PLURALISM, CIVIL SOCIETY AND SUBALTERN COUNTERPUBLICS

Reflecting on Contemporary Challenges in India through the Case-Study of the Pasmanda Movement

KHALID ANIS ANSARI

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Comments can be sent to	The author – khalidanisansari@gmail.com And to the editors of the Pluralism Working Paper series – pluralismworkingpapers@uvh.nl
	Khalid Anis Ansari is a founding member of The Patna Collective (India) and also a PhD student at the Kosmopolis Institute (University for Humanistics, Utrecht) under the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme in India.
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Caroline Suransky, Hilde van 't Klooster and Ute Seela

Editors of the *Pluralism Working Paper series*

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Editor's preface

This interesting paper, written by Khalid Anis Ansari, can be connected to two earlier papers in our series which both explore and problematize salient issues on pluralism that are emerging from the India Pluralism Knowledge Program. The *first* one is 'Human Rights, Pluralism and Civil Society; Reflecting on contemporary challenges in India' by Prof. Sitharamam Kakarala (2010/ No.6). In this paper, Kakarala discusses contemporary struggles in the realm of social theory development and pluralism. In addition, he analyzes the context of communal violence and conflict in contemporary India with a particular focus on religious pluralism in relationship to caste, gender and ethnicity. The current paper by Khalid Anis Ansari, exemplifies the efforts by the India Pluralism Knowledge Program to reframe the debate on pluralism in ways that allow us to go beyond communal violence and constitutional governance questions, and thus help us to rethink ways and means of strengthening the *pluricultural* societal fabric. The second paper in our series which is connected to the current work of Ansari is the conversation with himself and Shahrukh Alam, titled 'Exploring new Sites of Social Transformation, Conversations with the founding members of the Patna Collective in India (2010/ No.7). Both are founding members of the Patna Collective, a research-activist collective based in India. Their primary focus is to explore new ways of engaging with social transformation and its impact on Indian politics of identity. One of their areas of special attention is the pasmanda movement. This is a lower caste movement within the Muslim community in India, which aspires to forge new caste solidarities, by exceeding traditional religious identities and by challenging the hegemony of the upper-caste Muslim elite.

In this paper, which is based on his Doctoral research at the Centre for the Studies of Culture and Society (CSCS) in Bangalore, India and the Graduate School of the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands, Ansari makes new meaningful connections between international contemporary academic debates on pluralism and democratic social transformation on the one hand and discourses circulating within Indian subaltern spaces on the other. Through a particular case study of 'the pasmanda counterpublic', Ansari aims to enrich the debates within civil society as well as open new possibilities for engagement with social change. The paper consists of three parts. In the first part, the work of Laclau and Mouffe in particular, offers a meaningful point of departure in the conceptual context in which Ansari launches his discussion on the pasmanda counterpublic and its significance for rethinking contemporary challenges of social change. According to Ansari, Laclau and Mouffe have developed "an anti-essentialist and relational view of identification and stressed the constitutive role of power in identity formation". Their approach exposes a number of the "immanent limits of any discussion of pluralism outside 'the political' envisaged as a field necessarily marked with social antagonism and discursive contestations". When he connects this line of thinking with his own empirical research on discourses in the pasmanda movement, Ansari suggests that pluralism is indeed "an empty signifier whose content cannot be fixed beforehand but which will be contingently produced by the hegemonic struggle itself". In addition to the above, the notions of governmentality and relationality of the state (Foucault), the relation between public sphere and subaltern counterpublics (Fraser), and the distinction between 'civil society' and 'political society' (Chatterjee) also play a meaningful role in Ansari's sharp analysis.

The second part of the paper locates the pasmanda counterpublic in the ongoing and historical debate with a account of the emergence of new subaltern counterpublics in India and a concise genealogy of the modernity of traditional identities applied by both the colonial and post-colonial Indian state, with a special focus on caste. The third part of the paper is primarily based on resources produced by the pasmanda movement itself and discusses the ways in which the movement deals with religious pluralism, social reform within the Muslim community and social justice in India and finally sketches how the process of globalization is currently received by the pasmanda community.

As the Patna Collective is both research – as well as activist oriented, Ansari offers not only a thoughtful and well-researched academic account, but also explicitly pleas for civil society to be more "critically self-reflexive and engage with these new sites of social transformation in order to

make their frames and strategies more sustainable, effective and inclusive". I am convinced that Ansari's paper offers new challenging insights into pluralism, which are most certainly valuable not only in India, but also in the broader international realm. Apart from thanking Khalid Anis Ansari for his paper, I'd like to thank two additional people. Firstly, there is Sitharamam Kakarala who coordinates the India Pluralism knowledge program and also serves as one of Ansari's doctoral supervisors. Secondly, there is Hilde van 't Klooster from the Kosmopolis Institute who did some fine editorial work on the paper. I hope and trust that this paper will inspire new dialogue in the international Pluralism network and beyond.

Caroline Suransky

Chief editor of the *Pluralism Paper series* for the Pluralism Knowledge Program.

Pluralism, Civil Society and Subaltern Counterpublics

Reflecting on Contemporary Challenges in India through the Case-Study of the Pasmanda Movement

Khalid Anis Ansari

Introduction

The primary objective of this paper is to reflect on the concerns of pluralism in India[1], from the vantage point of the 'new' subaltern counterpublics, and to present a case for the civil society organizations (CSOs) that might facilitate a reconsideration of their conceptual frames and strategies for intervention in the light of these recent developments. It can be safely stated that the dominant imagination of the civil society in India, when it comes to the question of plural and democratic social transformation, seems to be overwhelmingly informed by the hegemonic notions of abstract citizenship and linear development framed in a distinctive modernist logic. Such a self-assured understanding has restricted the CSOs so far to undertake pedagogical interventions (educating the 'traditional' sections) or to lobby for changes in juridical structures. But the recalcitrance of most of the problems flagged to be addressed by civil society (communal violence, untouchability, dowry deaths, etc.), even after 60 years of existence of the post-colonial Indian state, have only indicated at the limits of civil society discourse and provided a ground for the reevaluation of the dominant CSO frameworks and strategies. One of the significant fallouts of such a discursive grip has been the non-responsive, or rather hesitant, attitude of most CSOs to engage with the 'new' sites of social transformation that are being inaugurated in the Indian social scene.

Quite clearly these new sites have thrown up innovative articulations of community/identity, informed by different spatial and temporal sensibilities, the neo-liberal modes of economic transformation, and often constituted by the contaminated negotiations between the dialectical processes of governmentality and subaltern maneuver. Also, it seems that these new identity formations have abstracted from the mainstream public sphere, which they often construe to be inhabited by elite voices, and have crafted what can be fairly categorized as *subaltern counterpublics* (to employ Nancy Fraser's term). So it is in these counterpublics and networks where their discourses and rationalities circulate quite often invisible to the gaze of the modern mediatized spaces. In the emergent literature trying to explain these new mobilisations in India an analytical distinction between 'civil society' and 'political society' is made to highlight a possible tension between modernisation and democratisation. Civil society refers to self-organized associations and movement organizations that were set up in the heydays of colonial modernity and are usually governed by elite classes who would like to see India in the club of highly modernized nations. Political society, on the other hand, alludes to contingent and fluid political formations such as community pressure groups, or such other contestants for power, who are generally identified with their ability to represent and work for the realization of the popular demands of the subaltern groups in their struggle for survival. Thus the former can be seen as a site for *modernization* and the latter as the site for *democratization*.

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[1] In an earlier paper in the Pluralism Working Paper series Sitharamam Kakarala has reflected on the question of pluralism in India from the vantage point of human rights (Kakarala 2010). The present paper can also be seen as an extension of that conversation but from a different angle.

Moreover, the question of 'religious pluralism' has staged itself with some force in the last few decades in India, especially due to the stark cases of inter-religious violence (communalism) witnessed in various jurisdictions. Among other factors, one of the causative factors in these persistent cases of violence has been the monolithization of religious identities. However, these monolithic religious identities have been interrogated by caste and gender movements of late from *within* leading to their relative 'loosening' and triggering off debates on internal social reform. In the case of Islam in India, despite the non-recognition of caste within Muslim public sphere, a number of lower caste Muslim organizations have sprung up recently that are challenging and subverting the Muslim monolith in interesting ways. These developments seem to be parochializing the discourse of religious communalism by interrogating vertical solidarities based on religious lines and articulating horizontal solidarities with similarly placed groups in other religious communities. But how far will they succeed in actually stemming inter-religious violence is yet to be seen. However, they definitely offer openings that need to be seized and worked on for the purposes of pluralism in India.

Hence, the ascendance of the lower caste movement within Indian Islam, called the 'pasmanda movement', has complicated the politics around Islam and Muslim (minority) identity, which has been seen as monolithic in public discourse. The Muslims who are part of the movement being mostly from artisan or working class background, have challenged the fascination of old Muslim elite with cultural and symbolic issues and have staged more organic and social issues relating to their everyday struggles for survival in their narratives, thus creating a 'counterpublic', a new discursive space. Hence, this study will represent and discuss the 'Pasmanda Movement'. It is hoped that this exercise will provide insights into the dynamics of ever-changing nature of social protest around the issues of recognition and justice. This could potentially throw new light on the interplay of the categories of class and caste vis-à-vis religious identity in contemporary India in the struggles for democratization and development. By exploring the pasmanda discourse it will seek to demonstrate how it could potentially inform the debates on plural and democratic social transformation in India. It will also attempt to make a case that the CSOs need to be more aware of their own discursivity and should aspire to engage with the various articulations in the subaltern counterpublics in order to make their frames and strategies more sustainable, effective and inclusive.

In this respect the relevant conceptual debates in making sense of the concerns of pluralism are outlined in Part One. Section A represents the critique of rationalists (deliberative democrats) and communitarian multiculturalists launched by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Section B carries the debate further and outlines the project of rethinking citizenship by the latter. It is followed by a brief discussion on the idea of 'governmentality' articulated by Michel Foucault and indicates at how it marks a shift in the imagination of the state-form and political power generally. Then section C, which is the last section in this part, presents the critique of Nancy Fraser on the mainstream conception of the public sphere and her introduction of the relevance of subaltern counterpublics in modern democracies. This is then supplemented with related discussions on Indian civil society, especially the framing of 'civil society' and 'political society' by Partha Chatterjee.

In Part Two, an attempt is made to broadly locate the pasmanda counterpublic in the ongoing and historical debates in India. It contextualizes the emergence of new subaltern counterpublics in India. Section A discusses the challenges India has been facing since independence in managing diversity. Section B offers a short genealogical account of the modernity of traditional identities like caste and religion, often in dialogue with the logic of governmentality applied by both the colonial and post-colonial Indian state. This is followed by Section C where caste is especially isolated and a more detailed treatment is undertaken to explain its career and persistence in contemporary India.

Part Three contextualizes the emergence of the pasmanda counterpublic through a short conceptual and historical sketch of the movement. Section B, C and D represent the major articulations of the movement by primarily using the resources produced by the movement itself. In this respect Section B sketches the discussions on the question of religious pluralism, especially the engagement with secularism and communalism. Section C outlines the openings for social reform within the Muslim community that are made possible by the movement. Section D foregrounds the debates on social justice and how the process of globalization is being received by the pasmanda community.

Then in the concluding section an effort is made to link the discussions in Part One, Two and Three and to demonstrate how they affect the question of pluralism and democratic social transformation.

