The use and abuse of multiculturalism

Chili and “Liberty”

Wednesday 22 February 2006, by SEN Amartya (Date first published: 27 February 2006).

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I.

The demand for multiculturalism is strong in the contemporary world. It is much invoked in the making of social, cultural, and political policies, particularly in Western Europe and America. This is not at all surprising, since increased global contacts and interactions, and in particular extensive migrations, have placed diverse practices of different cultures next to one another. The general acceptance of the exhortation to “Love thy neighbor” might have emerged when the neighbors led more or less the same kind of life ("Let’s continue this conversation next Sunday morning when the organist takes a break"), but the same entreaty to love one’s neighbors now requires people to take an interest in the very diverse living modes of proximate people. That this is not an easy task has been vividly illustrated once again by the confusion surrounding the recent Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed and the fury they generated. And yet the globalized nature of the contemporary world does not allow the luxury of ignoring the difficult questions that multiculturalism raises.

One of the central issues concerns how human beings are seen. Should they be categorized in terms of inherited traditions, particularly the inherited religion, of the community in which they happen to have been born, taking that unchosen identity to have automatic priority over other affiliations involving politics, profession, class, gender, language, literature, social involvements, and many other connections? Or should they be understood as persons with many affiliations and associations, whose relative priorities they must themselves choose (taking the responsibility that comes with reasoned choice)? Also, should we assess the fairness of multiculturalism primarily by the extent to which people from different cultural backgrounds are "left alone," or by the extent to which their ability to make reasoned choices is positively supported by the social opportunities of education and

participation in civil society? There is no way of escaping these rather foundational questions if multiculturalism is to be fairly assessed.

In discussing the theory and the practice of multiculturalism, it is useful to pay particular attention to the British experience. Britain has been in the forefront of promoting inclusive multiculturalism, with a mixture of successes and difficulties, which are of relevance also to other countries in Europe and the United States. Britain experienced race riots in London and Liverpool in 1981, though nothing as large as what happened in France in the fall of 2005, and these led to further efforts toward integration. Things have been fairly stable and reasonably calm over the last quarter-century. The process of integration in Britain has been greatly helped by the fact that all British residents from the Commonwealth countries, from which most non-white immigrants have come to Britain, have full voting rights in Britain immediately, even without British citizenship. Integration has also been helped by largely non-discriminatory treatment of immigrants in health care, schooling, and social security. Despite all this, however, Britain has recently experienced the alienation of a group of immigrants, and also fully homegrown terrorism, when some young Muslims from immigrant families —born, educated, and reared in Britain— killed many people in London through suicide bombings in July 2005.

Discussions of British policies on multiculturalism thus have a much wider reach, and arouse much greater interest and passion, than the boundaries of the ostensible subject matter would lead one to expect. Six weeks after the July terrorist attacks in London, when *Le Monde* published a critical essay called "The British Multicultural Model in Crisis," the debate was immediately joined by a leader of another liberal establishment, James A. Goldston, director of the Open Society Justice Initiative in America, who described the *Le Monde* article as “trumpeting,” and replied: "Don’t use the very real threat of terrorism to justify shelving more than a quarter-century of British achievement in the field of race relations." There is a general issue of some importance to be debated and evaluated here.

I will argue that the real issue is not whether "multiculturalism has gone too far" (as Goldston summarizes one of the lines of criticism), but what particular form multiculturalism should take. Is multiculturalism nothing other than tolerance of the diversity of cultures? Does it make a difference who chooses the cultural practices —whether they are imposed on young children in the name of “the culture of the community” or whether they are freely chosen by persons with adequate opportunity to learn and to reason about alternatives? What facilities do members of different communities have, in schools as well as in the society at large, to learn about the faiths and non-faiths of different people in the world, and to understand how to reason about choices that human beings must, if only implicitly, make?

II.

