



Editorial

All conflicts are identity conflicts...

John Paul Lederach

This comment by well known conflict transformation scholar and practitioner John Paul Lederach points to the manner in which core identities seem to be embedded in almost all forms of social and political conflict. Pervasive and seemingly non negotiable in nature, identity issues have a way of making a conflict seem almost resistant to transformation at certain points in time. The collection of academic articles and essays in this issue of *Peace Prints* titled "Identities in Conflict" is an attempt to tease out this persistent yet complex relationship between identities and conflicts.

The notion of identities has been invoked in literature, art, history and social sciences cutting across various research traditions. As a larger philosophical question it is of course linked to personal identity and one's sense of 'self,' as distinguished from 'others.' Extrapolating on this Social Psychology has moved beyond the sole preoccupation with individual cognition to also explore the idea of 'social identity' as an explanatory tool for understanding collective behaviour and inter group conflict. In fact the theory of social identity has acquired a particular salience in the fields of Social Psychology and Sociology where it has been used to understand how individuals acquire a sense of belongingness and community and thereby distinguish themselves from 'other' communities. The 'self' and the 'other' applied both at the level of individual and collective cognition has therefore been at the core of discourses around identity.

Over the last two decades the notion of identities has also permeated sharply into political discourse with prolific literature being generated around 'identity politics' and identity based political conflicts. However, the discourses intrinsically linking the notion of identities to social, ethnic and political conflicts have also been open to debate and critique. This is primarily because the concepts around identity, as also conflict, lend themselves to multiple interpretations.

Apart from a common and rather rudimentary understanding of identities as linked somehow to constructions of the 'self' and the 'other' both at the individual and/or group level, there is no agreement on the basic nature of identities and the manner in which they are defined, acquired, and shaped. Even at this basic level of understanding, a bewildering blizzard of identities can be identified as we all have multiple identities. Leave aside group identities, even the construction of the self is not based on any singular axis of identification. Equally importantly opinion has been sharply polarized between those who believe that identities are basically primordial and essentialist and those who see identities as social constructs, formed by political choices, and

consequently not to be treated as objective 'givens.' The fuzziness around identity emanating from the different ways in which it has been interpreted, and the protean nature of socially constructed identities have even caused some scholars to question its fundamental usefulness either as a descriptive category or as an analytical tool.

Some critical thinkers including social anthropologists seem to have offered a way out of this impasse by suggesting that while the concept of identity itself may be confusing and difficult to define empirically, its manifestations may be more evident and therefore easier to locate. Rather than focus on the abstractions of identity *per se* they suggest that if the searchlights shift to specific markers of identity such as language, dress, behaviour, *et al* the boundaries that mark one social group from another can be located. It can then be used to understand the similarities and differences between those who wear these markers and others who perceive them. The inclusive dialogic engagement between the 'wearers' and the 'perceivers' of the marker in question or alternatively the adversarial/conflictual relationship between them, as the case may be, offers a more creative avenue for understanding the relationship between identity, politics, dialogue and conflict.

The notion of conflict itself has been viewed very differently, with some highlighting its destructive dysfunctional aspect and others who think of conflict not only as inevitable but also as potentially transformatory and having the capacity to create changes or significant dents in an unjust social system. This second liberatory view of conflict also links conceptually with the manner in which identity politics has been used by some scholars for 'consciousness raising.' This implies that rather than accept the negative status quo offered by the dominant culture, the oppressed community uses the commonality of experiences of oppression to transform its sense of self and community. From this perspective, as Iris Marion Young points out in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, identity politics is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed and one's group identity makes one vulnerable to some forms of cultural imperialism including stereotyping, erasure, and appropriation of one's group identity, violence, exploitation, marginalization or powerlessness. Consequently identity politics is not just about theorizing but is also a mode of organization and a call for action which can directly be linked to the notion of justice.

Of course all conflict is not positive and many conflicts can be violent and dysfunctional. Several terms have been used to indicate this category of conflicts - the Carnegie Commission introduced "deadly" conflicts into the lexicon in the 1990s to denote violent conflict within states that rely on strategies of ethnic cleansing and target civilians, particularly vulnerable sections of it. Others such as Guy and Heidi Burgess of Colorado University have used the term 'intractable conflicts' for those conflicts that seem to be stuck at a high level of destructiveness. It is the invocation of identities in *these* conflicts (and not the invocation of identities *per se*) that has been the cause of worry.