PART ONE

The Question of Pluralism: Outlining the Relevant Conceptual Debates

We have got on to the slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk: so we need friction. *Back to the rough ground.*[2]

A. Taking Pluralism Seriously: Looking Beyond the Rationalist and Communitarian Frames

How should 'pluralism' be conceived under conditions of 'modern democracy'? That is the question that preoccupies us here. The quotation marks in both pluralism and modern democracy are significant as they mark that both these terms are contested ones without any stable definition. One of the central insights that are critical to this paper is what Chantal Mouffe has referred to as the 'paradox of modern democracy'. According to her '[I]t is therefore crucial to realize that, with modern democracy, we are dealing with a new political form of society whose specificity comes from the articulation between two different traditions. On one side we have the *liberal tradition* constituted by the rule of law, the defense of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the *democratic tradition* whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between those two distinct traditions but only a contingent historical articulation' (Mouffe 2000, 2-3; italics mine). This tension between liberal and democratic traditions (or between freedom and equality) constitutes the dynamic principle which keeps the liberal democratic regimes alive. The key to understanding democratic politics then lies in the recognition that it is possible to *mediate* and *negotiate* between the two antagonistic principles and to arrive at various contingent and precarious closures, but it is impossible to eliminate or reconcile this tension without at the same time endangering the legitimacy of the liberal democratic regimes themselves.

In fact, the shift from the Keynesian Welfare State to the neoliberal regime in western democracies (at least from the 1970s onwards) has specifically attempted to privilege the liberal tradition at the expense of the democratic tradition. The axes on which the recent articulations of democracy revolve are *free-markets* on the one hand and *human rights* on the other, while at the same time any notion of popular sovereignty is elided. While human rights are critical to any democratic project, democracy becomes meaningless without the participation of the people in decision-making processes (Mouffe 2005, 55). What the prevailing discourse signified by concepts like 'good governance' or 'non-partisan democracy' intends to achieve is a consensual and a depoliticized form of democracy or, in other words, politics free of any dimension of conflict. What is suggested is that ''one should look for 'impartial' solutions to social conflicts, but this is precisely where the problem lies. There are no impartial solutions in politics, and it is this illusion that we now live in societies where political antagonisms have been eradicated that makes it impossible for political passions to be channeled through traditional democratic parties'' (Mouffe 2005, 55). This is at the heart of what Mouffe dubs as a 'democratic deficit' and which poses dangers to popular allegiance to democratic institutions, especially in providing space to right wing articulations that are the only political options available to channelize the passions of the people by retaining the adversarial dimension in politics ('we' and 'them'). In a related move William E. Connolly points out at the 'paradox of difference'. He critiques the dominant understanding of 'pluralism as diversity' and provides a fascinating discussion on what he calls the dialectic of 'pluralization' and 'fundamentalization'. 'This correlation between pluralization and fundamentalization is not accidental, for each conditions the other: each drive to pluralization is countered by a fundamentalism that claims to be authorized by a god or by nature. Moreover, any drive to pluralization can itself become fundamentalized. These two drives participate, therefore, in the same political matrix' (Chambers and Carver 2008, 37-38).

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[2] L. Wittgenstein cited in (Mouffe 2000, 12-13).

While positing that any serious project of rethinking pluralism should engage with the related paradoxes of 'modern democracy' and 'difference', one may also indicate that the paradoxical nature of modern democracy is deeply related to the crisis of the political project of universal modernity (expressed by the institutions of constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market and secularism) itself. The liberal project of abstract citizenship, one of the great emancipatory visions (metanarratives) of modernity, remains more or less an elusive dream. This is reflected sharply in the various recent assertions of 'selfhood': also captured through the tropes of 'politics of particularisms', 'identity politics', or in the Foucauldian phrase 'insurrection of little selves' (Nigam 2006, 1). Quite clearly we have not arrived at the unmarked citizen which has been able to transcend the constitutive attachments of community life.

Perhaps at the root of this impasse lies the Enlightenment notion of *subjectivity*. The idea of a *disengaged agency*, of a rational human subject not constituted by cultural attachments, is the ground on which the entire logic of liberal democracy, abstract citizenship and secular nationalism stands. However, the problem is that the disenchanted modern world throws not only this kind of disengaged rational subject, but also the 'mass man'. The 'mass man' quite in contrast, 'acts through the process of mobilization, of mediations that *produce him*...as an extension of an always-already constituted collectivity—the nation, community or simply the 'mass'—moved by passion and perceived self-interest' (Nigam 2006, 6-7). This partially explains the increasing gulf between the enlightened, progressive elite and the so-called backward, sectarian and passionate masses in the contemporary political life. Both of course enter the arena of parliamentary democracy, but with a very different language and set of notions.

This crisis has been addressed through two dominant frames in recent literature: the rationalist frame of 'deliberative democracy' and the communitarian frame of 'multiculturalism (recognition)'. The distinctive idea of the model of deliberative democracy is that in a democratic polity decision-making should happen through a process of deliberation among free and equal citizens. Both the key theorists of this tradition, namely John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas, started off their projects by critiquing the *instrumentalist* dimension in contemporary political theory that focused merely on interests and preferences (interest group pluralism) in explaining political behavior. Their effort has been to recover the moral and normative dimension of liberal democracy by articulating a *normative rationality* ('Justice as fairness' for Rawls and the procedural 'discourse ethics' for Habermas) that could provide a solid ground for allegiance to liberal democracy and its institutions (Rawls 1971; Habermas 1984-87; 1996). In short, they have tried to transcend the *modus vivendi* liberalism by arguing that by applying adequate procedures of deliberation it is possible to reach forms of agreement that would satisfy both rationality (liberal rights) and democratic legitimacy (popular sovereignty).

While accepting pluralism as a fact of life they make a thick distinction between the 'public' and 'private' spheres. Their normative rational consensus ['overlapping consensus' for Rawls] around the basic institutions of liberal democracy is attained by relegating all comprehensive views (of a religious, moral or philosophical nature) to the private sphere. In the public sphere only the social and economic issues are deemed fit to be discussed. Hence, there is a hesitation in coming to terms with 'value pluralism'. A clear-cut separation is established between the realm of the private where a pluralism of irreconcilable comprehensive views exists and the realm of the public where an overlapping consensus can be established over a shared conception of justice or procedures. In other words, conceptions that refuse the principles of liberalism are to be excluded. A key consequence of this move has been the reversion and emergence in strange ways of whatever is excluded and suppressed as recent ethnic and fundamentalist upsurges amply demonstrate. Hence, even the rational consensus does not lead to a harmonious world. What the deliberative democrats miss is the element of the political with all its dimensions of power, antagonism and relationships of forces. Also, their understanding of political actors as driven by rational self-advantage completely erases 'passion', which is a key component of any collective identification, from the realm of politics (Mouffe 2005).

The multicultural communitarians on the other hand have attacked vigorously the atomistic liberal conception of 'self', which is putatively self-directed and autonomous (Macintyre 1981; Sandel 1998; Taylor 1989). They have argued with some force how the community is constitutive of the 'self' and forms the immediate context of morality and self-definition. Thus, the multiculturalists have foregrounded self-realization, informed by the notion of a substantive good, as the key aspiration and have articulated the *politics of recognition* for attaining that (Honneth 1992). The problem is that this move takes us into the domain of pyschologization and no principles are easily offered that can discriminate between different claims to recognition (Benhabib 1999, 406). Moreover, this thick notion of community entails the dangers of essentializing and reifying cultures which may lead to

group enclaving and separatism. Another concern is that the emphasis on inter-group inequality often discounts the question of intra-group inequality (Fraser 2001).

Hence, it seems that both 'rationality' and 'community' have not been able to address the issue of value pluralism convincingly. In the case of deliberative democracy we have too little of community and in the case of multicultural communitarians we encounter an excess. Also, both the frames escape the immanent problematic of power in the constitution of subjectivity and collective identity by either taking recourse to normative rationality or substantive culturalism and do not really offer conceptual resources for a more nuanced notion of pluralism. In the next section I will discuss briefly why the articulation of 'agonistic pluralism' put forward by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe may be better equipped in dealing with concerns of pluralism.

B. Rethinking Citizenship and the State

The liberal articulations of citizenship privilege *rights* over *obligations* and emphasize on a notion of *passive* citizenship rather than an *active* one. This has led to a weakening of the sense of community and collective spirit, as well as to a feeling of *anomie* and to the weakening of social bonds. Hence, the liberal conception that there is no 'common good' and that each individual is free to pursue his or her own conception of the good runs the risk of *sacrificing the citizen to the individual*. While being sensitive to the problems posed by the liberal notion of citizenship, Laclau and Mouffe are not very comfortable with the communitarian critiques that foreground a civic republican conception of citizenship either. According to Mouffe the communitarian attempt 'to recreate a type of *gemeinschaft* community cemented by a substantive idea of the common good is clearly premodern and incompatible with the pluralism that is constitutive of modern democracy' (Mouffe 1992, 29). In this view there is a different danger: that of *sacrificing the individual to the citizen*. So what is needed is perhaps 'a new conception of the citizen that is different from both the republican/communitarian and the liberal ones…' (Mouffe 1992, 29) The primary challenge for them then is how to conceptualize a 'political community' (citizenship) that articulates the demands of *pluralism* (and diversity) along with some notion of *'common good'* that is not a determinate or a substantive one.

This they do by offering a *constructivist* and *relational* view of identities (and politics) and by rearticulating the relationship between 'universals' and 'particulars'. The pre-condition to any meaningful plural and democratic project is to perceive 'différance' (Derrida) as the condition of the possibility of being. Any social objectivity must be construed as constituted through acts of power. Thus its very formation involves an act of exclusion which also dialectically governs its constitution ('the constitutive outside' according to Derrida). Since everything is constructed as 'difference' and has inscribed within it something other than itself, it cannot be conceived as pure 'presence' or 'objectivity'. Since the constitutive outside is present within the inside, as its always real possibility, there is an element of *contingency* in every identity. Hence, *power is not an external relation taking place between two pre-constituted identities, but rather constitutes the identities themselves* (Mouffe 2000). While contingency and particularity are central to understanding modern politics, 'this particularity cannot be constructed through a pure ''politics of difference'' but has to appeal, as the very condition of its own assertion, to universal principles' (Laclau 1995, 150). However, there is an indeterminate character to the universal and its final meaning can never be fixed. So the universal is an empty place and *'…it emerges out of the negation of the particular identities, but its content is fixed in and through political struggles for hegemony, in which particular demands are universalized and others are marginalized'* (Torfing 1999, 175: italics in the original)*.*

An immediate consequence of such a frame is that political community (and citizenship) cannot be construed as an objective entity out there but must be seen as a discursive surface where it is precariously constituted through the contestations and the process of hegemony within a discursive field marked by social antagonism. As we know there is always a gap between community as a whole (society) and the different social actors that operate within it. Because of the heterogeneity and complexity of modern societies, where the will of no social actor coincides with the society conceived as a totality, some form of 'representation' becomes imperative. Since all cannot be represented and neither can all be excluded the political space necessarily divides itself into an 'us' and 'them' through the simultaneous and interactive 'logic of difference' and the 'logic of equivalence'. In a political field a series of particular *democratic demands* (gays, workers, women, environmental, etc.) are put forward to the institutional space. If they are addressed successfully then they are resolved within a logic of difference. However, when they are not resolved these various demands tend to aggregate together by forming 'equivalential chains' through the principle of democratic equivalence. Now in these equivalential chains the particularity and plurality of these demands is not sacrificed, but they are only aggregated and represented through a leading identity arrived at though the competition and cooperation of various identities (the process of hegemony). Moreover, this chain of equivalence is

articulated through the employment of empty signifiers (God, Nation, Class, Communism etc.) (Laclau 2005). 'Empty signifiers are signifiers to the extent that they resonate within existing discourses; they do participate in the production of meaning. But they tend towards emptiness, or lack of meaning, due to the stresses placed upon them by their usage in a hegemonic articulation…This signifier tends to emptiness, or lack of meaning, precisely because of its fullness, its multiplicity of meanings…' (Day 2005, 207). This is the process of the formation of a 'we'. But a 'we' can only be articulated with respect to a 'them' (the constitutive outside). Hence, there is always an antagonistic relationality between 'us' and 'them' and these are only contingent and precarious constructs produced through hegemonic struggles within a field informed with power. Hence, political community will always remain a contested space where a few identities will be included and others excluded. In fact, this exclusion in itself creates the conditions of the possibility of any meaningful political community at all. 'It is therefore a community without a definite shape and in continuous reenactment' (Mouffe 1992, 31).