Britain, to which I first came as a student in 1953, has been particularly impressive in making room for different cultures. The distance traveled has been in many ways quite extraordinary. I recollect (with some fondness, I must admit) how worried my first landlady in Cambridge was about the possibility that my skin color might come off in the bath (I had to assure her that my hue was agreeably sturdy and durable), and also the care with which she explained to me that writing was a special invention of Western civilization ("The Bible did it"). For someone who has lived—intermittently but for long periods—through the powerful evolution of British cultural diversity, the contrast between Britain today and Britain half a century ago is just amazing.

The encouragement given to cultural diversity has certainly made many contributions to people's lives. It has helped Britain to become an exceptionally lively place in many different ways. From the joys of multicultural food, literature, music, dancing, and the arts to the befuddling entrapment of the Notting Hill Carnival, Britain gives its people—of all backgrounds—much to relish and to celebrate. Also, the acceptance of cultural diversity (as well as voting rights and largely non-discriminatory public services and social security, referred to earlier) has made it easier for people with very different origins to feel at home.

Still, it is worth recalling that the acceptance of diverse living modes and varying cultural priorities has not always had an easy ride even in Britain. There has been a periodic but persistent demand that immigrants give up their traditional styles of life and adopt the dominant living modes in the society to which they have immigrated. That demand has sometimes taken a remarkably detailed view of culture, involving quite minute behavioral issues, well illustrated by the famous cricket test proposed by Lord Tebbit, the Conservative political leader. His cricket test suggested that the sign of a well-integrated immigrant is that he cheers for England in test matches against the country of his own origin (such as Pakistan) when the two sides play each other.

Tebbit's test has, it must be admitted, the merit of definiteness, and gives an immigrant a marvelously clear-cut procedure for easily establishing his or her integration into British society: "Cheer for the English cricket team and you will be fine!" The immigrant's job in making sure that he or she is really integrated into British society could otherwise be quite exacting, if only because it is no longer easy to identify what actually is the dominant lifestyle in Britain to which the immigrant must conform. Curry, for example, is now so omnipresent in the British diet that it features as "authentic British fare," according to the British Tourist Board. In last year's General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, taken by graduating schoolchildren around sixteen years old, two of the questions included in the "Leisure and Tourism" paper were: "Other than Indian food, name one other type of food often provided by take-away restaurants"and"Describe what customers need

to do to receive a delivery service from an Indian take-away restaurant." Reporting on the GCSE in 2005, the Daily Telegraph complained not about any cultural bias in these nationwide exams, but about the “easy” nature of the questions, which anyone in Britain should be able to answer without any special training.

I also recollect seeing, not long ago, a definitive description of the unquestionable Englishness of an Englishwoman in a London paper: “She is as English as daffodils or chicken tikka masala.” Given all this, a South Asian immigrant to Britain might be a bit confused, but for Tebbit’s kindly help, about what will count as a surefire test of British identity. The important issue underlying the frivolity of the foregoing discussion is that cultural contacts are currently leading to such a hybridization of behavioral modes across the world that it is exceptionally difficult to identify any local culture as being genuinely indigenous, with a timeless quality. But thanks to Tebbit, the task of establishing Britishness can become nicely algorithmic and wonderfully easy (almost as easy as answering the GCSE questions just cited).

Tebbit has gone on to suggest, more recently, that if his cricket test had been put to use, it would have helped to prevent the terrorist attacks by British-born militants of Pakistani origin: "Had my comments been acted on, those attacks would have been less likely." It is difficult to avoid the thought that this confident prediction perhaps underestimates the ease with which any would-be terrorist—with or without training from Al Qaeda—could pass the cricket test by cheering for the English cricket team without changing his behavior pattern one iota in any other way.

I don’t know how much into cricket Tebbit himself is. If you enjoy the game, cheering for one side or the other is determined by a number of varying factors: one’s national loyalty or residential identity, of course, but also the quality of play and the overall interest of a series. Wanting a particular outcome often has a contingent quality that would make it hard to insist on unvarying and unfailed rooting for any team (England or any other). Despite my Indian origin and nationality, I must confess that I have sometimes cheered for the Pakistani cricket team, not only against England but also against India. During the Pakistani team’s tour of India in 2005, when Pakistan lost the first two one-day matches in the series of six, I cheered for Pakistan for the third match, to keep the series alive and interesting. In the event, Pakistan went well beyond my hopes and won all of the remaining four matches to defeat India soundly by the margin of four to two (another instance of Pakistan’s “extremism” of which Indians complain so much!).

