certain rejection of Western influences, along with a generous dose of anti-Islamic sentiment vis-a-vis both Pakistan’s and India’s own Muslim population.

The BJP’s cynical exploitation of popular Hindu emotional sentiment in regard to the controversial destruction of a 16th-century mosque allegedly built over the site of Lord Rama’s birth put the BJP at the center of public attention and was instrumental in bringing on the most serious wave of Hindu-Muslim communal violence since the period of partition. This led to the dismissal of BJP ministries in four states in December 1992 and their replacement by President’s Rule. (This is shown on figure 12.) Some commentators argue that the BJP leadership is more representative of the true India than was the Congress Party—as well as less corrupt—and anticipate that, once in power, the party will act with a considerable degree of responsibility and will restore stability to the nation. I am inclined to doubt that assessment.
For purposes of this graph, regional parties are considered as ethnic and the Union Territories of Delhi, Goa, Pondicherry, etc., are treated as States.

The number of States or Union Territories governed by ethnic parties is noted for each year.

Figures for each year are as of the month of March.
Postscript
In legislative assembly elections held in November 1993, the BJP suffered dramatic losses in three of five states in which it was formerly the ruling party, including Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state. On the other hand, it bettered its formerly dominant position in Rajasthan and won a smashing victory in Delhi. To a considerable extent, BJP losses were reflected in Congress gains. Whether, as some observers suggest, the 1993 elections signal that the BJP tide has crested and begun to fall remains to be seen.
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Sopher, David E., ed., An Exploration of India. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980. Includes, inter alia a critical overview of Indian regions by Bharat L. Bhatt, a valuable study of linguistic boundaries by Charles J. Bennett, and a highly original overview of the regional patterning of culture in India by the editor.

Summary of Discussion

Discussant: Robert Stoddard

I am going to try to achieve two things: first, integrate content with what Alex Murphy said yesterday about general principles through an illustration in South Asia, using Sri Lanka as an example and, second, build upon what Dr. Schwartzberg has said about the background of ethnic diversity in South Asia, but giving a slightly different prediction about India’s political future.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is primarily between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the mostly Sinhalese government. The Tamils want greater political control over their lives; therefore, they seek greater autonomy or even sovereignty over a specific territory. My comments pertain to the controversy over the delineation of such an area, a territory I will call “the Tamil region.”

At first glance, it would seem that a map showing the spatial distribution of people according to their ethnicity would provide a fairly objective method for drawing boundaries. However, even so-called objective regionalization depends upon agreement about, at least, four conditions which involve fundamental geographic issues. These are:

- **The definition of the pertinent population.** What constitutes membership in the ethnic group being regionalized is illustrated in Sri Lanka by the uncertain status of those classified as Indian Tamils. Because the Indian Tamils have an uncertain citizenship status, have been less politically active, and generally belong to a lower caste than the Sri Lankan Tamils, they are usually omitted from the population that defines the Tamil region. But such an omission is not universally accepted and, as I will presently show, the inclusion of Indian Tamils can make a difference.

- **The definition of ethnic territory.** Territorial belongingness is normally based upon the existence of a demographic majority. But in a census unit where no group exceeds 50 percent, a case can be made for defining territorial belongingness to the group having only a plurality. In most administrative subdivisions of Sri Lanka, one or another of the ethnic groups has a very large majority, so the potential for this kind of controversy is limited to only a few areas. But these few areas are the critical places of conflict and are where “ethnic cleansing” is most likely to occur. Even though intense fighting has taken place in the Tamil heartland of Jaffna, some of the severest suffering by noncombatants has occurred in the peripheral or frontier areas, where no ethnic group possesses a majority.

- **The size of the areal units.** The real crux of the territorial problem is one of scale because the homogeneity of a region depends upon the size of the areal unit that is being clustered to form a regional whole.

- **The decision about the necessity for regional contiguity.** There is a strong argument for avoiding ethnic enclaves in any administrative unit. In the Sri Lankan situation, it is difficult to achieve complete contiguity because of the spatial distributions of the ethnic populations.

Let us examine this regionalization task—that is, the objective delineation of a Tamil region—by looking at the distributions of ethnic populations at three areal scales.