However, any notion of a political community also 'requires the correlative idea of the common good, but a common good conceived as a vanishing point, something to which we must constantly refer but that can never be reached' (Mouffe 1992, 30). The common good can also be referred to mean 'following Wittgenstein, a "grammar of conduct" that coincides with the allegiance to the constitutive ethico-political principles of modern democracy: liberty and equality for all.' (ibid., 30). However, there would be multiple interpretations of these principles and no interpretation can be fixed a priori. Since the notion of any essential identity and a substantive good has been discarded there are now no enemies or interpretations that need to be annihilated. Rather the task is to convert enemies into *adversaries* and antagonism into *agonism*. An adversary, in contrast to an enemy, is a legitimate opponent who plays within the rules of the game (liberty and equality). Rather, he or she is a co-creator of the rules of the game and these rules are not settled once and for all but rather are subject to constant reinterpretation, resistance, opposition and are constantly articulated by the hegemonic struggles between various adversaries (Torfing 1999, 252-255). The interesting move here is that the various social actors are not asked to drop their particularistic loyalties and conceptions of the good, but rather they are encouraged to employ them in redefining the rules of the game—liberty and equality—within the language game of democratic politics. 'The prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions, nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilize these passions, and give them a democratic outlet' (Mouffe cited in (Torfing 1999, 255)). However, total indeterminacy and toleration would also mean the total disintegration of social fabric if it is not arrested at some point. Following this all democratic societies must necessarily be based on *force* and *exclusion*; the condition of possibility of democracy is also its condition of impossibility. Hence, 'Such a view of citizenship is clearly different both from the liberal and the communitarian ones. It is not one identity among others, as it is in liberalism, nor is it the dominant identity that overrides all others, as it is in civic republicanism. It is an articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty.' (Mouffe 1992, 32).

A second important issue to be considered in the context of social movements and civil society, is the conceptualization of the state. There is a tendency in many progressive movements to identify the state as a monolithic and oppressive site, or as a deliverer of the gifts of recognition to subordinate identities. What these arguments often fail to appreciate is the *relationality* of the state-form and that it is also a site of contestation and struggle with multiple possibilities. In his hugely influential essay 'Governmentality' Michel Foucault (2000) undertakes a genealogical analysis of the art of government. He suggests that due to the impact of the decline of feudalism and the emergence of the modern state, and the processes of Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century, a ground was created for the emergence of new questions with respect to political power. In fact, there was a shift from the sovereign notion of power (Machiavelli) to an art of government. What primarily mattered in the sovereign notion of power was the territory. The subjects figured only with respect to the 'common good' defined in terms of compliance to the law (whether transcendental or worldly).I In the case of government the focal point is a 'complex composed of men and things'. As Foucault puts it:

> 'What government has to do with is not territory but, rather, a sort of complex composed of men and things. The things, in this sense, with which government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those things that are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, and so on; men in their relation to those other things that are customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, and soon; and finally men in their relation to those still other things that might be accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, and so on.' (Foucault 2000, 208-9).

Ultimately, to govern came to mean the correct and efficient administration of 'men and things'. 'In contrast to sovereignty, government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population' (Foucault 2000, 216). It must be remarked here that this foregrounding of *populations* as an object of government was compelled due to the demographic growth and rise of capitalism in the eighteenth century, as also the availability of various forms of statistical techniques. '…it is the population itself on which government will act either directly, through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly, through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the stimulation of birth rates, the directing of the flow of population into certain regions or activities, and so on.' (Foucault 2000, 217).

This understanding of modern political power is what Foucault calls *governmentality*. Broadly it comprises of three important elements. One, it refers to the 'conduct of conduct' which broadly means 'any rational effort to influence or guide the comportment of others – whether these be workers, children, communities, families, or the sick – through acting upon their hopes, desires, or milieu' (Inda 2005, 6). In this context Foucault articulates the notion of *biopower* to allude to new technologies of power employed to serve the purposes of the government: the care and growth of population. Biopower means nothing less than the control of life itself. It operates at the aggregate levels of the population as a whole ('biopolitics') and at the level of the individual body ('discipline') Two, it suggests that political power cannot be reduced to the activities of the state. 'Indeed, for Foucault, governing – that is, the regulation of conduct – is not merely a matter of the government and its institutions but involves a multitude of heterogeneous entities: from politicians, philanthropists, and state bureaucrats to academics, clerics, and medics. What thus counts in thinking about governmental power is not simply the state but also all these other actors, organizations, and agencies concerned with exercising authority over the conduct of human beings' (Inda 2005, 6). And, the third element of governmentality is the target of government which is primarily the aggregate termed population. All in all, 'governmentality draws attention to all those strategies, tactics, and authorities – state and nonstate alike – that seek to mold conduct individually and collectively in order to safeguard the welfare of each and of all.' (Inda 2005, 6).

The important lesson that one can draw from the processes of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe) and governmentality (Foucault) is that no sites, institutions or bodies are immune from the functioning of the 'will to power'. Also, the role of governmentalisation of the state in the production of modern subjects must be taken cognizance of. However, any move for domination or the production of subjects in a hegemonic game is never determinate or final and other resources could be harnessed to subvert closures forced by the powerful. So, even when the dream of a final emancipatory moment (the revolution) has seriously been interrogated in political theory, the struggle against domination of all types remains as imperative as ever. Mouffe sums this up well:

> '[…] the adversary cannot be defined in broad general terms like 'Empire', or for that matter 'Capitalism'. It is instead contingent upon the particular circumstances in question – the specific states, international institutions or governmental practices that are to be challenged. Put another way, the construction of political demands is dependent upon the specific relations of power that need to be targeted and transformed, in order to create the conditions for a new hegemony. This is clearly not an exodus from politics. It is not 'critique as withdrawal', but 'critique as engagement'. It is a 'war of position' that needs to be launched, often across a range of sites, involving the coming together of a range of interests. This can only be done by establishing links between social movements, political parties and trade unions, for example. The aim is to create a common bond and collective will, engaging with a wide range of sites, and often institutions, with the aim of transforming them.' (Mouffe 2009, 237).

C. Civil Society and Subaltern Counterpublics

After a brief discussion on the constitutive nature of political community (citizenship) and the relationality of the state apparatus through the formulation of governmentality, it will be useful to discuss the role of civil society in the democratic field, with special reference to the Indian conditions. In this respect I feel that the conceptual moves by Laclau and Mouffe need to be supplemented with the ideas of Nancy Fraser as her articulation has a more direct and clearer relevance for making sense of the new identity movements in India, especially in problematizing the debates on social policy. I will begin by seizing on the arguments presented by her in a very insightful essay captioned 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' (Fraser 2003). As we know, the concept of the 'public sphere', originally theorized by Habermas (1989), refers to a space where citizens deliberate about their common affairs. It is more or less an institutionalized site for discursive interaction and conceptually autonomous of the state apparatus and economic markets. It can be safely construed as a space for the play of democratic associations.

Now Fraser dubs this articulation of the public sphere as a 'bourgeois, masculinist conception' (Fraser 2003, 85) and sets out to interrogate the four assumptions that are central to it:

(i)   It is possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to bracket status differentials and to deliberate *as if* they were social equals. Societal equality is not a necessary condition for political democracy.

(ii)   The proliferation of a multiplicity of competing counterpublics is a necessary step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy. A single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics.

(iii) Discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation about the common good. The appearance of private interests and private issues is always undesirable.

(iv)   A functioning democratic public sphere requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state. (Fraser 2003, 85)

The *first* assumption stresses open access for all in the public sphere irrespective of their social location. Fraser tells us, in history this has never been realized. A series of subject positions, such as women, various ethnicities and plebian men, were formally excluded from it. Even when they are formally included now they can face marginalization because discursive interactions within a bourgeois public sphere privilege 'protocols of styles and decorum' that are themselves informed by status inequality. Hence, the demand to 'bracket status differentials and to deliberate *as if* they were social equals' asked of the interlocutors is an impossible demand and often benefits the dominant groups within society. So it seems more appropriate 'to *unbracket* inequalities' by consciously staging them if we are to move towards participatory parity in the public sphere. Moreover, this emphasis on bracketing obscures another assumption: the conception of the public sphere as a 'space of zero degree culture'. This means that all cultural expressions will be accommodated with equal ease in the public sphere. In stratified societies, where the media and pedagogic space is skewed towards the cultural practices of economically and socially powerful groups, this is a problematic assumption to hold. Hence, the first assumption of the bourgeois public sphere - that social equality is not a necessary condition for achieving participatory parity - is clearly inadequate in Fraser's view.

In response to the second assumption she undertakes a discussion on 'inter-public relations' as a contrast to the discussion on 'intra-public relations'. Since the mainstream public sphere is not a space for participatory parity in stratified societies it is useful for the disadvantaged sections to form what she calls *'subaltern counterpublics'*. These are 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 2003, 91). These subaltern counterpublics have a dual role. They act as enclaves for the subaltern groups where they can articulate their concerns and bring a coherence to their demands without the supervision of the dominant groups which concentrate, in Mansbridge's words, on 'absorbing the less powerful into a false 'we' that reflects the more powerful' (cited in (Fraser 2003, 90)). On the other hand they also act as training grounds for agitational activities directed at wider publics. It is in the dialectic between these two functions of the subaltern counterpublics that their emancipatory potential can be located. In general these counterpublics expand the discursive space in stratified societies and enable discursive contestation and so craft a ground for participatory parity which the imagination of a single, comprehensive public sphere is at a loss to address.

The third assumption - that 'discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation about the common good, and that the appearance of private interests and private issues is always undesirable' - is equally problematic for Fraser. After all, what constitutes a 'public matter' or a 'private matter' cannot be resolved before the discursive contestation takes place. Also, there is no neutral conception of the 'general good' available. For instance, the dominant notions of domestic privacy can exclude certain issues and debates from the public sphere by 'personalizing and/or familiarizing them'. Also, the notions of market privacy can exclude certain critical issues by 'economizing' them and thus debar them from a public and political deliberation. 'After all, when social arrangements operate to the systemic profit of some groups of people and to the systemic detriment of others, there are prima facie reasons for thinking that the postulation of a common good shared by exploiters and exploited may well be a mystification' (Fraser 2003, 99).

Lastly, in engaging with the last assumption of the bourgeois public sphere - 'that a functioning democratic public sphere requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state' - she develops the concepts of 'weak publics' and 'strong publics'. Civil society refers to the nexus of NGOs and other associations that are beyond the state or the market. Now since the bourgeois conception of the public sphere supposes the desirability of a strong separation of civil society (associational) from the state, it restricts its role to merely opinion formation rather than decision-making. This is what Fraser calls 'weak publics'. However, the emergence of 'parliamentary

sovereignty' complicates the picture since a sovereign parliament operates as a 'public sphere *within* the state'. Sovereign parliaments are dubbed as 'strong publics' by her because their discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making. 'With the achievement of parliamentary sovereignty, therefore, the line separating (associational) civil society and the state is blurred' (Fraser 2003, 103). So the essential question is not how to maintain a strong separation of civil society from the state but how to best make institutional arrangements where the accountability of the strong publics (parliament) can be ensured through interrogations from the weak publics (civil society).