A more serious problem lies in the obvious fact that admonitions of the kind enshrined in Tebbit’s cricket test are entirely irrelevant to the duties of British citizenship or residence, such as participation in British politics, joining British social life, or desisting from making bombs. They are also quite distant from anything that may be needed to lead a fully cohesive life in the country.

These points were quickly seized upon in post-imperial Britain, and despite the diversions of such invitations as Tebbit's cricket test, the inclusionary nature of British political and social traditions made sure that varying cultural modes within the country could be seen as being entirely acceptable in a multi-ethnic Britain. To be sure, there are many natives who continue to feel that this historical trend is a great mistake, and that disapproval is often combined with severe resentment that Britain has become such a multi-ethnic country at all. (In my last encounter with such a resenter, at a bus stop, I was suddenly told, "I have seen through you all!," but I was disappointed that my informant refused to tell me more about what he had seen.) Yet the weight of British public opinion has been moving, at least until recently, quite strongly in the direction of tolerating—and even celebrating—cultural diversity. All this, and the inclusionary role of voting rights and non-discriminatory public services, have contributed to an interracial calm of a kind that France in particular has not enjoyed recently. Still, it leaves some of the central issues of multiculturalism entirely unresolved, and I want to take them up now.

III.

One important issue concerns the distinction between multiculturalism and what may be called "plural monoculturalism." Does the existence of a diversity of cultures, which might pass one another like ships in the night, count as a successful case of multiculturalism? Since, in the matter of identity, Britain is currently torn between interaction and isolation, the distinction is centrally important (and even has a bearing on the question of terrorism and violence).

Consider a culinary contrast, by noting first that Indian and British food can genuinely claim to be multicultural. India had no chili until the Portuguese brought it to India from America, but it is effectively used in a wide range of Indian food today and seems to be a dominant element in most types of curries. It is plentifully present in a mouth-burning form in vindaloo, which, as its name indicates, carries the immigrant memory of combining wine with potatoes. Tandoori cooking might have been perfected in India, but it originally came to India from West Asia. Curry powder, on the other hand, is a distinctly English invention, unknown in India before Lord Clive, and evolved, I imagine, in the British army mess. And we are beginning to see the emergence of new styles of preparing Indian food, offered in sophisticated subcontinental restaurants in London.

In contrast, having two styles or traditions co-existing side by side, without the twain meeting, must really be seen as plural monoculturalism. The vocal defense of multiculturalism that we frequently hear these days is very often nothing more than a plea for plural monoculturalism. If a young girl in a conservative immigrant family wants to go out on a date with an English boy, that would certainly be a multicultural initiative. In contrast, the attempt by her

guardians to stop her from doing this (a common enough occurrence) is hardly a multicultural move, since it seeks to keep the cultures separate. And yet it is the parents' prohibition, which contributes to plural monoculturalism, that seems to garner the loudest and most vocal defense from alleged multiculturalists, on the ground of the importance of honoring traditional cultures—as if the cultural freedom of the young woman were of no relevance whatever, and as if the distinct cultures must somehow remain in secluded boxes.

Being born in a particular social background is not in itself an exercise of cultural liberty, since it is not an act of choice. In contrast, the decision to stay firmly within the traditional mode would be an exercise of freedom, if the choice were made after considering other altenatives. In the same way, a decision to move away—by a little or a lot—from the standard behavior pattern, arrived at after reflection and reasoning, would also qualify as such an exercise. Indeed, cultural freedom can frequently clash with cultural conservatism, and if multiculturalism is defended in the name of cultural freedom, then it can hardly be seen as demanding unwavering and unqualified support for staying steadfastly within one's inherited cultural tradition.

