

SIKH HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP

Cultural Diversity, Religion and Anti-Discrimination

The policies and legislation of States on anti discrimination have been influenced by the classical discourse on race and antiracism. This has largely concentrated on colour. Cultural Diversity as an integral part of anti-discrimination policies is fairly recent and yet developing. Although acknowledged to be important, Cultural diversity is one of these terms whose meaning is apparently 'elusive' and therefore not very useful. Attempts to bring the terms 'culture' and 'cultural diversity' in the political discourse are met with suspicion and fear of a potential controversy they might raise. It is true that both terms have been used with various different meanings in mind, yet it's also true that the reason they remain 'elusive' and controversial is because so far inadequate attention has been paid on trying to bring them into the political discourse; at least not as mere decorative terms that will add a positive vibe to the discussions but as meaningful and crucial concepts that will add weight to the discussions of any future policy that aims to bring about co-existing communities on the basis of equality and human rights.

Cultural diversity in itself does not presuppose equality or an 'automatic' state of harmonious co-existence of different cultures and communities. It needs to be accompanied by the understanding, acceptance and promotion of cultural differences on the one hand, and the need to tackle racism and discrimination on the other.

Religion and culture are often interlocked but religion as a term and concept is often avoided in discussions on community cohesion. When it does get discussed, it is often outside the discourse as something separate, that does not concern public policy. Nevertheless, religious consciousness and belief for a lot of people is important. It is a crucial aspect of their individual and group identity that is more often than not seen as an integral part of their culture. As such it cannot possibly be left in the margins of discussions around cultural diversity, anti-discrimination and community cohesion.

Before considering a desired position of 'culture' in the anti-racism or anti-discrimination discourse it is important to make a brief note in relation to the 'anti-racism' or 'race' discourse. In order to deal with anti discrimination there is a need to consider the sources of racism which will help to appreciate the genealogy of the current discourse. The conventional race discourse is a field that refers or reacts to classifications that were once constructed in order to exclude and dominate. Had such classification evolved as a means of seeking better co-existence and real understanding, there may not have been a need to have the discourse on anti discrimination in the first place. It is important to question the basis of terms such as race, racism and racial discrimination. There is also a need to undertake a more thorough analysis in order to unravel the multiple definitions conflated within these terms and their use to human society. From there then there is a need to move on to a comprehensive anti-discrimination discourse and subsequently develop policies and legislation to reflect those.

Any discussion on equality necessitates the question «equality in relation to what and whom?». Is the concept of equality that has developed as part of the western dominated discourse on 'race' one that refers to equality of all in relation to the 'white race'; or is equality being discussed without reference to any specific group or culture. In the later, all 'races' and cultures have the same weight and importance in the equation with some commonly evolved parameters of values. SHRG's position is the latter and it is within this context that we feel that culture is an integral part of the 'anti-racism' or perhaps better 'anti-discrimination' discourse¹ and that the recognition, acceptance and promotion of cultural diversity could be the antidote to racism and discrimination.

Although there is by now literature that discusses the importance of bringing 'culture' into the 'anti-racism' or/and 'anti-discrimination' debates, in practice public policy has progressed mostly by accommodating colour and to some extent descent/ethnicity but very little has been done in relation to protecting people's and group's cultural identities and values.

¹ For by using the term 'anti-discrimination' instead of 'anti-racism' it is easier in many ways and of course in some contexts to avoid all the limitations and racist connotations of the discourse as they have developed through time.

Discrimination and racism occur primarily because people are fearful of 'the different'. In this sense, people who come from different cultures are perceived as a threat to what is thought to be a 'homogenous national culture'. This is because homogeneity is usually treated as an indication of 'normality', whereas cultural diversity is approached with suspicion, usually as an 'invasion' of the different into the 'homogenous' whole. However, a careful analysis of British shows that diversity and not homogeneity is the starting point of a dynamic process that involves a wide variety of perspectives, ways of life, individual and communal identities and economic-political circumstances that blend together and change through time. This needs to be accepted and made integral to public policy. If it is done cultural diversity will cease to be perceived as a threat and it will be approached as an opportunity for the equal and peaceful co-existence of different peoples. What is important is that people need to be made comfortable with different cultures amongst them.

Another important point is that cultural diversity is usually talked in terms of the act of 'tolerance'. This does not necessarily promote the co-existence of different cultures on an equal basis. The concept of 'tolerance' suggests merely a political 'recognition and accommodation' of different ways of being while it still presupposes cultural homogeneity of the 'nation-state' and assimilation of the minority cultures into the majority, 'tolerant' one. An alternative to the passive practice of 'tolerance' would be the active promotion of the more inclusive and dynamic concept of 'cultural diversity' that promotes respect for different cultures and protection of their rights on the basis of the human rights principles.

The WCAR provided with a unique opportunity to discuss such issues. SHRG raised them from the beginning of the process. Although there was initial reluctance, the awareness raising lobbying by SHRG and a wide network of NGO's changed perceptions. Towards the end of this process, the conference was a little bit more prepared to accept the importance of embracing cultural diversity and the need to systematically challenge the idea of the existence of apparently 'a-cultural' civic structures in societies.. The final conference document included a few references to the importance of cultural diversity and now it's up to us all to make them meaningful.

Racism and discrimination also evolve from people's frustration of having to deal with an apparently 'a-political' and 'a-cultural' civic structure and anti-discrimination discourse. The issue here is the non-existent, limited or biased knowledge about different communities and the lack of a sense of belonging for all. This combines with inadequate public policies; vast relative economic disparities and the liberal model of governance according to which there is no space for 'culture' in the public sphere but it's something that concerns only the private life of people. Broadly this generates two main reactions simultaneously, creating tensions and conflicts, much like those witnessed in the summer of 2001 in the North of the country. The first one is rooted in the nationalist approach whereby the functioning of British society is not and should not be 'a-cultural' but reflect the 'white-English, majority culture'. The second reaction comes primarily from non-white communities who then feel excluded and marginalized or feel a perceived threat of assimilation.

These issues have been analysed by a wide range of experts. Currently we have the B. Parekh and Ousley reports, the Cattle and Ministerial reports and many others that have discussed community cohesion, the issue of British civic identity as well as that of the common values included in this identity. The crucial question that remains un-addressed is that despite all this work that has been done since the 70s, and the vast number of experts, why are there still discussions on such issues almost on the same basic level that were taking place all those years ago? Has there been progress at all? If not, why? The government is now engaged in evolving a community cohesion policy. The question that concerns some communities is, will it make cultural diversity integral or marginalise it?

Following the progress made at the WCAR there is a need to focus on cultural diversity within the community cohesion and anti-discrimination policies. Although a difficult task, there is a need to ensure that cultural diversity is embraced within community cohesion policies and that constructive and progressive coexistence is realised in today's Britain to have a successful future for an increasingly pluralistic British society. The public should be at ease with cultural diversity.

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