

Introduction

Policies and their outcomes might have paradoxical effects, whatever the initial intentions of the policy makers. In a world which is progressively dominated by a variety of fundamentalist religious and ethnic political powers, one should recognise and give adequate due to the intentions, as well as some of the achievements, of multicultural policies. However, one cannot give such policies the full 'three cheers', as some of their so-called solutions have exacerbated and enhanced some of the problems they were supposed to tackle. Multiculturalist policies have differed in the various western countries that have adopted them. However, in many ways they share basic characteristics. In this paper I am going to focus on the case study of Britain, at a time and in a political climate where there are growing political pressures to abandon at least part of the foundations of multiculturalism and move in a more assimilationist direction. At the same time, multiculturalism has shown itself to be a remarkably flexible method of partially absorbing the challenge of feminism and providing sections of the British state with a platform to conduct a dialogue with minorities in the state.

Britain, it is said, is one of the most multicultural and racially mixed societies in the world. Yet it is also home to some of the most impoverished and racially segregated minority communities, who appear to be led by conservative religious leaderships. Mostly found in northern cities, their presence is seldom visible except when it erupts violently on the national stage. During the summer of 2000 there were riots in the northern cities of Oldham and Bradford, by both young Muslim men protesting violently against their racialised and subordinated status, and young White working-class men heavily affected by extreme right-wing political organisations like the British National Party (which had had, for the first time, a representative elected to a local council).

The Ouseley Report into the causes of the rioting¹ castigated the leaderships of these communities as being socially conservative, timid, and incapable of real leadership. The assumption was that 'traditional' leaderships had maintained a stranglehold on their communities. Having failed to assimilate, they must now be made to do so, under the banner of 'social cohesion'.

A number of other factors that cannot be examined here, such as long term economic decline, and the rise of identity politics and religious fundamentalist movements, undoubtedly contributed to the acute tensions in these communities. Absent from most discussions of the riots and their causes is the role of the state in entrenching both conservative and fundamentalist men (who in this case only partly overlap) in positions of leadership or with enormous access to decision making on behalf of 'their' communities. The policy under which this process has taken place is usually known as multiculturalism. It has influenced the delivery of the services particularly of the local state in areas such as education, social services and policing. It has also affected forms of political representation and the ways in which a layer of Asian (and possibly African-Caribbean) political leadership has been created.

This paper describes some of the ways in which multicultural policies have affected the lives of women from minority ethnic communities, and indicates the reasons why the state, at both national and local levels, has failed to provide a democratic discourse based on citizenship rights as a way of incorporating new minorities into the political and social mainstream.

What is multiculturalism?

The term 'multiculturalism' is often used in two or three different ways that are conflated. One way in which it is used is to describe a society in which people of many different origins live - this can be used both as a factual description or as a normative one, describing a certain kind of a political, social and cultural ideal. Multiculturalism is also used as a description of a social policy which respects cultural differences, as opposed to a model of social integration which depends on full assimilation into the 'British way of life'.

A document laying out education policy for the London area in 1977 expresses the basic tenets of its more plural aspects:

The authority serves the city where the presence of people of diverse cultures with different patterns of belief, behaviour and language, is of great importance ... Recognising this, we have reaffirmed our determination to sustain a policy which will ensure that, within a society which is cohesive, though not uniform, cultures are respected, differences recognised and individual identities ensured. ²

Yasmin Ali's description of the actual practice of local government is rather more trenchant:

Multiculturalism has provided the ideological justification of - and coherence for - a range of policies designed to contain communities and isolate them from - or mediate their limited entry to - the local political arena. It has also had the purpose, as far as governments of both the Labour and Conservative parties have been concerned, of depoliticizing 'race' as an unpredictable populist factor in British politics. ³

Clearly, after the riots of 2000, but also as a result of political shifts both in post cold war Europe and since the rise of extreme right political parties globally post 9-11, sections of the British government have decided that multiculturalist policies in their traditional form are no longer functional. A move towards more assimilationist policies has been launched, signalled by the Home Secretary David Blunkett's White Paper, 'Secure Borders, Safe Haven'. ⁴ At the same time, the need to find Muslim allies in the 'war on terror' has intensified the Prime Minister's search for a (largely male) leadership to engage in dialogue, in an attempt to coopt their public support for the war effort.