The second question relates to the fact that while religion or ethnicity may be an important identity for people (especially if they have the freedom to choose between celebrating or rejecting inherited or attributed traditions), there are other affiliations and associations that people also have reason to value. Unless it is defined very oddly, multiculturalism cannot override the right of a person to participate in civil society, or to take part in national politics, or to lead a socially non-conformist life. No matter how important multiculturalism is, it cannot lead automatically to giving priority to the dictates of traditional culture over all else.

The people of the world cannot be seen merely in terms of their religious affiliations—as a global federation of religions. For much the same reasons, a multi-ethnic Britain can hardly be seen as a collection of ethnic communities. Yet the "federational" view has gained much support in contemporary Britain. Indeed, despite the tyrannical implications of putting persons into rigid boxes of given "communities," that view is frequently interpreted, rather bafflingly, as an ally of individual freedom. There is even a much-aired "vision" of "the future of multi-ethnic Britain"that sees it as"a looser federation of cultures" held together by common bonds of interest and affection and a collective sense of being. But must a person's relation to Britain be mediated through the culture of the family in which he or she was born? A person may decide to seek closeness with more than one of these pre-defined cultures or, just as plausibly, with none. Also, a person may well decide that her ethnic or cultural identity is less important to her than, say, her political convictions, or her professional commitments, or her literary persuasions. It is a choice for her to make, no matter what her place is in the strangely imagined "federation

of cultures."

There would be serious problems with the moral and social claims of multiculturalism if it were taken to insist that a person's identity must be defined by his or her community or religion, overlooking all the other affiliations a person has, and giving automatic priority to inherited religion or tradition over reflection and choice. And yet that approach to multiculturalism has assumed a pre-eminent role in some of the official British policies in recent years.

The state policy of actively promoting new "faith schools," freshly devised for Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh children (in addition to pre-existing Christian schools), illustrates this approach, and not only is it educationally problematic, it also encourages a fragmentary perception of the demands of living in a desegregated Britain. Many of these new educational institutions are coming up precisely at a time when religious prioritization has been a major source of violence in the world (adding to the history of such violence in Britain itself, including Catholic-Protestant divisions in Northern Ireland —themselves not unconnected with segmented schooling). Prime Minister Tony Blair is certainly right to note that "there is a very strong sense of ethos and values in those schools." But education is not just about getting children, even very young ones, immersed in an old inherited ethos. It is also about helping children to develop the ability to reason about new decisions any grown-up person will have to take. The important goal is not some formulaic parity in relation to old Brits with their old-faith schools, but what would best enhance the capability of the children to live "examined lives" as they grow up in an integrated country.

IV.

The central issue was put a long time ago with great clarity by Akbar, the Indian emperor, in his observations on reason and faith in the 1590s. Akbar, the Great Mughal, was born a Muslim and died a Muslim, but he insisted that faith cannot have priority over reason, since one must justify—and, if necessary, reject—one's inherited faith through reason. Attacked by traditionalists who argued in favor of instinctive faith, Akbar told his friend and trusted lieutenant Abul Fazl, a formidable scholar with much expertise in different religions: "The pursuit of reason and rejection of traditionalism are so brilliantly patent as to be above the need of argument. If traditionalism were proper, the prophets would merely have followed their own elders (and not come with new messages)." Reason had to be supreme, in Akbar's view, since even in disputing reason, we would have to give reasons.

Convinced that he had to take a serious interest in the diverse religions of India, Akbar arranged for recurring dialogues involving not only people from mainstream Hindu and Muslim backgrounds in sixteenth-century India, but also Christians, Jews, Parsees, Jains, and

even the followers of “Carvaka”—a school of atheistic thinking that had robustly flourished in India for more than two thousand years from around the sixth century B.C.E. Rather than taking an “all or nothing” view of a faith, Akbar liked to reason about particular components of each multi-faceted religion. Arguing with Jains, for example, Akbar would remain skeptical of their rituals, and yet he was convinced by their argument for vegetarianism and even ended up deploring the eating of flesh in general. Despite the irritation all this caused among those who preferred to base religious belief on faith rather than reasoning, he stuck to what he called “the path of reason,” the rahi aql, and insisted on the need for open dialogue and free choice. Akbar also claimed that his own liberal Islamic beliefs came from reasoning and choice, not from blind faith or what he called "the marshy land of tradition."