I think Fraser's interrogation of the mainstream conceptions of the public sphere is very germane to the debates on civil society in India and in making sense of new sites of social transformation. As in other countries civil society in India too is a contested terrain and is often criticized for its elite composition and orientation. When Purdue remarks that, "…representation within civil society has traditionally been selective in the established democracies, favoring white, upper and middle class males' (Purdue 2007, 2) it has definite resonances in the Indian scene too. Javeed Alam for instance comments, in discussing the relationship between Indian civil society and democracy, that '…the elite, the core of civil society, has developed deep reservations against the working of democratic processes in India…Civil Society may be a restricted presence in Indian society. Those possessing education and culture, capable of exercising their rights, are the core members of civil society; they carry the cross for the others insisting that others are capable of acting like them. The decline in the social importance of the assumptions of elite world view and their decline in the political process is quite pronounced. This is the reason why those who strongly subscribe to the values enshrined in the civil society have become alienated from the processes which sustain democracy' (2004, 122-24).

It is in the backdrop of such strong sentiments that one has to relook at the dominant articulations of civil society in India today. Elliott comments that '[w]hereas the interest of civil society in the United States has been animated by worry about lack of civic engagement and in Eastern Europe by resistance to interventionist states, Indian discussion flows from concerns about the extension of democracy to previously subordinated groups, so-called 'democratic deepening'' (Elliott 2003, 22). In the emergent literature trying to explain these new mobilisations an analytical distinction between 'civil society' and 'political society' is made to highlight a possible tension between modernisation and democratisation. Civil society refers to self-organized associations and movement organizations such as trade unions that were set up in the heydays of colonial modernity and are usually governed by elite classes who would like to see India in the club of highly modernized nations. Political society, on the other hand, alludes to contingent and fluid political formations such as community pressure groups, or such other contestants for power, who are generally identified with their ability to represent and work for the realization of the popular demands of the subaltern groups in their struggle for survival. Thus the former can be seen as a site for *modernization* and the latter as the site for *democratization* (Chatterjee 2001).

In his essay 'Civil Society and Ideological Contestation in India' Mark Robinson (2003) points at the poverty of western notions of civil society in making sense of the complexity of the Indian situation. He suggests that the concept of the civil society can be enriched and extended by applying it creatively to the contemporary Indian situation. One, he argues that civil society must not be construed as a set of associations that espouse democratic values and shared commonality of purpose informed by some normative notion of common good. He proposes to include organizations founded on ascriptive identities like caste and religion, in the definition of civil society because of their 'forceful empirical reality'. In a parallel move he parochializes the identification of civil society with a sub-set of organizations pursuing normative claims that are supposed to have some superior validity. Such conceptual narrowness and normative exclusion, according to Robinson, 'cloud analytical depth' and offer a hindrance in comprehending empirical realities. Two, the purely associational nature of civil society must be broadened and the question of ideology must be brought in. Third, he stresses on revisiting the sharp conceptual distinction between conventional understanding of civil society and political society, by seeking to demonstrate 'how groups and organizations wedded to particularist ideological agendas consciously treat the spheres of civil and political society as complimentary and interchangeable' (Robinson 2003, 358). He proposes three principal sites of contestation in contemporary India: 1) the claim to ideological and political supremacy of the Hindu right wing movement; 2) the effects of capitalism and the development state; 3) resistance to the forms of autonomous action that seek to probe the accountability of the state and responsiveness to its citizens. He further lays down what I consider to be the central concern for all civil society actors in India today:

'[…] voluntary sector as presently constituted has only a modest role to play in the three arenas of contestation…The development and welfare concerns of the voluntary sector have generally precluded it from taking a more active role in struggles over ideological hegemony, in part because they are seen to be political issues and because the sector is generally more comfortable with a consensus-building approach. But the struggles taking place in these three

realms profoundly shape the lives of the poor and marginalized communities that the voluntary sector claims to privilege.' (Robinson 2003, 375).

It is my contention that a strong response to these three struggles in India is being articulated in various subaltern counterpublics informed by diverse forms of identifications (dalit, pasmanda, muslim women etc.). For a number of reasons civil society has been hesitant to engage with them in any meaningful manner. In Part two I will first discuss the emergence of new subaltern counterpublics in India. In Part three I will map the issues in one such counterpublic, the pasmanda movement, and discuss the inferences that the civil society could potentially extract from it.

PART TWO

The Emergence of 'New' Subaltern Counterpublics in India

A. The question of managing diversity in post-Independent India

One of the most urgent tasks that confronted the policy makers of the Indian nation in the post-Independence period was the management of the enormous diversity of the Indian social scene[3]. A number of communities structured along the lines of religion, caste, language, region, tribe, nationality, gender and class staked their respective claims over the resources and symbolic space of the nascent post-colonial state. In the hegemonic discursive contest that preceded and followed the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1948, a number of closures in the policy domain were reached that were seen as 'just' at that point of time. Despite the overall liberal modernist accent of the nationalist project it was conceded that the abstract and neutral conception of citizenship had to be somewhat complicated. It was resolved that some form of cultural protection was necessary for the religious and linguistic minorities, and also that a suitable mechanism for compensatory discrimination needed to be evolved with respect to the subordinated lower caste and tribal groups (Mahajan 2002, 42-43). The mechanism of universal citizenship could probably prove an interruption to their progress and mainstreaming by not explicitly problematizing their differences related to their socio-economic situation and cultural development. Consequently, both these concerns found a place within the Constitution, wherein the former was usually captured through the discourse of 'minority rights' and the latter through the discourse of 'social justice' in popular imagination.

Quite clearly this was a substantial innovation within the frame of normative liberal modernity which held the notion of equality of treatment of all citizens by the state, and also a stark indicator of how modernity is translated differently in various spatial and temporal registers (Kaviraj 1997). Thus, India had already moved innovatively with respect to citizenship even when the academic discussions on multiculturalism or differentiated citizenship rights were not in vogue in western academies (Kaviraj 2010, 37). Broadly, the founding fathers of the Indian nation had adopted the cultural and pedagogic goal of secular nationalism, and had envisaged a development policy where centralized socialist state planning and industrialization were to be the key elements. However, secularism was creatively defined not in terms of opposition to religion *per se*, but as symmetrical treatment of all religions by the state and public policy. Nonetheless, in the last few decades the received understanding and the constitutional consensus on secular nationalism, socialist development, minority rights and social

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[3] Broadly, the population of India is divided, in terms of religion, into the majority Hindu community (about 80%) and the religious minorities like Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jains and Buddhists which constitute the remainder. In the context of minorities the Muslims, which constitute around 14% of present India's population of about 1.21 billion, are the most significant minority in terms of numerical weight. However, the Hindu community is internally fragmented into five normative status-based caste groups or *varnas*—the *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (merchants), *Shudras* (laborers), and a group of outcastes—the dalits (formerly untouchables). These *varnas* are further subdivided into a few thousand sub-castes or *jatis*, which are endogamous occupational groups and are theoretically supposed to follow a ritualized hierarchical norm of group ranking. However, in practice *jatis* are probably the more functional and easily identifiable units, even when their textual hierarchy is often complicated, subverted and redefined in the daily political. Apart from these there are a number of tribal groups. In terms of numbers the lower castes (shudras) and outcastes (dalits) constitute more than 75% of Hindu population. However, despite the discounting of caste/tribe within minority religions most of them, just like their Hindu counterparts, are internally stratified on caste/tribe lines as well. The Constitution constructed the categories of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (OBCs) and Minorities to capture this complex reality for policy making. However, while SCs referred to the dalits, STs to the aborigines or tribals, Minorities to religious and linguistic minorities, the category of OBC was left ambiguous without any clear referents. Lastly, while SCs, STs and OBCs were to be the beneficiaries of affirmative action (quota or reservations), the minorities and their culture were to be protected and encouraged through various other welfare schemes and interventions.

justice have come under intense strain from various quarters due to significant shifts in the Indian polity.

In the decade of the 1990s, Indian political economy witnessed three key ruptures in the form of major policy decisions and mass mobilizations that have impacted both theoretical and activist endeavors in significant ways. The *first* event was the right-wing 'religious' mobilization around the issue of Ramjanambhumi-Babri Mosque, that aspired to demolish a 16th century mosque believed to have been constructed by the Muslim ruler Babur after bringing down a Hindu temple at the supposed birth-place of the Hindu deity Ram. The mosque was demolished in 1992 through a nation-wide mobilization of the Hindu 'faithful' and was followed by violent rioting between Hindus and Muslims in major urban centers in India (Jaffrelot 1996; Hanson 1999; Basu, et al. 1993). This conflict led to 'communal' (a term employed for inter-religious clashes in India) polarizations and had a significant bearing on social harmony, toleration and the question of pluralism.[4] The *second* event was the acceptance of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report by the central government in 1990. The report proposed recognition of the lower caste *shudra* sections for the purposes of affirmative action (termed as quotas or reservations in India) through a particular reading (in terms of caste) of the ambiguous constitutional term 'Socially and Educationally Backward Classes' (popularly termed as Other Backward Castes or OBCs). This event led to a large scale mobilization on the axis of 'caste'. By ensuring representation and integration of the OBCs, it seriously disrupted power equations and effected a transition in Indian democracy (Engineer 1991; Frankel 1990). This incremental transformation has been succinctly captured by the phrase 'India's silent revolution' by Jaffrelot (2003). The *third* event was the initiation of the New Economic Reforms in 1991, often labeled as neo-liberal reform in progressive literature (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2002). This major policy decision, that was captured popularly by the acronym LPG (liberalization, privatization, globalization), arrested India's long tradition of state socialism and centralized planning. It also saw the conflicting emergence of the middle classes and the growing inequalities and livelihood crisis for the working classes at the same time (Desai and Das 2004). Developments such as the increasing corporatization and domination of Indian industry by big business, the surge in consumerism, the displacement of traditional skills and the retreat of the state from the social sector, the increasing urbanization and the foregrounding of knowledge economy have led to the surfacing of new anxieties and contestations around the notion of development (Alternative Survey Group 2004; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009).

The interplay of these three major trajectories have a significant import for the debates on pluralism, development and democracy in India. They structure the crucible where a series of *new social movements* (organized around various identities) (Omvedt, 1993) have been inaugurated, thereby putting severe strains on the mainstream public sphere, the received articulations on social transformation and the official consensus on most state categories[5]

As already mentioned the affirmative action policies were designed primarily along caste/tribe lines and were captured by the term 'social justice' in public discourse. Specifically, caste was largely perceived as a socio-economic identity, defined negatively in terms of disadvantage, which required to be ultimately annihilated. On the contrary, the religious identity of minorities, which was associated with a core set of ethics and a substantive notion of 'good-life', was seen as requiring protection and safeguards from the state through 'minority rights'. However, both these identities were seen as *traditional* identities which would be eventually managed or transcended, if not annihilated or assimilated, within the logic of progressive rationality of secular nationalism. However, the recalcitrance of these identities and the emergence of new identities informed by a complex interplay between these naturalized ones, even after 60 years of the existence of the post-colonial state, has seriously interrogated the tradition/modernity dichotomy assumed in modernization theory and has thrown new challenges for conceptualizations of social change in India. In fact, these putative traditional identities have demonstrated remarkable capacities of adjustment and maneuverability in dealing with a modern democratic context.

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[4] In India pluralism is articulated as 'secularism' which basically refers to symmetrical treatment of all religions (Upadhyay 1992; Sen 1993).

[5] For instance, the category of SC which alludes to the dalits is under strain from the enactment of the 'mahadalit' (most dalit) identity in Northern India or the rivalry between *maala* and *madiga* dalit castes in Andhra Pradesh. Most minority groups are also witnessing caste or gender movements from within that are destabilizing the discourse of minority rights. Due to these pressures the received wisdom on what constitutes culture or socio-economic marginalization has become a contested question in India today.