Asians in Britain

Most comment on the Ouseley Report, and other analyses of the riots, assume that Asians in Britain have always been entrenched in social conservatism. Yet even in Bradford, in the north of England, where large numbers of British Muslims mobilised around the Rushdie affair, research shows that many first generation Asians had high expectations for their

daughters. Haleh Afshar's interviews with three generations of Asian women⁵ describe how many first generation Muslim women who came to this country hoped that their daughters would have a chance of a good education and job prospects. By and large, they also wanted them to maintain their *izzat* (honour), learn to be good Muslims and marry appropriately. But how these values were addressed varied widely. Some argued with or persuaded their husbands to extend their daughter's freedoms in marrying outside the *biradari* (clan), working outside the home, learning to drive and so on.

In other areas, such as Southall in London, settlement from the 1960s onwards in an expanding economy ensured that women had high levels of paid employment outside the home. Men and women who immigrated to Britain had often been politicised by their time in the armed forces, as well as by their participation in anti-colonial, social and political movements in their countries of origin. Yet multiculturalist policies seldom recognised the political histories of the new migrants, or the complex decisions they had made, even though they were active in trade unions and rapidly, in spite of facing acute racism, began to participate in local politics, being elected as councillors in local government and so on. The policies concentrating on the socialisation of these communities have often had the effect of homogenising and stereotyping them.

To illustrate some of the inherent issues of multiculturalist policies in Britain, I would like now to discuss in more detail the character and effects of such policies in education and the forced marriage debate.

Multiculturalism in schools

In so far as multicultural policies recognised diversity and promoted pluralism, they have been and continue to be valuable tools for helping children understand the many different cultures amongst which they live. However, there were problems with the way in which the policy was implemented, since it sometimes enforced cultural and religious difference rather than simply valuing pluralism. Too often the depiction of the different cultures was done in such a way that it constructed a unified and homogeneous picture, both of the culture and the community. This has had the effect not only of reinforcing cultural stereotypes, any contestation of or deviation from which is perceived as 'inauthentic', but also of promoting group or communal identity.

Children from minorities sometimes feel that they are meant to 'represent' an entire culture or religion. Positive stereotyping can be bewildering for them to handle, just as negative stereotyping could attack their self-esteem. The different backgrounds of the many children who are mixed race or nationality (or religion) is not given sufficient room for recognition. The search for 'authentic voices from the community' has meant that textbooks teaching religion have been produced by fundamentalist religious groups, who are seen as the authentic transmitters of those religious traditions. For instance, the Islamic Foundation in Leicester has produced textbooks on Islam and prescriptions governing every aspect of Muslim life

which have been endorsed by the Commission for Racial Equality. Similarly, the syllabus on Hinduism was written by the VHP, an international pan-Hindu right wing group which has been implicated in massacres of Muslims in the state of Gujarat in India.

Culture is often equated with religion, food, costuming and ritual, so that recognising diversity comes to mean celebrating religious festivals only. Differences within religious or cultural beliefs are not recognised, or the fact that some families are more observant than others or observe in different ways. Generally, as has been pointed out by feminist scholars like Trin Min Ha and Nira Yuval-Davis, multiculturalism tends to see cultural differences as non-threatening, complementary and enriching, rather than depicting irreconcilable views of human relations - more like international cuisine than 'clash of civilisations'.

Such a view can make the state authorities fail to recognise or act in cases where women or children are abused. The failure to help minors facing forced marriage is an example, which will be discussed below.

Multiculturalist policies can also trigger a backlash from some white children or parents, who may feel that their culture is undervalued, since they are not 'black' or 'ethnic'. In fact, there are many different forms of ethnicity, and dominant forms and national origins should also be recognised. Yet respect for religious difference has emerged as a strategy for children and young people to counter Islamophobia and name-calling at school and elsewhere, and to support their Muslim friends. With all their limitations, multiculturalist policies have helped to shift the boundaries of the nation in Britain and to incorporate in some ways the Black and other ethnic minorities who immigrated to Britain after WW2 from Britain's previous empire.