There is also the further question (particularly relevant to Britain) about how non-immigrant communities should see the demands of multicultural education. Should it take the form of leaving each community to conduct its own special historical celebrations, without responding to the need for the “old Brits” to be more fully aware of the global inter-relations in the origins and development of world civilization? If the roots of so-called Western science or culture draw on, say, Chinese innovations, Indian and Arabic mathematics, or West Asian preservation of the Greco-Roman heritage (with, for example, Arabic translations of forgotten Greek classics being re-translated into Latin many centuries later), should there not be a fuller reflection of that robust interactive past than can be found, at this time, in the school curriculum of multi-ethnic Britain?

When a British or an American mathematician today employs an algorithm to solve a computational problem, he or she implicitly commemorates the contribution of the ninth-century Muslim mathematician al-Khwarizmi, from whose name the term “algorithm” is derived, and from whose path-breaking Arabic mathematical book, Al-Jabr wa al-Muqabalah, the term “algebra” originates. Even if Muslim faith schools fail to celebrate such non-religious works of Muslim intellectuals, should not all British students—old Brits as well as new ones—read something about such global contributions to the roots of modern world civilization? Educational broadening is important not only in Britain but across the world, including the United States and Europe. World history need not come to children (as it often does) only in the form of parochial recollections, combined sometimes with small capsules of packaged history of religion—not to mention the lampooning cartoons encountered outside the school. The priorities of genuinely multicultural education can differ a great deal from the intellectual segmentation of a plural monocultural society.

If one issue concerning faith schools involves the problematic nature of giving priority to unreasoned faith over reasoning, there is another momentous issue here, which concerns the role of religion in categorizing people, rather than other bases of classification. People’s priorities and actions are influenced by all of their affiliations and associations, not merely by religion. The separation of Bangladesh from

Pakistan was based on reasons of language and literature, along with political priorities, and not on religion, which both wings of undivided Pakistan shared. To ignore everything other than faith is to obliterate the reality of concerns that have moved people to assert identities that go well beyond religion.

The Bangladeshi community, large as it is in Britain , is merged in the religious accounting into one large mass along with all the other co-religionists, with no further acknowledgment of culture and priorities. While this may please the Islamic priests and religious leaders, it certainly shortchanges the abundant culture of that country and emaciates the richly diverse identities that Bangladeshis have. It also chooses to ignore altogether the history of the formation of Bangladesh itself. There is, as it happens, an ongoing political struggle at this time within Bangladesh between secularists and their detractors (including religious fundamentalists), and it is not obvious why British official policy has to be more in tune with the latter than with the former.

The problem, it must be admitted, did not originate with recent British governments. Indeed, official British policy has for many years given the impression that it is inclined to see British citizens and residents originating from the subcontinent primarily in terms of their respective communities, and now—after the recent accentuation of religiosity (including fundamentalism) in the world—community is defined primarily in terms of faith, rather than by taking account of more broadly defined cultures. The problem is not confined to schooling, nor to Muslims. The tendency to take Hindu or Sikh religious leaders as spokesmen for the British Hindu or Sikh population, respectively, is also a feature of the same process. Instead of encouraging British citizens of diverse backgrounds to interact with one another in civil society, and to participate in British politics as citizens, the invitation is to act “through” their “own community.”

The limited horizons of this reductionist thinking directly affect the living modes of the different communities, with particularly severe constraining effects on the lives of immigrants and their families. But going beyond that, how citizens and residents see themselves can also affect the lives of others, as the violent events in Britain last summer showed. For one thing, the vulnerability to influences of sectarian extremism is much greater if one is reared and schooled in the sectarian (but not necessarily violent) mode. The British government is seeking to stop the preaching of hatred by religious leaders, which must be right, but the problem is far more extensive than that. It concerns whether citizens of immigrant backgrounds should see themselves as members of particular communities and specific religious ethnicities first, and only through that membership see themselves as British, in a supposed federation of communities. It is not hard to understand that this fractional view of any nation would make it more open to the preaching and cultivation of sectarian violence.