B. Modernity of Tradition: A Short Genealogical Account

In important ways the terms of most contemporary debates in India were set by the colonial state and its ethnographers in collaboration with the elite native informers (Bayly 1988). Broadly, the formation of entrenched communities and various fault-lines one witnesses at present were informed by the colonial classificatory categories produced for the purposes of governmentality. Hence, the production of various identifications can be traced back to the crucible of colonial efforts to govern India and the subsequent contestations and the jostling for power by various groups inscribed unarguably by an unequal and differentiated colonial development policy. Among the most pervasive effects of colonial ethnographic efforts were the homogenization and systematization of social identities. Even in pre-colonial times allegiance to particular communities was considered valuable. But these communities were fuzzier, ambiguous and fluid. Colonial modernity and the operations of the decennial Census on the other hand introduced a 'new community' by its efforts at enumeration and classification of the subject population. 'The new 'communities' were now often territorially more diffuse than before, less tied to small locality, less parochial, on account of changes in communications, politics and society more generally. They were at the same time historically more self-conscious, and very much more aware of the differences between themselves and others, the distinctions between 'Us' and 'Them'. The new 'community', or 'enumerated community'...also became increasingly a part of a rationalist discourse—centrally concerned with numerical strength, well-defined boundaries, exclusive 'rights' and, not least, the community's ability to mount purposive actions in defense of those rights' (Pandey 1997, 305-06). Hence, colonial knowledge system craftily laid out 'ethnographic plots' which also quite often 'encouraged the census takers to transfer the authority of self-classification from their subjects to themselves' (Viswanathan 1998, 161).

Importantly, the colonial state presented itself as the embodiment of universal history and modernity and contrasted itself with the provinciality and 'traditional' culture of India. This articulation of 'difference' was necessary to legitimize its benevolent rule. It held the promise of modernity for the subjects, but equally made it an elusive dream (modernity as an ideal that Indians were not capable of achieving) thereby justifying its perpetual presence ('the white man's burden'). In this context *a holistic and metaphysical notion of 'tradition' was constructed which was supposedly impervious to power and outside history*. While in the European case civil society was construed as a social realm supposedly free from the primordial loyalties of the past, and considered to be autonomous and also protected by the state, in the Indian case caste and religion and their 'collective' connotations became an important metaphor for colonial civil society, and also a reminder that Indians were incapable of developing a civil society on 'individualist' European lines (Dirks 2001). The notion of community, sifted through the primordialist and essentialist lens, was valorized and an all-India 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' community was constructed.

As Mushirul Hasan suggests for instance:

> '[…] the act of 1909 (Indian Councils Act) was a calculated master-stroke. Separate electorates, along with reservations and weightages, gave birth to a sense of Muslims being a religio-political entity in the colonial image—of being unified, cohesive and segregated from the Hindus. They were homogenized…In consequence, self-styled leaders, mostly drawn from *Ashraf* (honorable) families and without any tangible link with the Muslim masses or *Ajlaf* (Ignoble) were emboldened to represent an 'objectively'-defined community […]' (Hasan 1998, 15).

Thus, *the contemporary common sense that holds religion to be the overarching identity of all Indians can be adequately located in these consequential colonial moves about a century back.* In the same vein, '…caste was configured as an encompassing Indian social system in direct relationship to the constitution of ''Hinduism'' as a systematic, confessional, all-embracing religious identity' (Dirks 2001, 7). This refiguring of caste as a religious system show-cased Indian society as mystical, spiritual and harmonious and was contrasted with the extractive, despotic and therefore irrelevant world of native rulers and states. So in interesting ways *the Indian political was held to be backward and the Indian social to be static and immutable* (Dirks 2001). However, even when the ritual status of caste[6] and themes of functional interdependency (consensus) between various castes were underlined, *caste was also modernizing itself in the encounter with colonial rule*. The classificatory scheme was

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[6] The caste system, as a system of social stratification, is basically premised on three essential features: (a) the principle of *hierarchy* in accordance with the elaborate rules of purity-pollution as registered and legitimized in the canonical religious texts; (b) endogamy (marriage within one's caste); and (c) occupational specialization. The caste system divides the entire population into various castes which are hierarchically arranged, with the Brahmins placed at the top and the dalits at the bottom. Throughout history upwardly mobile lower caste groups have sought to imitate the hierarchical Brahmanical values and to renegotiate their rank in the caste hierarchy, a process which M. N. Srinivas termed as *sanskritisation* (Srinivas 1966). The other route often taken by lower caste groups to subvert caste oppression was through the *Bhakti* (mystic) path. However, both these trajectories offered at best *positional* change but not *structural* change in the system. Overall, caste is a signifier of inequality, dividing the populace into dominant and subordinate castes, and facilitating the monopolization of knowledge, wealth and power by the higher castes.

producing new solidarities on caste lines and giving birth to various caste associations and federations that were putting new demands to the colonial state.

In some readings the recognition of caste by the colonial census was also meant to undermine the anti-colonial nationalist movement usually led by the higher caste religious elites[7]. Consequently, those lower caste groups organizing around caste identity were often branded and reviled by the nationalist religious elite as colonial loyalists. However, the approach taken by lower caste movements then can only be appreciated if we understand the dual contestation they were engaged in. In contrast to the mainstream nationalist movement that was mainly challenging external British colonialism, the lower caste movements - owing to their own social location - were quite willing to underscore and contest the *internal colonization* (Brahmanism) by the upper caste elite as well (Ilaiyah 2001, 125).

In the colonial period one of the most influential articulations in public discourse, from the dalit viewpoint, was forwarded by Dr B. R. Ambedkar[8]. According to him caste was the most powerful vehicle of dominance—ritual as well as political and economic (Thorat and Deshpande 2001). He conceptualized the caste system as a unique institution as no other society had such 'an official gradation laid down, fixed and permanent, *with an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt*' (cited in (Jafferlot 2003, 20)). He articulated the principle of 'graded inequality' where each caste had certain caste groups simultaneously arranged above and below it so that caste system was not a mere division of labor but *a division of laborers* (Rodrigues 2002, 263). In his reading in most other jurisdictions the 'exploiter' and 'exploited' formed distinct and large blocs and solidarity of the exploited was, though difficult, at least possible. In the Indian case however the principle of graded inequality, which ensured that each caste was pitched against the other, political unity among the exploited lower castes was well nigh impossible. Hence, caste in the Ambedkarite reading emerges as not essentially a question of consciousness, but a question of structure, of *power*. In fact, this interpretative conflict has been historically inscribed in the varying responses to the caste question by the mainstream nationalist movement (as exemplified by M. K. Gandhi[9]) and the dalit/bahujan movements (best represented by Ambedkar). For Gandhi caste was a social evil that necessitated social and theological reform for its eradication. Ambedkar, however, was suspicious of 'social' movements as the limited success of Bhakti/Sufi movements was too apparent to him. In contradistinction to Gandhi he insisted on a *political* movement for annihilating it. He also viewed caste system as a system of *exclusion* and brought to the fore the issue of *representation*. No wonder his insistence on the political was seen by many to be fracturing the nationalist consensus.

However, all these contestations were unambiguously informed by colonial interventions that had radically transformed the conceptual landscape and imagery of caste. The mythology and origins of the caste system were reconfigured to suit the colonial interests. According to Jaffrelot, 'while castes have always been perceived in India as kin groups, the racial dimension that caste tended to acquire in the nineteenth century derived from European interpretations of Indian society...[C]olonial ethnography was largely responsible for merging caste and race, and more precisely for equating the 'Aryans' with the upper castes and the Dravidians with the lowest orders of the Indian society' (Jafferlot 2003, 151-52). Moreover, the British administration not only internalized this ethnographic body of knowledge but also propagated it to the Indian masses that interacted with and utilized it multifariously. Various *caste associations* sprouted all over India which sought to improve their rank in the colonial census. They organized themselves into interest groups and as mutual aid structures. Various 'sons of the soil' narratives began to be forged and each group strove hard to construct its own collective history, golden age and a separate identity. In these circumstances Jotiba Phule[10]

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[7]'Besides, the British officials helped the lower castes to get organized because they feared a Brahmanical conspiracy. In Maharashtra, the Chitpawan Brahmins were the first target of the British because of their implication in secret societies which were responsible for violent actions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Madras, the Brahmins were simply perceived as the most active Congress supporters' (Jafferlot 2003, 179).

[8]Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), also known as *Babasaheb*, was an Indian jurist, scholar and the most prominent leader of the Dalits. He was also the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. Born into a poor *mahar* (considered an untouchable caste) family, Ambedkar spent his whole life fighting against social discrimination and the Hindu caste system. He converted to Buddhism eventually and is also credited with providing a spark for the conversion of hundreds of thousands of untouchables to Theravada Buddhism.

[9] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 –1948), who belonged to the *bania* upper-caste, was a prominent political and ideological leader of India during the Indian independence movement. He pioneered the *Satyagraha* and defined it as resistance to tyranny through mass civil resistance. His philosophy was firmly founded upon *ahimsa* (non-violence) and he is popularly called *mahatma* (the great soul) in India.

[10]Mahatma Jotiba Govindrao Phule (1827—1890) was an activist, thinker and social reformer from Maharashtra, India. He belonged to the *mali* agricultural caste. He is most known for his efforts to educate women and the lower castes as well as the masses. In 1873, Phule, along with his followers, formed the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* (Society of Seekers of

formulated the idea of *Bahujan* (majority) and stressed on the need to manufacture *shudra-atishudra* (dalit-shudra) solidarity (Hanlon 1990). Thus, caste had reinvented itself in modern terms and had navigated far from the traditional underpinnings of a system based on consensus and interdependency. It was engaging with the political and competing for power through its substantialization and ethnicization.

Thus, colonial efforts reconfigured Indian society in substantive ways. The Indians were classified into various state categories that derived legitimacy from colonial ethnography. While on the one hand religion was foregrounded as the overarching identity, leading through a complex turn of events and notions of religious nationalism to the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947, it also foregrounded caste as a principle that interrogated this notion of religious monolith from within. In addition, it must be underscored that this politics of identity was circumscribed by the political economy of the colonial state which promised uneven development and unequal opportunities to various groups. Afterall the '…colonial state did involve…a process of differentiation which benefited some Indian groups at the expense of others' (Sarkar 2005, 55). However, this constructivist perspective must be handled with caution as 'society does not allow itself to be boxed up by the state. Social groups challenge state categories, both reacting to and exploiting the inherent complexity of overlapping identities. Thus we cannot stop at simply vilifying official categories. State classifications do not entirely determine social faultlines, and these classifications may be used to the advantage of subordinate groups' (Jenkins 2003, 111). In a way these various categories were invented to manage social tensions, but they also became in reverse to be internalized and used by the excluded to articulate their representation and integration into the system, as will be discussed in the following section. At the very least the colonial interventions and pedagogic exercises transformed the Indian *imaginaire* in an irreversible way.

C. The Recalcitrance of Caste

In the first census conducted in Independent India while religion was retained as an official category caste was summarily dropped. In fact, in the post-colonial phase caste was an embarrassment for the mainstream nationalist and left parties (usually dominated by the upper caste sections) which privileged 'class' and saw caste as a primordial-feudal identity which could either be transcended with the modernization efforts of the state or in the case of the latter once the proletarian revolution had been successfully carried out. Even Ambedkar, inspired by the liberal democratic tradition, saw the caste system as an aberration and called for its 'annihilation' (Ambedkar 2002). However, in contrast to the mainstream nationalist and left parties which wanted to 'privatize' caste, he suggested that annihilation of caste was to be ascertained not by restricting caste to the private sphere, but rather by bringing it to the public sphere for a discussion and including caste realities within the ambit of affirmative action. This is where a dilemma emerged for caste politics: *how to transcend an identity while simultaneously employing it to securing group rights?* How to deal with the passions, myths and iconography that gradually associate with identity constructions and which may not be overcome by resorting to a simple rationalist discourse? Subsequent developments in India have demonstrated the persistence of caste in the public sphere. The focus of many caste movements is now more on addressing social exclusion and altering power equations rather than abandoning of caste identity as such.