However, this shift happened in a very partial and contested way, and central to the present policies of the British state is the difference in treatment of settled minorities as against the attack on the rights of refugees. At the same time as the government was pursuing its ugly policies of restricting rights of asylum, dispersing refugees and enforcing the humiliating and inefficient voucher system (where refugees are given vouchers forcing them to buy goods in certain supermarkets rather than giving them cash), it was sending out a very different message to British Asians. In its first term of office, with a complete absence of fanfare, the Labour government quietly dropped the 'primary purpose' clause in immigration rules, which had prevented people marrying a spouse if they admitted that the main purpose of the marriage was settlement in Britain. The clause was seen as an attack on the arranged marriage system and its abandonment was greeted with relief. But the government remained coy about publicising this liberalisation, presumably on the assumption that any relaxing of immigration rules would play very badly with the *Daily Mail*. The *Daily Mail* is a right-wing paper read by what is known as 'Middle England' - the heartland of white, middle-class, conservative England. The Labour government is acutely conscious of adverse publicity from this paper, and is sometimes thought to construct its press statements so as to elicit approval from sources which have traditionally been hostile to labour, socialist or working class pro-trade unionist politics.

Forced marriage

Under pressure from MPs and Asian feminists, the government embarked on a most complex intervention into what had previously been considered the internal affair of Asian communities in Britain. It appointed a working group on what was termed 'forced marriage'. Feminists had distinguished forced marriage, in which coercion, physical or emotional, was exercised, from 'arranged marriage', where both parties actively consented to the marriage. Adopting feminist arguments, the minister, Mike O'Brien, was widely quoted as saying, 'Multiculturalism is no excuse for moral blindness'.

How had the government been persuaded to tackle an issue which was seen as deeply 'culturally sensitive'? As Blair was later to argue about the 'war on terror', the call went out that this was not 'about Islam'; indeed, the issue was not about any major religion. The formula, presumably developed by agile Whitehall mandarins and energetically pedalled in ministerial speeches emanating from the Home and Foreign Offices, pronounced what was close to a *fatwa* (which means a legal opinion, not as is popularly thought, a death sentence) on the state of religious law. All major religions, it was said, require consent in marriage.

Unfortunately, this is a highly problematic statement. In Hindu marriage ceremonies, for instance, consent is assumed, while in some forms of Muslim law 'consent' is bestowed by the guardian of the girl, particularly if she is a minor, even though there is a part of the marriage ceremony where the consent of the woman is sought. A young woman who was forced to marry her cousin described a fairly typical example of the way in which religious authorities collude with the parents:

As the marriage ceremony was going along, the Imam asked if I consented to the marriage. My mother, she pushed my head down three times. That's how the marriage was consented, it was not my choice at all.

Nevertheless, leaders of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu organisations were lined up to denounce forced marriage as having no foundation in their core religious beliefs, reinforcing the view of cultural differences as always compatible and benign. While such positions reinforce their internal political power both *vis-à-vis* the government and their British communities, this does not necessarily stop them from supporting much less benign positions in their countries of origin or within their communities away from the public eye.

The arguments about the position of women in minority communities in Britain have a lineage that extends well back into the colonial past, into the most famous of British reforms (often cited as evidence of a civilising imperial mission): the abolition of *sati* or the burning of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands. As officials anxiously considered the implications of reform, they asked for opinions from *pandits*, or Hindu priests, about whether this was a central part of early Hindu beliefs, or merely a later accretion which could not be considered a compulsory rite. The crucial factor, however, was the considerable pressure from Indian social reformers, which created a climate in which the colonial power could act. In this as

in other instances of reform, such as the raising of the Age of Consent (the time when child brides were forced to cohabit with their husbands), it was Indian demand, coupled with some scriptural authority, which opened the space for reform of the law.

The Janus face of local 'community leaders'

The forced marriage debates in Britain were also part of the process by which unelected lay community leaders, organised into religious bodies, were given increased status by the government (the leaderships of the councils of mosques and temples which exist in every major British city tend to be controlled by business men rather than by *imams*, or priests).

Since the prominence of these religious leaders depended in part on their patronage by the state, they were happy to provide an emollient message according to the government line. This served to obscure their failure to confront existing religious practices and the direct collusion of many clerics in, for example, imposing forced marriage on unwilling young people.