Tony Blair has good reason to want to “go out” and have debates about terror and peace “inside the

Muslim community," and (as he put it) to "get right into the entrails of [that] community." Blair's dedication to fairness and justice is hard to dispute. And yet the future of multi-ethnic Britain must lie in recognizing, supporting, and helping to advance the many different ways in which citizens with distinct politics, linguistic heritages, and social priorities (along with different ethnicities and religions) can
interact with one another in their different capacities, including as citizens. Civil society in particular has a very important role to play in the lives of all citizens. The participation of British immigrants — Muslims as well as others — should not be primarily placed,
as it increasingly is, in the basket of "community relations," and seen as being mediated by religious leaders (including "moderate" priests and "mild" imams, and other agreeable spokesmen of religious communities).

There is a real need to re-think the understanding of multiculturalism, so as to avoid conceptual disarray about social identity and also to resist the purposeful exploitation of the divisiveness that this conceptual disarray allows and even, to some extent, encourages. What has to be particularly avoided (if the foregoing analysis is right) is the confusion between a multiculturalism that goes with cultural liberty, on the one side, and plural monoculturalism that goes with faith-based separatism, on the other. A nation can hardly be seen as a collection of sequestered segments, with citizens being assigned places in predetermined segments.

V.

There is an uncanny similarity between the problems that Britain faces today and those that British India faced, and which Mahatma Gandhi thought were getting direct encouragement from the Raj. Gandhi was critical in particular of the official view that India was a collection of religious communities. When Gandhi came to London for the Indian Round Table Conference called by the British government in 1931, he found that he was assigned to a specific sectarian corner in the revealingly named "Federal Structure Committee." Gandhi resented the fact that he was being depicted primarily as a spokesman for Hindus, in particular "caste Hindus," with the rest of the population being represented by delegates, chosen by the British prime minister, of each of the "other communities."

Gandhi insisted that while he himself was a Hindu, the political movement that he led was staunchly secular and not a community-based movement. It had supporters from all the different religious groups in India. While he saw that a distinction can be made along religious lines, he pointed to the fact that other ways of dividing the population of India were no less relevant. Gandhi made a powerful plea for the British rulers to see the plurality of the diverse identities of Indians. In fact, he said he wanted to speak not for Hindus in particular, but for "the dumb, toiling, semi-starved millions" who constitute "over 85 percent of the population of India." He added that, with some extra effort, he could speak even for the rest, "the Princes

... the landed gentry, the educated class."

Gender, as Gandhi pointed out, was another basis for an important distinction that the British categories ignored, thereby giving no special place to considering the problems of Indian women. He told the British prime minister, "You have had, on behalf of the women, a complete repudiation of special representation," and went on to point out that “they happen to be one-half of the population of India.” Sarojini Naidu, who came with Gandhi to the Round Table Conference, was the only woman delegate at the conference. Gandhi mentioned the fact that she was elected the president of the Congress Party, overwhelmingly the largest political party in India (this was in 1925, which was exactly fifty years before any woman was elected to preside over any major British political party). Sarojini Naidu could, on the Raj’s “representational” line of reasoning, speak for half the Indian people, namely Indian women; and Abdul Qaiyum, another delegate, pointed also to the fact that Naidu, whom he called “the Nightingale of India,” was also the one distinguished poet in the assembled gathering, a different kind of identity from being seen as a Hindu politician.

In a meeting arranged at the Royal Institute of International Affairs during his visit, Gandhi insisted that he was trying to resist “the vivisection of a whole nation.” He was not ultimately successful, of course, in his attempt at “staying together,” though it is known that he was in favor of taking more time to negotiate to prevent the partition of 1947 than the rest of the Congress leadership found acceptable. Gandhi would have been extremely pained also by the violence against Muslims that was organized by sectarian Hindu leaders in his own state of Gujarat in 2002. But he would have been relieved by the massive condemnation that these barbarities received from the Indian population at large, which influenced the heavy defeat, in the Indian general elections that followed in May 2004, of the parties implicated in the violence in Gujarat.