Quite unambiguously, in the post-colonial phase, it were the Ambedkarites and the Socialists, especially the factions led by Dr. Rammanohar Lohia[11], which saw the relevance of caste They grasped the correlation between 'caste' and 'class' and interpreted caste as the Indian parallel of the European notion of class. While the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) or Minority categories were more-or-less adequately defined and had subsequently gone through a process of sedimentation, the Other Backward Classes (OBC) remained a vague category and was relegated to the backburner for decades (except in certain states). Since the OBC - that had been institutionalized by the 1950 Constitution and popularized by the first Backward Classes Commission (Kaka Kelkar Commission) - was the only category that could have been employed by the non-dalit shudra lower

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Truth) with the main objective of the organisation being to liberate the *bahujans* [shudras and ati-shudras (dalits)] and to prevent them from exploitation and atrocities committed by the Brahmins.

[11] Rammanohar Lohia (1910-1967) was an Indian freedom fighter and a socialist political leader. Unlike the Marxist theories which became fashionable in the third world in the 50s and 60s, Lohia recognized that caste, more than class, was the huge stumbling block to India's progress. Aside from the procedural revolution of non-violent civil disobedience, bridging the rich-poor divide, the elimination of caste and the revolution against incursions of the big-machine, other revolutions in Lohia's list included tackling man-woman inequality, banishing inequality based on color, and that of preserving individual privacy against encroachment of the collective.

castes in India, the socialists articulated their politics of 'social justice' around the notion of backward classes and sought reservations for lower caste groups in that category. Their politics mainly concentrated on *recognition* and *representation* of the lower castes in the state machinery, as is exemplified by their slogan '*pichda pawe sau mein saath*' (the backward should get sixty out of hundred jobs). Inequality in India, in the Lohiaite discourse, is read to be a product of social backwardness accruing from the functioning of the caste system (see Sheth 2002, 124-125). Ultimately, the efforts of the socialists reached its apotheosis with the partial implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations (quotas in central government jobs for OBCs) by the National Front government in 1990. The subsequent agitations by upper caste-led groups in North India, in the wake of the acceptance recommendations of the Mandal report, exposed the repressed cleavages and contours of power of Indian society. However, the initial euphoria was brought to an uneasy halt by the subsequent Supreme Court judgment (*Indira Sawhney vs. Union of India and Others.*) which upheld the government's move in 1992. It also *inter alia* legitimized the employment of the category of 'caste' for identifying the OBC's.[12] Thus the lower castes could now identify themselves with the statutory category of OBC and the road was cleared after a prolonged gestation period for their consolidation as a political community.

The OBC phenomenon helped the lower castes to organize themselves as an interest group and to challenge what they perceived as the upper caste monopoly of public sector employment. It opened an aperture for new horizontal solidarities to be forged out in contradistinction to the vertical, clientelistic Congress-like patterns. It was a 'silent revolution' suggesting an incremental strategy to social change driven by 'quota politics'. It also marks the transformation of the OBC category from a statist/constitutional one to a vibrant and subjectively experienced new political community. In time the lower caste groups transformed the power relations and became dominant in the North Indian politics due to their demographic weight and successful organization. 'Paradoxically, caste—certainly the politicized version of caste—was responsible for the democratization of Indian democracy' (Jafferlot 2003, 10). In the final analysis, it reveals how constructed state categories can offer spaces for maneuver for subordinate groups and act as tools of social empowerment.

PART THREE

The Pasmanda Movement

A. The Emergence of the Pasmanda Counterpublic[13]

The *pasmanda movement* (henceforth PM) refers to the lower caste/class movement within Indian Muslim society and was propelled by the enactment of the *pasmanda* identity in the state of Bihar in 1998. 'Pasmanda' a Persian word meaning 'those who have been left behind' alludes to the dalit and OBC Muslims, also otherwise called *ajlaf* (base) and *arzal* (lowly). They are further subdivided into various occupational and endogamous *biradaris* (jatis). The PM aspires to organize these various lower castes, which form about 85% of Indian Muslim population, in order to challenge the hegemony of *ashraf* (honorable or upper castes) sections over the community and state institutions that operate for the benefit of Muslims[14].

One significant motivation for the recent emergence of the PM has been the inclusion of about 80 Muslim groups as 'backward' castes in the Mandal Commission Report. This was evidently a carry-over of Lohiaite influence as he often referred to the 'backward class among Muslims' in his writings.[15] This acknowledgement of the presence of caste within Muslims by the state was in

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[12] 'Mandal judgment of the SC in 1992 upheld GOI order of 1990 with the stipulation that socially advanced persons and sections (SAP's), or the so-called 'creamy layer' of castes identified as BC should be excluded…It also upheld that caste is a class…The Mandal judgment also held that, for purposes of inclusion in lists of SEdBCs, economic backwardness/poverty is relevant only if and when it arises from social backwardness, and that economic backwardness *per se* is not a criterion for identification of a class as backward in accordance with the Constitution' (Krishnan 2006, 19).

[13] The pasmanda counterpublic is also being archived by the Pluralism Knowledge Programme, India. See: http://pluralism.in/2011/02/introducing-the-pasmanda-counterpublic-archive/

[14] Also, *ashraf* also refers either to those upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam during the reign of imperial Islam in India or the Muslims of a foreign extraction. The *ajlaf* and *arzal* on the other hand refer to local converts to Islam usually from lower caste Hindu locations.

[15] Lohia: 'The degradation of women, Adivasis, Sudras, Harijans and *backward classes among Muslims* and others must be traced to the caste system' [(Sheth 2002, 124) emphasis added]

opposition to most articulations that conceptualized the caste system to be a part of 'Hindu' religion. The presence of caste in Indian Islam was especially seen as an embarrassment by many elite Muslims who often elided it by citing the egalitarian thrust of classical Islam. However, these claims often privileged normative or *theological* reality over *sociological* reality. Obviously, there is a caste system in Muslim society which also mirrors that of Hindu society, though it differs somewhat in its cultural aspects (I. Ahmad 1978). It could not have been otherwise according to Bose (1975) who suggests that since the productive roles of agricultural society in mediaeval India were so firmly embedded in caste practises that it was almost impossible to break free of its economic logic even by groups belonging to Islam or Christianity that otherwise declared their hostility to the ideology of the caste system. In fact, caste could be conceptualised as a system of social exclusion and power, as a mode of social stratification, which applies to almost all communities and regions in India, even when it may differ in its details and incidence across various jurisdictions. Overall, the Mandal moment fractured the neat and monolithic construction of an 'all-India Muslim community' and also propelled the emergence and further consolidation of lower caste Muslim politics.

However, it will be a-historical to view the recent emergence of the caste movement within Muslim society as merely a Mandalisation of Muslim politics as some authors are prone to do (Mahajan and Jodhka, 2009). Caste was definitely present within Indian Muslim society in the medieval period (Aquil 2009; Falahi 2007) and the modern history of caste movements among Indian Muslims can be traced back at least from the second decade of the twentieth century with the formation of Falah-ul-Momineen in Calcutta in 1914. Later, the All India Momin Conference (AIMC) was formed in Rohtas (Bihar) in 1926 and it strived to consolidate the lower caste Muslims (H. N. Ansari 1989, 2-3). It contested the elite-upper caste Muslim (*ashraf*) hegemony and saw it as the force behind the formation of Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and its 'communal' articulation of politics. It opposed the two-nation theory that IUML proposed and sought to support the Congress instead.

However, the tragedy of Partition could not be averted. The 1946 election involved a 'restricted electorate' and the results were heavily skewed in favor of the Muslim League dominated by aristocratic upper caste Muslims.[16] After Independence, there was a difference of opinion within the AIMC over to retain its independent identity or to associate closely with the Congress. Abdul Qayyum Ansari argued for the latter while Maulana Asim Bihari wanted to preserve an independent and separate identity. A. Q. Ansari's position carried the day and AIMC was co-opted by the Congress and soon the movement was fragmented and its momentum lost (Anwar 2004, 18). In hindsight it could be said that A. Q. Ansari failed to see through the caste/class composition and the latent Brahmanism of the Congress party and the discomfort it had with any form of lower caste mobilization. After this phase the lower caste Muslim politics remained subdued and largely 'silent', in part due to the general anti-Muslim sentiment prevalent at the national level produced by the partition holocaust, only to be reinvigorated in the decade of 1990's due to the Mandal development and the formation of a microscopic and articulate middle class among lower caste Muslim communities[17].

The state of Bihar, being the socialist laboratory, was the frontrunner in this respect. It saw the emergence of the All India Backward Muslim Morcha (AIBMM) as early as 1994, led by Dr. Ejaz Ali, a professional doctor. His key demand was the scrapping of the 1950 Presidential Order which ejected the dalit Muslims/Christians from the SC list thus making these groups ineligible for the affirmative action and other welfare policies accruing to the SC category[18]. However, the AIBMM split in 1998 over the issue of the inclusion of the upper-caste Muslim 'sheikh' caste under a new category 'neo-shaikh'[19] in the OBC category by the Bihar government. While Dr. Ejaz Ali supported the move, another faction led by Ali Anwar, a journalist saw this as a dilution of reservation and decided to

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[16] Sumit Sarkar mentions about the '…extremely limited franchise (about 10% of the population in the provinces, less than 1% for the Central Assembly)…Congress leaders...quietly accepted the election of the Constituent Assembly by the existing provincial legislatures based on limited voting rights…The League won its demand for Pakistan without its claim to represent the majority of Muslims being really tested, either in fully democratic elections or…in sustained mass movements in the face of official repression…' (S. Sarkar 2005, 427).

[17] Gyanendra Pandey has discussed the progressive role of the middle class in subaltern communities, like dalits in India and the Afro-Americans in the United States, in articulating the politics of these suppressed communities (Pandey 2009). I see a similar role of the lower caste Muslim middle class in the articulation of pasmanda politics.

[18] The Presidential Order of 1950 had ejected out the dalits in minority religions from the SC list. However, the dalit Sikhs and Dalit Buddhists were later included in SC list in 1956 and 1990 respectively, leaving only dalit Muslims and Christians out of the list. This was articulated by the AIBMM as a case of discrimination on the grounds of religion and in violation of the principle of 'secularism' enshrined in the Constitution.

[19] Since the inclusion of lower caste Muslims in OBC list in 1990, the upper caste Muslims have tried to either raise the demand of separate reservations for all Muslims or to enter the actually existing OBC list in order to avail of the benefits of affirmative action. This has been seriously challenged by pasmanda muslims who have interrogated the suabalternity of ashraf muslims and have argued that they are not socially and educationally backward and hence ineligible for reservations.

move out of AIBMM. Ali Anwar, along with his supporters, then formed the All India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz (AIPMM) in 1998.[20] 'Pasmanda' which is a Persian word meaning 'those who have fallen behind' soon caught the imagination of the people and the intellectuals. Ali Anwar forwarded the first major coherent articulation of 'pasmanda politics' in his book *Masavaat Ki Jung* (Anwar 2001).