The challenges of grappling conceptually with the idea of identity are captured in the paper *Identity Issues* by Louis Kriesberg. Unraveling some of the complexities of using identities as a theoretical construct, Kriesberg explains how self and collective identities

are formed and constructed. Elaborating on some of the key characteristics of identities he problematizes its linkage with another idea that has been a principle of organization in the contemporary world - namely nationalism. Pointing out that collective identity can extend across countries and ethnicities, he also invites attention to the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism. In many ways this sets the template for many of the articles that follow where the pitfalls of a purely ethnic nationalism in a multicultural context are alluded to. The paper goes on to explore how identities are by and large socially constructed and therefore not immutable and frozen in time and space. They can and indeed do change and can be turned around to contribute to the transformation of even seemingly intractable conflicts. The paper suggests that identities if properly understood and dealt with can be made part of the solution rather than being regarded only as part of the problem.

One way of doing this appears to be through the lens of multiculturalism. As Gurpreet Mahajan points out in her paper *Responding to Identity Conflicts: Multiculturalism and the Pursuit of Peaceful Coexistence* theories of multiculturalism are in fact responses to ethnic conflict that challenge the dominant understanding of the nation-state as one nation. Rather it recognizes that there are cultural differences among citizens and most modern states are multinational states. As Mahajan argues, multinational liberal democracies may be ready to recognize the claims of minorities for political participation but they are less accepting of accommodating diverse cultural claims as they believe this can dilute national unity. Wedded to the Westphalian notion of one state one nation in a world that challenges this empirically, such fears are easily explained. Theories of multiculturalism seek to allay this concern by suggesting loyalty to the state would in fact depend on its ability to accommodate rather than suppress the cultural claims of its minorities.

Our understanding of identity politics has also been mediated by the contributions of feminists. Feminist praxis explores how identities are designed to define groups in adversarial terms precisely to serve the interests of power. Indicating how gender ideas are either subsumed or strategically positioned within other identities, Anuradha Chenoy in her paper *Identity Politics and Feminist Praxis* points out that identity politics has in fact revealed the patriarchal nature of all institutions and argues that patriarchy is woven tightly into all identity constructions. In looking at how the emotive issue of motherhood has sometimes been used in a manner that simply reinforces the essentialisms that contemporary feminist praxis seeks to resist, Chenoy raises a larger theoretical question on the nature of femininity as a marker of gender identity. If femininity is so deeply associated with oppression of women can it be used as part of an emancipatory framework and praxis in the first place? This has remained an abiding dilemma for feminists.

While Kriesberg, Mahajan and Chenoy examine some of the conceptual frameworks around which identity debates have been foregrounded, another set of academic papers in this collection are more empirical in nature and grounded more specifically in the experience of South Asia in particular. They use the theoretical discourses around nationhood, law, justice and culture to actually examine how identity constructions manifest themselves and interface with social and political conflict.

Meghna Guhathakurta in her paper *Cartographic Anxieties, Identity Politics and the Imperatives of Bangladesh Foreign Policy* reinforces the idea that contemporary states particularly South Asian states are best conceptualized as multinational. The Westphalian notion of a 'nation-state' hardly serves any meaningful purpose in South Asia and can on the contrary create alienating cultural hegemonies that hurt minorities. This is precisely what happened in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh where the tribal population was marginalized both on the basis that they did not speak the dominant language (Bengali) or follow the majority religion (Islam). This identity based conflict has not died out completely even though active conflict has abated after signing of a peace accord. Guhathakurta also pertinently points to the layering of identities in Bangladesh and the constant tussle between a language-based nationalism and a religious-based nationalism which continues to play itself out even today. She warns that when international pressures emanating from globalization pressurize Bangladesh to adopt growth oriented development paradigms without paying adequate attention to issues of social equity, or force it to conduct a war on terror in ways prescribed by bigger powers, it will have its fallout on ethno nationalist politics at the domestic level. In alluding to this Guhathakurta gestures towards a larger critical point regarding changes that a rapidly changing world is bringing about on the perceptions of who we are, our relationship with the community and the impact of this on old and new forms of conflict.