Gandhi would have taken some comfort in the fact, not unrelated to his point at the Round Table Conference in London in 1931, that India, with more than 80 percent Hindu population, is led today by a Sikh prime minister (Manmohan Singh) and headed by a Muslim president (Abdul Kalam), with its ruling party (Congress) being presided over by a woman from a Christian background (Sonia Gandhi). Such mixtures of communities may be seen in most walks of Indian life, from literature and cinema to business and sports, and they are not regarded as anything particularly special. It is not just that a Muslim is the richest businessman—indeed the wealthiest person—living in India (Azim Premji), or the first putative international star in women’s tennis (Sania Mirza), or has captained the Indian cricket team (Pataudi and Azharuddin), but also that all of them are seen as Indians in general, not as Indian Muslims in particular.

During the recent parliamentary debate on the judicial report on the killings of Sikhs that occurred immediately after Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguard, the Indian prime minister, Manmohan Singh, told the Indian parliament, “I have no hesitation in apologising not only to the Sikh community but to the whole Indian nation because what took place in 1984 is the negation of the concept of nationhood and what

is enshrined in our Constitution.” Singh’s multiple identities are very much in prominence here when he apologized, in his role as prime minister of India and a leader of the Congress Party, to the Sikh community, of which he is a member (with his omnipresent blue turban), and to the whole Indian nation, of which he is a citizen. All this might be very puzzling if people were to be seen in the “solitarist”
perspective of only one identity each, but the multiplicity of identities and roles fits very well with the fundamental point Gandhi was making at the London conference.

Much has been written concerning the fact that India, with more Muslim people than almost every Muslim-majority country in the world (and with nearly as many Muslims—more than 145 million—as Pakistan), has produced extremely few homegrown terrorists acting in the name of Islam, and almost none linked with Al Qaeda. There are many causal influences here, including the influence of the growing and integrated Indian economy. But some credit must also go to the nature of Indian democratic politics, and to the wide acceptance in India of the idea, championed by Gandhi, that there are many identities other than religious ethnicity that are relevant to a person’s self-understanding, and also to the relations between citizens of diverse backgrounds within the country.

I recognize that it is a little embarrassing for me, as an Indian, to claim that, thanks to the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and others (including the clearheaded analysis of “the idea of India” by Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest Indian poet, who described his family background as "a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan, and British"), India has been able, to a considerable extent, to avoid indigenous terrorism linked to Islam, which currently threatens a number of Western countries, including Britain. But Gandhi was expressing a very general concern, not one specific to India, when he asked, "Imagine the whole nation vivisected and torn to pieces; how could it be made into a nation?"

That query was motivated by Gandhi’s deep worries about the future of India. But the problem is not specific to India. It arises for other nations too, including the country that ruled India until 1947. The disastrous consequences of defining people by their religious ethnicity and giving priority to the community-based perspective over all other identities, which Gandhi thought was receiving support from India’s British rulers, may well have come, alas, to haunt the country of the rulers themselves.

In the Round Table Conference in 1931, Gandhi did not get his way, and even his dissenting opinions were only briefly recorded, with no mention of where the dissent came from. In a gentle complaint addressed to the British prime minister, Gandhi remarked, "In most of these reports you will find that there is a dissenting opinion, and in most of the cases that dissent unfortunately happens to belong to me." Yet Gandhi’s farsighted refusal to see a nation as a federation of religions and communities did not “belong” only to him or to the secular India he was leading. It also belongs to any country in the world that is willing

to see the serious problems to which Gandhi was drawing attention.

P.S.

* From “New Republic” February 27, 2006. Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire Dispatch | 22 February, 2006 | Dispatch No. 2221.

* Amartya Sen received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998. His new book, “Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny”, will be published by
W.W. Norton this spring.