A statement such as 'Islam seeks consent in marriage' has the same weight as 'Islam gave equal rights to women in the seventh century'. In other words, it relieves the authorities of actually having to consider what actively seeking consent would actually imply in the modern world. And it takes the sting out of the government's critique of forced marriage among those conservative 'community leaders' who feel that the state is trespassing on their territory.

That territory, it has become increasingly clear as the 'war on terror' progresses, is not really an area of complete autonomy in the 'internal affairs' of the community. Rather, it is the struggle to control the representation of the community and therefore determine the types of policy and intervention that the state adopts. Unlike the disaffected young men with no access to resources or the ear of government, Muslim women's groups have been consulted by the government. They have always challenged the right of secular feminists to speak for Muslim women, demanding that the state bring back stricter immigration controls to protect helpless women from Asian men in pursuit of visas and the right to settle in Britain. On the other hand, a secular feminist group like Southall Black Sisters has argued that this would be a racist policy, as domestic violence cases amongst the majority population are not dealt with by deporting the violent men but by providing alternatives for women and using the criminal justice system.

Another policy pursued by British Muslim intellectuals, which can be seen to make strategic use of the government's anti-immigration policies, is that of Zaki Badawi, the head of a theological college trying to create a class of British educated *imams*. He has demanded that the government stop giving visas to foreign-born *imams* who don't speak English, and, in addition, close down after-school classes run by radical Islamists on the grounds that they are recruiting grounds for terrorism.

At the same time, Tower Hamlets, one of London's leading councils to have developed policy on forced marriages, made partnership with the East London mosque a central plank of their policy. This is a mosque controlled by the *Jamaat i Islami*, who have positioned themselves in Britain as a leading 'moderate group', progressive on social questions such as forced marriage. Unlike in many other South Asian mosques, women are allowed to pray in the East London mosque. The mosque has been working with Tower Hamlets Council in dealing with truancy from schools. 'Having an *Imam* visit, is like having a superstar,' said a council spokesman.

Britain has remade relationships between non-established religions and the state so as to conform to the model of the Church of England. The position of the Chief Rabbi does not traditionally exist in Judaism. Similarly, *imams* and *pandits* are not expected to have a pastoral role of the type promoted by Tower Hamlets. Generally they are required to facilitate the proper practice of religious rituals. They do not necessarily exercise a huge social power over their congregations. However, in Britain, as part of the present phase of multiculturalist policies, their right to exercise that power is being vigorously promoted by the local state as part of its overall attempts at social engineering.

The *Jamaat's* history, which it has not repudiated, is not as benign or as modernist as it appears to British multiculturalists. It was founded by Maulana Maududi in India and is a fundamentalist political party in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh with links to other fundamentalist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. One of its most prominent leaders in Britain, also active in the East London mosque, was alleged to have taken part in the mass murder of secular supporters of Bangladeshi independence during the war for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. While pursuing 'moderate' policies in the British context, it continues to support fundamentalist positions in South Asia such as the spread of draconian *shari'a* based laws, including support of the death penalty for adultery and blasphemy. Institutions connected to it, such as the Islamic Foundation, have also supported the dictatorship in Sudan.

Yet these very groups are the key partners of the British state in numerous initiatives, from local level to the Crown. When Prince Charles visited the East London mosque, he was warmly welcomed by an alleged war criminal, Chowdhury Moinuddin. Even British NGOs seem to find it necessary to legitimate their entry into discussions of culturally sensitive issues by choosing fundamentalist partners. When the respected organisation Reunite held a national conference on forced marriage, it was decided to hold it at the Islamic Foundation. The conference went ahead in spite of the refusal of secular feminists, including those from Asian and Muslim communities, to attend.

Terrorism and asylum

The awareness of the terrorist threat post 9-11 came just as the 2000 riots in the northern cities of Oldham and Bradford made the government aware of a layer of extremely alienated Muslim youth. It also came at a time of an acute crisis of labour in many different sectors, from the shortage of skilled workers in the public sector, to information technology and

agriculture. The government had cautiously begun to acknowledge the success of Asian immigration and the need to start opening up to new generations of immigrants, while of course continuing to show 'bogus asylum seekers' the door to prove that Britain was no soft touch for economic migrants.