Subsequently, the AIPMM organized a Dalit Muslim Mahapanchayat in New Delhi on 4 December 2004 where Ali Anwar clearly spelled out the agenda of the organization. The main demands were the scrapping of 1950 presidential order and reservations for Dalit Muslims under the SC category, protection for cottage industries and artisans, and share in political power (Reporter 2004, 5). He has been consistently raising the issue of negligible representation of pasmanda muslims in political parties (Anwar 2005, 9-13). Though the self-perception of the AIPMM is that of a *social movement*, it is keen in forming a political party for pasmanda muslims, sooner or later. However, that party, it is held, will not be an exclusivist party like the Muslim League, but one that will incorporate dalits and pasmanda sections from other religions as well (Anwar 2005, 4).

Broadly, the PM has challenged the hegemony of the upper caste *ashraf* Muslims (I. Ahmad 2003) and pointed out the conflation of their interests with the politics around Islam and 'minority rights' in general. It also brings a qualitatively new angle to the traditional practices of mobilization around singular primordial identities. It builds on *both* caste and religion and therefore complicates the processes of identification in India. In the following three sections I will further explore this point by foregrounding the discussion on religious pluralism, social reform and social justice as conducted within the Pasmanda counterpublic.

B. Religious Pluralism: Engagements with Secularism and Communalism

In most of the frames employed to make sense of communalism *the plausible connection of caste to communal violence* scarcely emerges as a problematic in itself[21]. Quite in contrast, in various dalit/bahujan writings 'caste' emerges as the central contradiction of the Indian society and religious communalism is often seen as the weapon of the privileged castes/classes to check subaltern assertion (Rajshekhar 2007; Teltumbde 2002; Ilaiah 1998). According to Dilip Menon, 'The inner violence within Hinduism explains to a considerable extent the violence directed outwards against Muslims once we concede that the former is historically prior. The question needs to be: how has the deployment of violence against an internal Other (defined primarily in terms of inherent inequality), the dalit, come to be transformed at certain conjunctures into one of aggression against an external Other (defined primarily in terms of inherent difference), the Muslim? *Is communalism a deflection of the central issue of violence and inegalitarianism within Hindu society?*' (2006, 2). In this reading communalism shares an intimate relation with the repressed histories of caste. This is supported by the fact that from 1850 to 1947 communal violence has always followed periods of mobility and assertion on the part of the dalits and other subordinated castes (D. M. Menon 2006, 8). One recent study validated it for the recent pogrom in Gujarat (2002) too when it traces the historical roots of this violence in the anti-reservation riots in Gujarat in the 1980s (Shani 2007).

In fact, it has been pointed out that in India the 'state' and 'civil society' are overwhelmingly dominated by the upper caste elite groups (J. Alam 2005, 354-55). This leaves the 'political society' as the privileged site for the socially excluded caste groups to operate. If we put the democratization of caste and subaltern assertion in political society under the rubric of 'politics of social justice' and if we contrast it with the antithetical movements of communal mobilizations in India (represented foremost by the champions of *Hindutva*), we then perhaps arrive at the central problematic, the heart of the political battle raging in India today. As one political commentator puts it:

> 'Hindu nationalist mobilization...has undermined democratic process...By contrast; the lower castes have broadened the parameters of democracy by demanding greater rights and opportunities. The violence associated with caste conflicts is generally instigated by the upper castes to prevent subordinated groups from acquiring greater power. Lower castes have not retaliated with comparable campaigns of hatred. Nor do they conceive their identities in an exclusionary fashion. Lower caste movements are strengthened by forming coalitions with other groups that seek to challenge underrepresentation and inequality. *Indeed, over the past decade, lower caste consciousness has been one of the major antidotes to the growth of Hindu nationalism*...Where caste-based reforms would foster a more equitable system; Hindu nationalism would do the opposite.' (A. Basu 1997, 395-96).

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[20] Discussion (Recorded) in Patna with the founding members of the AIPMM, 10th August 2009.
[21] For a brief mapping of the various frames see: (Kakar 2000)

Moreover, it can be argued that this battle has only got more sharpened with the onset of globalization and the initiation of economic reforms in India. Thomas Hansen sees the rise of the Hindu Right as a 'conservative revolution' against forces both from within (the growing assertiveness of Dalits and Sudra castes) and from without (the threat of liberalization and the incorporation into a global mass culture) (Hansen 1999).

One gets a sense that in most studies on communalism 'the Muslim', as an undivided cultural whole, is often projected as the *object* of inter-religious violence. However, the pasmanda discourse complicates this logic by foregrounding the complicity of the upper caste Muslim elite in sustaining and reproducing the communal discourse that is often instrumental in inciting episodes of communal violence. There is a feeling that the game of competitive communalism between 'majority' and 'minority' religious communities has been carefully engineered and crafted by their elites (mostly male and upper caste) to hoodwink the common people by insincere communal/religious slogans in order to preserve and perpetuate their own class/caste interests. 'Indeed, the constitutional provisions…for the minorities in certain areas were used by the state, nervous about its inability to control…discrimination, to silence a section of the minority elite by privileges, and symbolic sinecures' (Kaviraj 1997, 22). In fact, there is a stress on the dialectical relationship between 'majority' and 'minority' fundamentalism and the pasmanda movement proposes to contest minority fundamentalism from within in order to wage a decisive battle against majority fundamentalism at the national level (Alam 2003). Ali Anwar opines thus:

> 'We see that the politics of communalism, fuelled by both Hindu and Muslim elites, is aimed at dividing us, making us fight among ourselves, so that the elites continue to rule over us as they have been doing for centuries. This is why we in the Mahaz have been seeking to steer our people from emotional politics to politics centered on issues of survival and daily existence and social justice, and for this we have been working with non-Muslim Dalit and Backward Caste movements and groups to struggle jointly for our rights and to oppose the politics of communalism fuelled by Hindu and Muslim 'upper' caste elites.' (Anwar and Sikand 2005).

While 'secularism' appears to be a normative ideal, there is profound dissatisfaction with how it translates on the political turf. The inaugural issue of the AIPMM's journal *Pasmanda Awaaz* proclaims: '[…] secularism is not only our motto but rather it's an article of faith for us' (AIPMM 2004, 2). However, this initial enthusiasm subsides in other writings. Anwar for instance writes: 'Now to keep on reiterating secularism day in and day out won't do. One will also have to be democratic. Some people only know how to get our votes. Now they will have to learn to give us votes.' (Anwar 2005, 4).

If South Asian Islam is informed by the hierarchical values of caste system then its appeal as an option for conversion is also perhaps parochialized. As we know in the recent political violence, especially in Gujarat (2002) and Orissa (2008-09), the issue of religious conversions and consequent depletion of Hindu numbers was foregrounded by the right wing 'Hindu' groups. Historically speaking, especially since the Ambedkarite intervention, conversion has been articulated as a tool for political and social empowerment by dalit groups. Ambedkar is known to have famously said in a conference at Yeola in 1935: 'I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu' (cited in (Michael 2005, 168)). The logic behind this position has been conflating the caste system with Hinduism and not realising that caste has been one of the dominant principles of social stratification in India which, as the lower caste movements in non-Hindu religions now emphasise, has been equally legitimised by their religious traditions and textual production (Jodhka 2004; Anwar 2001).

C. The Question of Social Reform

The pasmanda movement has so far interrogated both the *textual* production of Indian Islam and its *lived* reality, from the vantage point of both normative Islam and the requirements of modern notions of democracy and social justice. This has initiated discussions within the Muslim community that offer an aperture for the process of internal community reform to set in (K. A. Ansari 2011). Masood Falahi's work in particular has attempted to *historicize* Indian Islam and offered an early interrogation of the supposed egalitarianism of textual Islam in India (Falahi 2007). It is a rich compendium of *fatwas* (religious opinions) and positions of the *ulema* (religious scholars) of various schools of Islam existing in India today and reveals the caste bias in their interpretative efforts.

These kinds of critiques reveal the Islamic interpretative domain to be a *contested* one as opposed to the 'literalist' or 'fundamentalist' frame of Islam as being essentially immutable and static. They also offer a hope that the fundamentalist articulations of Islam could be replaced by more location-

informed and contextualized renderings of Islam.

The pasmanda discursive space is peppered with stories and narratives about discrimination and oppression meted out to the lower caste Muslims at the hands of upper caste counterparts. Most of the pasmanda communities are subjected to a complex culture of humiliation through circulation of several stories and jokes by the upper castes where even the titles of their castes are used in derogatory terms and often as an abuse.[22]

There is also anxiety over *sectarian clashes* within Indian Islam (Shia-Sunni, Deobandi-Barelvi etc.) and these clashes are often seen to be fomented by the elite Muslims to jeopardize the efforts of lower caste Muslims to organize and improve their situation.

Another recurrent theme in these narratives is the existence of separate graveyards for Muslims of various castes (especially higher) and the clashes that have followed the attempts at burial for low caste Muslims in the same (Anwar 2003). Also, there is a condemnation of the practice, still continuing in various jurisdictions, of lower caste Muslims not being allowed to occupy the front rows in the mosques during prayers (Anwar 2001, 64-68). In one of his pieces Ali Anwar raises a number of questions for the Muslim leadership. Most of the questions are related to dowry, women's condition in India and the paradox of the theory and practice of Muslim representative bodies such as the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) (Anwar 2003). Some have even argued in favor of the formation of a separate Pasmanda Personal Law Board.

At first sight the discussions in the various pasmanda forums seem divergent from the usual emotive issues raised by mainstream Muslim discourse. This does offer promise of a social and hermeneutical reform from *within* rather than one imposed by the state from without. It is expected that the problematizing of these concerns by the pasmanda counterpublic in the public sphere will persuade the ashraf sections to introspect and to bring about an attitudinal change by enabling them to be more aware of their own discursivity. Afterall, it could be argued that a *negotiated* social reform between various players in the community is far more sustainable than the ones imposed from above, however progressive they may sound to be.

D. Social Justice, Globalization and Development

As indicated earlier, the PM has preferred to work within a framework of 'social justice' rather than that of 'minority rights'. In their pursuit of *democratization* they have concentrated on intra-group inequality which often gets elided in minority rights frame. There is an acute sense that the Muslim political and religious leadership, dominated by the *ashraf* sections, has failed to articulate the concerns of pasmanda muslims in any substantive manner. In the pasmanda narrative *ashraf* is the *other* and there is visible discomfort with the 'Muslim' or 'minority' identity as it is felt that they rather easily conflate with *ashrafiya* concerns and interests. As Ali Anwar says:

> Now the time is ripe for pasmanda muslims to craft their own identity. The identity of pasmanda muslims was hitherto obscured in the name of minority. Now we fear the word minority and feel that it is a fake word. In the name of minority either someone terrorizes us or someone snatches away our rights. In real terms we are the majority (bahujan) in this country…There is a bond of pain between pasmanda-dalit muslims and the pasmanda–dalit sections of other religions. This bond of pain is the supreme bond. We face the same issues. That is why we have to shake hands with the dalit and pasmanda sections of other religions (AIPMM 2005, 9).

However, even though *ashrafiya* is pitched as the dominant 'other' there is sympathy for the less well-to-do among those sections (H. Ahmad 2010). There are also stories of benevolence and kindness of some persons from upper caste location registered in the movement's journal (Correspondent 2008, 19). Ali Anwar has also tried to parochialize the process of 'othering' by articulating a more affirmative self-definition at times. For instance:

> 'We are not setting the Dalit/Backward Caste Muslims against the so-called ashraf Muslims. Our movement is not directed against them. Rather, we seek to strengthen and empower our own people, to enable them to speak for themselves and to secure their rights and justice from the state. We welcome well-meaning people of so-called ashraf background as well as non-Muslims who are concerned about the plight of our people to join us in our struggle.' (Anwar and Sikand 2005).

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[22] For a very rich sociological account of this phenomenon see (Anwar 2001, 37-70).