On the provincial level, eight of the nine Sri Lankan provinces have large majorities consisting of only a single ethnic group. Furthermore, their geographic arrangement does not violate the goal of contiguity (figure 13). In the Eastern Province, however, the largest group has only a plurality. Sri Lankan Tamils, who have the plurality in this province, insist that it should be part of their region of control, even though it differs a little bit from the traditional historical lands. The government disagrees.

If we look at the district level, the complexity of the territorial issue is even more evident. In over half the 24 districts, the majority ethnic group exceeds 80 percent of the population. In only three districts does the
Figure 13
Ethnic Composition in Sri Lanka, 1981

By Province

By District

By Division

- Sinhalese Majority
- Sinhalese Plurality
- Sri Lankan Tamil Majority
- Sri Lankan Tamil Plurality
- Indian Tamil Majority
- Indian Tamil Plurality
- Moor Majority
- Moor Plurality
percentage drop below 50 percent. However, the location—and here we come into the geographic aspects that were emphasized by Dr. Murphy—of these three districts complicates the task of regionalization. Two of the plurality districts—Trincomalee and Amparai—are in Eastern Province and present the same definitional problem as produced by the larger provincial units. The third district, Nuwara Eliya, is located in the center of the country, where it is surrounded by Sinhalese majority districts. Furthermore, the ethnic population that holds the plurality is the Indian Tamil community. Therefore, if a definition of “Tamil population” were to be expanded to combine both the Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils, the resulting different ethnic map would produce a Tamil region having a noncontiguous exclave.

Minor civil divisions below the district level are too small for political autonomy. That does not mean, however, that these units cannot be used as a basis for a regionalization scheme. However, the spatial fragmentation of the Sri Lankan Tamils in the peripheral zone persists at this scale. In the Trincomalee District, the population residing along a narrow coastal sliver forms a plurality consisting of a third ethnic group—the Moors. The geometric complexity of ethnic concentrations is partially solved if the Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils are considered as members of the same ethnic category because the plurality population of this coastal strip shifts to being Tamil. Although such a redefinition of the Tamil population tends to solve some of the problems of contiguity along the east coast, as noted above, it complicates the regionalization task in the central part of the country.

Thus, it is evident that a major contributor to ethnic conflicts is the distributional pattern of contending populations. Also, this Sri Lankan situation reinforces the generalization made yesterday: the areas where atrocities are most likely to occur, and from which most refugees would originate, are the zones of ethnic transition between the regional core areas of the differing ethnic groups.

Now, let me shift to the second topic which concerns India, where I would like to deal with a nonterritorial conflict. My own interests have usually focused upon ethnoregionalism more than on the nonspatial interclass struggles for power. However, interclass strategies have real implications for the Hindu nationalist movement.

It is critical to note that we are dealing with two major perspectives on Indian nationalism, the secular and the Hindu. Indian secular nationalism is well illustrated by the leadership of Nehru, who expounded, practiced, and institutionalized the pluralistic society. From this perspective, the Indian nation-state is based upon a syncretic view of Indian culture and a federal system of government. All religions, all jatis, all languages, and all people within the territory of this country have equal opportunity under the law, according to the Constitution. The laws of the land accommodate both the wishes of the majority, as expressed by free and democratic elections, and the rights of the minorities.

In contrast, Hindu nationalists believe that the nation should be based not only on common culture but also upon the religion of Hinduism. The more extreme forms want to rule India as a Hindu state and rid the country of all non-Hindu persons and influences. The more benign forms of Hindu nationalism seek unity among the various castes and languages in India through the common heritage of living within a “Hinduized” land.

From the perspective of the Hindu nationalists, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs already share a more or less similar sacred geography. Because of their origins, their holy lands are within the same Hinduized land. The Jews and the Parsis came from foreign areas, but, because these communities are small, they have not been a particular problem. On the other hand, Hindus view Christians and Muslims—with their doctrinaire ideas—as a problem. The nonacceptance of Muslims is especially strong because:

- Muslims are associated with the invasions from circa 1000 to later than 1500.
• Some Muslim leaders, insisting that Muslims belong to a separate nation, carved Pakistan from a “part of India.”

• The Indian Muslim population is large enough to make a significant difference.