But the solution proposed by David Blunkett - dealing with all these problems simultaneously through raised standards for acquiring citizenship, a test of knowledge of the English language, and a vow of allegiance to British democratic values - will not only fail, but it admonishes the victims rather than dealing with the perpetrators of separatism. Although the Asian rioters were mostly born in Britain, speak English and were educated in British schools, the lack of 'social cohesion' has been laid largely at the feet of their mothers, who do not speak English and who, in their role as guardians of their cultures of origin, are deemed to have prevented the integration of the younger generation.

Policing the boundaries of piety

Paradoxically, the move towards 'social cohesion' policies is taking place at the same time as there is growing pressure for Britain to establish many more independent faith schools. Different branches of government blow hot and cold about whether they will proceed with this policy. The effects of such a move could be very problematic. Existing faith schools, which are largely Church of England or Catholic, are one of the greatest forces for segregation. Both White and African-Caribbean children enter Christian schools, leaving state schools in the same catchment area almost entirely Asian. Yet increasing the number of minority faith schools would further enhance the power of the men in the councils of mosques and temples who have the ear of government and are controlled by fundamentalist elements such as the *Jamaat i Islami* and the VHP. Their 'integration' into British society has partially been achieved because these movements are seen as progressive forces within their communities on issues of gender equality. Unlike the more traditional *imams* and priests who, if they do not speak English, are routinely characterised as backward and separatist, active fundamentalists in Britain are often sophisticated, English speaking gentlemen (and women) who easily conform to the ideal of social cohesion.

Conclusion

The British state used its colonial heritage to develop multicultural policies to incorporate the influx of immigrants who arrived in Britain from South Asia and the Caribbean after the war. Initially, it allowed many social policies to be set by the 'norms' laid down by conservative community leaders. However, the pressure of organised, secular Asian feminism has forced the state to acknowledge that it must intervene to stop crimes being committed against young Asian women. But to justify this intervention it resorted to developing support amongst the very people it wanted to criticise, and thereby helped increase their hold over 'their' communities.

The lesson for the state, and the NGOs who have assisted in legitimating the activities of fundamentalist groups, is that they cannot regard the issues of violence against women or the equality of women as the only markers of a progressive position. In modern Britain

today, as in South Asia, attitudes to women are only one sign of religious authoritarianism. The question of 'voice', or who speaks for the community, is equally if not more telling. Not only are secular voices regularly excluded, but so are religious minorities within their own communities. For example, the *Ahmadiyahs*, a minority Muslim sect, have been excluded, sometimes violently, from the Muslim *ummah* and sit on none of the Muslim councils in Britain, though the *Jamaat* play an active role. The Hindu temple committees are dominated by proponents of an aggressive Hindu identity such as the VHP and the HSS. These are the groups pushing for more faith schools, and who have argued for laws on incitement to religious hatred (not the anti-racist groups who most have to deal with the fallout from racial or religious attacks). For these neo-conservative leaderships, a new blasphemy law would represent victory for one of the key demands of the anti-Rushdie campaign, and could lead to enormous censorship on matters of religion.

But what would be the effect of such faith schools on the integration of the alienated Muslim youth of northern England into British society? And if they have foreign-born wives, or British sisters who are subjected to forced marriages, where are the resources to help these women escape? Where is the acknowledgement of the state's role in upholding forced marriage through its 'respect' for cultural diversity? And finally, where are the resources for English classes that groups like Southall Black Sisters have been struggling to provide, and which are going to become a condition for being given British citizenship?

Endnotes

- ¹ Sir Herman Ouseley, 'Community Pride, not Prejudice: Making Diversity Work in Bradford', July 2001.
- ² Cited by C. Connolly in 'Splintered Sisterhood: Anti Racism in a Young Women's Project', *Feminist Review* 36, Autumn 1990.
- ³ Yasmin Ali (2001[1992]) 'Muslim women and the politics of ethnicity and culture in Northern England', in G. Sahgal and N. Yuval-Davis (eds) *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, London: WLUML [Virago], p. 108.
- ⁴ Home Office, CM5387, February 2002.
- ⁵ Haleh Afshar (1998) 'Strategies of resistance among the Muslim minority in West Yorkshire: impact on women', in Nickie Charles and Helen Hintjens (eds) *Gender, Ethnicity and Political Identities*, London: Routledge.