Quite unarguably the driving force of the movement remains the politics of 'social justice' or 'quota politics'. Historically, Muslims benefited from group policies during the colonial period in the form of reserved legislative seats (1909), as well as separate electorates and a quota of 25% of civil service positions (introduced in 1926) (Jenkins 2003). However, Muslim reservations were a casualty of partition which witnessed intense religious-communal violence. Moreover, the founding fathers of the Indian nation were committed to a 'secular' republic and the vision of secularism was incongruent with reservations on the basis of religion. Thus, in the post-independence phase reservations for Muslims were abandoned in favor of welfare schemes for them owing to their 'minority' status.

However, the Mandal Commission Report by listing 82 Muslim lower caste groups as 'backward' unleashed the long suppressed debate whether reservations should be articulated on the lines of religion or caste among Indian Muslims. Those arguing the former, mostly upper caste Muslims, underlined the egalitarian ethic of Islam and dubbed caste-based reservations to be divisive and disruptive of the unity of Muslims as a 'community'. They argued for reservations for Muslims as a whole, or 'total Muslim reservations' as it came to be called in pasmanda political discourse. Those arguing the latter, mostly lower caste Muslims, highlighted that the social reality of Indian Muslims was caste-informed and reservations should legitimately be on the basis of caste. They argued that 'total Muslim reservations' was a ploy of the advanced *ashraf* sections to corner the benefits of reservations. They moreover called it a 'communal quota' and highlighted the dangers of religious polarization that it may result in (Anwar 2004, 3). This battle between these two positions is writ large in the subsequent debates that ensued over various government reports following the Mandal Moment: Sacchar Committee Report, P.S. Krishnan Report to the Andhra Pradesh Government and the Ranganath Mishra Commission Report (See (K. A. Ansari 2010a) for a detailed discussion on Muslim reservations).

Moreover, a greater part of the population that could be clubbed under the rubric 'pasmanda' usually works in the 'unorganized sector' of the Indian economy as skilled or manual labor and shares an ambivalent, or rather at most times hostile, relation with the process of globalization. The globalization and privatization of Indian economy, accepted as a major policy since the economic reforms of 1991, has witnessed massive erosion of traditional employment and disruption in cottage industries without actually creating commensurable new opportunities or avenues for retraining of skilled labor in modern (or postmodern) sectors of the 'new economy'. This exclusion is reflected in the pasmanda discourse, at least at the rhetorical level, even when the articulation is not consistent in nature.

> 'Our politics is related to economics. Our artisans are dying of hunger. Many are committing suicide. Tailors, dyers, vegetable vendors, butchers, cotton workers…If the mattress is made of foam and so is the quilt how will the cotton worker earn? If vegetables and fruits are imported how will vendors make a living? In Seelampur, we were told even embroidery is being handled by computers…The sari industry in Benares and Mau is in crisis. Threads are coming from China…We don't get electricity. Entire villages in Bihar have been depopulated. In Delhi there is a Sitamarhi colony and a Nalanda colony. We migrate because our livelihoods are vanishing.' (Anwar 2005).

The social base of pasmanda leadership and the disproportionate presence of lower castes in the unorganized sector coerce them to negotiate and address the material conditions of life. Though a concern with the increasing exclusion of the pasmanda from the functioning of an altered economy is reflected in the discourse, there seems to be no attempt yet made to offer a robust critique of the political economy of the contemporary era. But perhaps it is too much to ask from the movement at such a nascent stage.

Concluding summary

The broad objective of this paper was to flag the value of various discourses circulating in the subaltern counterpublics in relation to the discussions on pluralism and democratic social transformation. The idea was to enrich the debates within civil society, through a particular case study of the pasmanda counterpublic, and to open possibilities for the engagement of civil society with these new sites of social transformation much more seriously than it has done so far. This seems more relevant when one considers the empirical force and the appeal these sites hold for their respective constituencies. In this pursuit Part One dealt with the conceptual matrix that I found useful and relevant in making sense of the 'pasmanda counterpublic' that I subsequently explored in Part Two and Part Three respectively.

This paper began with outlining the insights of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who have offered an anti-essentialist and relational view of identification and have stressed on the constitutive role of power in identity formation. They have also put their finger on the immanent limits of any discussion of pluralism outside 'the political' envisaged as a field necessarily marked with social antagonism and discursive contestations. In their account power is an empty place temporarily stabilized and occupied as an outcome of the process of hegemony. In this respect they have taken issues with the views of the 'rationalists' and 'communitarians' and have argued that both the frames have been unable to address the question of value pluralism and passion adequately. While the rationalists, with a robust sense of normative rationality, tried to solve the problem by relegating the question of comprehensive views to the private sphere, the communitarians on the other hand have foregrounded a substantive notion of good life and community which is arguably not compatible with the modern democratic language game (liberty and equality). In a way both have been unable to counter the forces of fundamentalism and the ascendance of right wing populism in various locations. In contrast Laclau and Mouffe have proposed a constructivist notion of political community (citizenship) which is circumscribed by a denormativized process of *democratization* where the content of the signifiers 'liberty' and 'equality' is not inhabited beforehand but is precariously fixed through hegemonic struggles. Such a frame obviously offers more space in engaging with many instances of 'unruly' political behavior or the various 'awkward' translations of modernity that we find in jurisdictions outside the western world. Hence, the question of pluralism cannot be settled or comprehended in an objective sense but it can only act as a theoretical horizon within which one can conduct politics in a field marked by social antagonism. Pluralism is therefore as much an empty signifier whose content cannot be fixed beforehand but which will be contingently produced by the hegemonic struggle itself. Apart from the arguments forwarded by Laclau and Mouffe, the notions of governmentality and relationality of the state (Michel Foucault), the relation between public sphere and subaltern counterpublics (Nancy Fraser), and the distinction between 'civil society' and 'political society' (Partha Chatterjee) were laid down as a conceptual context for launching a discussion on the pasmanda counterpublic.

It is remarkable how the state classificatory exercises for governance and unprecedented external events have been instrumental in creating discursive ruptures that have enabled the enactment of the pasmanda identity, and how it has been innovatively employed by the pasmanda muslims to address a range of concerns and problems. Indeed, the pasmanda activists and ideologues are increasingly manufacturing a public for its discourse through its networks. It is hoped that once these networks are sedimented they will press the hegemonic groups to listen more carefully to what they are saying. Overall, I believe the articulations of the movement, that I have outlined in Part Three, must be taken seriously as they are informing the debates on pluralism, democracy and development in India in remarkable ways. These are also concerns that animate the debates within Indian civil society as well.

In the context of pluralism the question of communal violence has posed a persistent threat in India. The limits of the twin strategy resorted so far in containing and challenging religious fundamentalism and violence, namely the 'secularist' (inspired by Nehru) and the 'reformist' (inspired by Gandhi) (Omvedt 1995, 4), have been brought to sharp focus in the episodic violence of the last two decades. With their distinct points of emphases both the strategies however fall short of contaminating the neat articulation of religious communities. Both strategies in curious ways escort the *naturalization* of religious identity as a political community. This is not to suggest that religion should be seen as an unwelcome gatecrasher in the public sphere. Religion has always been political and perhaps shall ever remain so. But the insistent foregrounding of religious identity in the modern public sphere, or its ethnicization or substantialization, obscures at least two features in the Indian context. One, in the Nandian distinction of religion as *faith* and religion as *ideology*, the former is often relegated to the background[23]. This would be seen as a tragic loss by many who value this aspect of religion dearly. Secondly, it obscures the differentiation and diversity within religious groupings and brushes aside the critiques of suppressed caste and gender groups who might perceive the politics arranged around religion to be disproportionally benefiting the upper caste/class (usually male) sections at their expense.

In this respect the PM, by posing an internal challenge to the *ashraf* hegemony, subverts any notion of a Muslim monolith and presents the community as a contested terrain. Secondly, by forging horizontal alliances with similarly placed caste groups in 'majority' and other 'minority' religious

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[23]Ashis Nandy: 'By faith I mean religion as a way of life, a tradition which is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural.' 'By ideology I mean religion as a sub-national, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic, interests' (Nandy 2002, 62-63).

groups it seriously disrupts vertical solidarities on religious lines and therefore holds the promise of parochializing the forces of religious communalism that take cue from such solidarities. Thirdly, by raising the question of subjectivity and location in the interpretation of religious texts it undercuts all fundamentalist and literal articulations that offer non-negotiable versions of Islam, and may enable counter-hermeneutics of 'religious truth' in future. In a way the various tensions introduced by the PM in Indian Muslim society may also in the long run loosen up naturalized understandings of community and frozen versions of Islam. I think these are openings that must be seized and worked upon as they may have significant bearing on both the practices as well as theorizations of toleration and pluralism in India.

Moreover, by contaminating religion with caste, the PM is complicating and disrupting the official notions of 'social justice' and affirmative action (organized around caste) and 'minority rights' (articulated primarily around religion). Where to box the lower caste Muslims: in caste or in religion, in social justice policies or in policies designed for minorities? This complication has serious repercussions on the politics of representation, recognition and integration and thereby opens up new debates on standard categories like 'citizenship', 'minority rights' or 'affirmative action' which are associated with the democratic imagination. Overall, these debates within the Muslim community over the validity of caste or religion for reservation purposes 'shatter dichotomized conflicts in the realm of ideas by constantly drawing into question the boundaries of castes and religions and their relationship to each other. In this sense, inter-group tensions do not disappear but become certainly more complex and arguably less tense than conflicts between clear cut and unambiguous groups…Contemporary Muslim…protest groups are shaped by the structure of the state reservation categories but also demonstrate agency by challenging static classification' (Jenkins 2003, 125).

Also, the pressures that the PM has put on the Constitutional consensus on minority rights must be seen as productive for democracy and be adequately problematized. One obvious problem with 'minority rights' is that it is biased towards recognition of *institutionalized* cultures under the pretext of inter-cultural inequality. Consequently, intra-cultural inequality often takes a back seat. Moreover, the production of 'minority' assumes a parallel construction of a 'majority' within the confines of the nation-state. One may ask if it is the appropriate moment for a re-evaluation of this stress on the robust distinction between 'majority' and 'minority' in an increasingly fragmented world. As Connolly suggests, '...it is clear that the speed and scope of capitalism helps to foment a veritable *minoritization* of the world, as numerous constituencies of multiple types cross old borders and enter into relations with *a "majority" culture that often makes up an actual minority of the populace*' (Chambers and Carver 2008, 323; emphasis mine). I think that caste movements, by introducing the question of diversity and inequality within all religious units, have dispersed the sense of 'thick' community and this is an important development in the context of pluralism.

Lastly, since most of the pasmanda muslims come from artisan and other occupational castes or form the large army of landless labor, they can mostly be located in the 'unorganized sector' of the Indian economy. Very often they are tied to small producer units and collectives who are battling for survival in the privatized and liberalized economic environment. The politicization and mobilization of the pasmanda muslims could therefore also have an impact on the preferred trajectory of development that Indian policy makers have opted for.

We have seen briefly how the pasmanda counterpublic informs the key debates on pluralism and democratic social transformation in India today. Other subaltern counterpublics may approach the same concerns from a different angle. But what is striking is that these are also themes that the civil society organizations have been engaging with for quite some time now with mixed success. However, if the business of CSOs is with 'people'—especially those who are marginalized, exploited and subordinated—then it is rather curious that a vast majority of them inhabits the counterpublics that are operating in the political society. The very empirical force of this fact must persuade civil society to be critically self-reflexive and engage with these new sites of social transformation in order to make their frames and strategies more sustainable, effective and inclusive.

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T +31-30-2390100 | **F** +31-30-2340 738
pluralismworkingpapers@uvh.nl | www.uvh.nl