If the BJP were to gain national power, it is difficult to predict whether stability would be restored to the nation. But we can predict that, if the right wing of the Hindu nationalists should gain power, there would most likely be mass, even widespread, conflicts in areas where significant Muslim populations now live. A plausible scenario would be massive outmigrations similar to those that occurred during partition. A worst case scenario would be another war between India and Pakistan—this time with nuclear weapons.

In spite of several conditions that can lead to conflict, there are strong reasons for believing that India will not erupt into major ethnic wars, with the possible exception of Kashmir. Other than Kashmir, there is strong evidence that India is not as ethnically volatile as many other regions in the world. First, note that the population of India exceeds all of Africa, all of Latin America, or all of Europe, none of which is in a single nation-state or single country. All these other regions are splintered into many states, and the people within each show little evidence of uniting politically. In contrast, even with all the diversity among the people of India, the nation has remained together for almost half a century. Furthermore, this has been accomplished within a mostly democratic environment again, something that has not been achieved in Third World countries in Africa or in Latin America. It also contrasts with the situation in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where ethnic feelings were suppressed by dictatorial governments. That success provides a basis for predicting that ethnic conflicts will not be more severe in India than elsewhere.

A second reason for predicting fewer ethnic conflicts within India than in many other major world regions is based on the Indic culture. Maybe India’s success is just a happenstance of outstanding secular leadership at the time of, and immediately after, independence and, therefore, will dissipate with time. Yet, secular nationalism does seem to have a firm foundation, namely the Indic culture, which has nurtured tolerance and has accommodated differences through the ages. The eclectic and nonideological nature of Hinduism and the other indigenous religions of South Asia certainly provides a deeply ingrained cultural propensity for the acceptance of differences. It is true that throughout most of history the people of the subcontinent did not live in a single political unit and that the various regional states did engage in fighting, but most conflicts did not result from the kind of major ideological crusade that separates people for centuries and produces long-lasting hatreds.

Certainly it is in the best interest of the United States, as the leader of the democratic world, to support the forces of pluralism in South Asia.

General Discussion

DR. GLADNEY: I am always, and I think everybody is, amazed that India is still together. You mentioned the term success in that regard. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about why this is a success, particularly considering the poverty of India, the civil strife, the Hindu-Muslim clashes, and the separatists like the Kashmiris. Why is it that keeping the country together is successful?

DR. STODDARD: Maybe the term “success” is a little bit strong, especially if we define a successful state as one that eliminates poverty, as well as reducing civil strife. And, I do not deny that the Hindu-Muslim clashes are just as worrisome in India as religious conflicts in Northern Ireland, in the Caucasus, or in Lebanon. Furthermore, half a century may be too short a time to declare full success. Moreover, the durability of India as a state may partly reflect the lack of a highly politicized populace. After all, the 67 percent of the population that resides in rural areas live a life that is pretty much circumscribed by their local environment. Although there is a rising politicization, as expressed by the percentage of people who have voted in the recent elections, the stability of a peasant agrarian economy or agrarian society probably goes a long way toward explaining the relative success.
DR. SCHWARTZBERG: The Indian Government has been willing to pull back. This has not happened yet in Kashmir and Punjab, however.

QUESTION: Would you comment on the Kashmir situation?

DR. SCHWARTZBERG: I plan to work on Kashmir during the coming year. The people in Kashmir are alienated to a degree that will preclude their reconciliation with India. I cannot predict exactly the shape of the future of Kashmir, but I will predict that there will be a significant change in the situation there.

I am more optimistic in the case of Punjab, a richer area and strategically much more important. There seem to be signs that India has the Punjab situation under control. However, the raid on the Golden Temple will not soon be forgotten, nor the many other human rights abuses that the Indian Government has committed in the name of quelling that insurrection. I believe, however, that the prospects for reconciliation exist, and many people who know Punjab better than I do say that, even at the worst of times, the majority of Sikhs were always moderate and that the extremists never represented the Sikh rank and file.

One fundamental difference between Kashmir and the Punjab is that the dissociation of Punjab from India would probably let loose an unstoppable Balkanization of India, while dissociation of Kashmir would not necessarily result in such an outcome.