The paper titled *People without Shadows: Ethnographic Reflections on Identity and Justice in contemporary India* by Samir Kumar Das looks at justice as the dominant language through which much of identity politics is conducted. Based on ethnographic research on the victims of riverbed erosion in central West Bengal in India which results in a tussle of identities as 'islanders' are converted into 'mainlanders,' this paper turns the searchlights on larger theoretical questions of the place of law, justice and governmentality in the lives of people whose status changes with the meanderings of a river. It is a poignant reminder that there is a category of people whose ambivalent legal identity implies that they forgo the most basic right - "the right to have rights." Breaking away from the general mould of looking at identity politics only through the lens of culture and ethnicity this article foregrounds the conflictual politics around legal identity and the paradoxes in the world of law when it comes to dealing with those whose chief marker of identity is simply their powerlessness.

Another dimension of identity mobilization that has generated tremendous conflict in contemporary India has been along religious lines - what in Indian parlance is often described as communal conflict. Whether or not religion has been the underlying cause of violence, there is no doubt that the visible manifestation of such conflicts exploits religious sentiment and targets members of a community on the basis of their religion. Asha Titus in her paper *Gujarat 2002 - The Politics of Polarization* draws our attention to the pogrom that was carried out in Gujarat in India in 2002 that resulted in thousands of members of the minority community (in this case Muslims) being systematically targeted, killed or rendered homeless. Titus adds what she calls 'another layer' to the existing analysis of this religious identity mobilization by examining it from an open-ended concept of cultural identities and cultural hybridity particularly among Gujarati Muslims. Emphasizing the historicity of the experience of Islam in India she calls

attention to the fact that in analyzing religious mobilizations this complex social fact also needs to be taken on board.

In the section on *Perspectives*, two essays – one from South Africa and the other from South Asia – explore the implications and challenges to national identity in these two multinational contexts.

Vasu Gounden in his opinion piece *Reflections on Identity Conflicts and Nation Building in Contemporary South Africa* advocates the idea of civic nationalism (as distinguished from ethnic nationalism) as the anchoring concept that can bring together different cultural constituencies in post apartheid South Africa together around a common vision for progress. While he does not reject the relevance of multiculturalism as a viable policy option through which responses to identity conflicts can be framed, Gounden does add the caveat that this task can be daunting from a practical standpoint given the debates around nativism in South Africa.

Writing in the context of South Asia, Aswini Ray in his essay *National Identity and Regional Autonomy in South Asia: the Case of Jammu and Kashmir* makes a plea for accommodation and argues that demands for regional autonomy need not be looked at with suspicion and labeled anti-national. Pointing to what he calls the conceptual traps of the western notion of “nation-states,” he posits that in the context of South Asia where cross-cultural constituencies cut across state borders a more imaginative approach towards national identity building is called for.

While Aswini Ray’s essay is built around the specific case of Jammu and Kashmir and its identity construction vis-à-vis the Indian state, Jammu and Kashmir *itself* is a multicultural space where another set of identity politics within its boundaries also play themselves out. The Book Review section explores this angle through a discussion around Rekha Chowdhury’s edited volume *Identity Politics in Jammu and Kashmir*. Navanita Sinha in her insightful review of the volume evaluates the book from the perspective of its overall contribution to an understanding of how internal identity dynamics within this state influence the interstate conflict between India and Pakistan and vice versa. As Sinha rightly points out, there has been a plethora of writings on the Kashmir issue from the perspective of an inter-state dispute and also personalized writings on the conflict in the Valley. But Jammu and Kashmir is more than just the Valley. The multiple identities within the state including sub regional identities have received far less attention and this is the gap that this volume seeks to fill.

On the whole, the collection of research articles, opinion pieces and book discussion in this edition of *Peace Prints* builds on the already prolific literature available on identity conflicts by looking at the two concepts of identity and conflict through a critical lens. It revisits some of the foundational questions on the nature of identity and how it is defined, politicized and mobilized particularly in an age where multicultural states are becoming the norm rather than the exception, not just in South Asia, but across the world. It captures how the trajectory of identity politics has changed over the years beyond demands for formal inclusion in politics to more active assertions seeking recognition of differences, thus reminding us that there are culture based sites of

disadvantages in the polity along with socio-economic ones. It reflects on changing identities in an age of globalization and new technologies and invites introspection on how this is working to further marginalize women, ethnic/indigenous minorities, and the economically disadvantaged, thereby creating new sites of conflict and changing the way older conflicts are manifested.

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