

Multiculturalism

Chapter for Encyclopedia of Equality, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

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Introduction

While cultural diversity is a feature of most contemporary societies, how governments engage with this diversity varies enormously around the world. Most countries are signatories to international conventions committing to human rights and anti-discrimination, but national policies regarding diversity look different in different contexts and in some, may not exist at all. This paper defines multiculturalism in terms of government policies that aim to recognise the rights of all cultural groups within a society and make accommodations for minority groups (Kymlicka, 1995).

The focus on policy is distinct from other definitions of multiculturalism that focus on demography or multiculturalism as ideology. As Berry & Ward (2016) note, multiculturalism

is often used to refer to the demographic reality of a culturally diverse society, or as an ideological commitment to accept this diversity. Psychological aspects of multiculturalism (Berry & Ward, 2016) examine processes such as acculturation (cultural changes in groups or individual behaviour changes caused by inter-cultural contact) and adaptation to changing cultural contexts (e.g. psychological, sociocultural and intercultural adaptation). This paper does not deal with these demographic, ideological or psychological aspects of multiculturalism, focusing instead on multicultural policy, as multicultural policy plays such a crucial role in shaping how the demographic reality of diversity translates into individual and societal outcomes. Focusing on multicultural policy entails examining governments' management and accommodation of diversity, and the programs that foster acceptance of diversity and enable equitable participation in society by members of ethnic minority groups.

In some societies, multicultural policies are the product of long-term political mobilisation on the part of these minorities. In others, they may reflect state level priorities or anxieties about addressing ethnic tensions, secessionist tendencies, or severe social inequalities. The focus here is on such policies in five countries that exemplify distinct approaches to multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is often seen as a Western concept but in fact it was practised as official policy, if not explicitly by name, in other countries long before the notion was popularised in the West. This paper begins in India, where the newly independent nation was defined using a multicultural framework. It then discusses Singapore, where again, upon independence, the city state was imagined in multiculturalist terms. We then move to Canada and Australia, which introduced multicultural policies in the 1970s, ushering in the concept to the Western

world. Finally, we examine Britain which has had a more tenuous framework of multiculturalism, particularly in recent years.

India

Within what is now India, many cultures and religions have coexisted for thousands of years. Independence from Britain, however, saw the establishment of a striking arrangement to officially recognise cultural minorities. Mahajan (2005: 289) argues that India was ‘among the first few democracies to embark on the multicultural path’. Decades before multicultural policies emerged in the West, the Indian Constitution of 1950, despite not using the term multiculturalism, safeguarded the rights and identity of minority groups, made provisions for their special treatment and stipulated enforcement mechanisms. Article 29(1) of the Indian Constitution states that any section of the population will have the fundamental right to conserve their distinct language, script or culture (Ghosh, 2018: 28).

Four kinds of communities were recognised, based on religion, language, caste and tribe (Mahajan, 2005: 295). Differentiated rights were granted to each type of community. For historically disadvantaged groups including scheduled castes (Dalits), scheduled tribes and ‘backward’ classes, the Constitution provided special conditions to enable access to resources previously denied to them. The Constitutional provision of Reservation or Positive Discrimination states that a percentage of places must be reserved for scheduled castes and tribes and backward classes in all public and private educational institutions, Parliament and government services (Ghosh, 2018: 29). For tribal communities and religious and linguistic communities, provisions allowed them to live in accordance with their distinctive way of life and culture. Many tribal communities enjoy forms of self-governance through separate territorial jurisdictions (Mahajan, 2005: 305).

The commitment to secularism in India provides for equal treatment of all religions. The Constitution gives official recognition to the Personal Laws of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Parsees, meaning that in family-related matters, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, alimony and custody of children, individuals are governed by the personal laws of their own religious community (Mahajan, 2005: 296).

Not only was cultural diversity acknowledged in the Constitution, but it was also, according to Mahajan (2005: 292), seen as ‘an essential and indispensable characteristic of the Indian polity’. The positive impacts of Indian multicultural policies are seen especially in politics, with the rise of Dalit parties, and Dalits have held positions as ministers, chief ministers and even President of India (Ghosh, 2018: 32). India’s distinctive approach to cultural diversity has been largely successful in minimising ethnic conflict and strengthening a sense of belonging to the nation (Mahajan, 2005: 310).

This is not to downplay continued sporadic instances of communal violence and enmities between different groups that may be condoned or even stoked by authorities. Formal measures of recognition cannot guarantee universal acceptance or tolerance in society. As the largest minority group, Muslims continue to suffer socioeconomic disadvantage in relation to education, health, employment and political representation (Gautam, 2016: 4). The recent rise of Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has exacerbated discrimination against Muslims (Maizland, 2022), posing a threat to the multicultural vision of India’s founders.

Singapore

As in India, intercultural relations were front of mind during Singapore's moment of independence in 1965. The importance of multicultural policy was connected to official fears about racial conflict, given the inter-communal riots between Chinese and Malays during the 1960s. In Singapore, inter-racial relations bear the legacy of British colonial rule on the Malayan peninsula, when different racial groups were structurally segregated. Malays, Chinese and Indians were allocated different and unequal economic roles and had very little contact with each other. This was the foundation of inter-ethnic conflict (Noor & Leong, 2013: 716).

At independence, Singapore's first leader, Lee Kuan Yew, declared: 'Singapore is not a Malay nation, not a Chinese nation, not an Indian nation. Everybody will have a place in Singapore' (cited in Frost, 2021: 3735). With the founding of Singapore, the new nation's population was defined in multi-racial terms through the CMIO model (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others). These racial categories structure bureaucratic processes as well as social and economic policy. Racial categories are recorded on each citizen's birth certificate and national identification card (Vasu, 2012: 738).

Singapore recognises four official languages, with equal status given to Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English, though Malay is the national language. In school students study both English and their mother tongue (Chee & Siddique, 2019).

Electoral laws stipulate that all political parties field candidates that include ethnic minority representatives in each constituency. Chinese parliamentary seats comprise 75% of the total seats, with the remainder for the minority races (Vasu, 2012: 744).

Racial quotas in Singapore's housing policy ensure a multi-racial mix in every government-built housing estate, in order to avoid segregation. These estates, which house the vast majority of Singapore's residents, comprise different racial groups in proportion equivalent to the general population (Chee & Siddique, 2019).

Socioeconomic assistance is provided via racially defined organisations, funded by the government. Run by members of each ethnic community, they tailor support services to their own communities, providing for example, job training, education subsidies, and career and family counselling (Noor & Leong, 2013: 718).

While Singapore is widely regarded as a successful multicultural society (Chee & Siddique, 2019), critics argue that preserving racial 'harmony' is a discourse used by a repressive state to justify their racialized governance of the population and to pre-empt public debate about racial discrimination and inequality (Chua, 2003). Moreover, formal equality masks the perpetuation of a racial hierarchy with Chinese at the top and a Malay underclass at the bottom of society (Barr & Skrbis, 2014).

Other ethnic tensions manifest in antagonism towards immigrants from China, blamed for over-crowding, economic and educational competition, wage stagnation, increasing housing costs and unemployment (Frost, 2021: 3745). And although ethnically Chinese, immigrants are accused of exhibiting behaviour and values misaligned with the local culture (Noor &

Leong, 2013: 723). Foreign-local divisions have led to the emergence of a more culturally conscious, inward-looking sentiment among some sections of the population (Noor & Leong, 2013: 724).

Canada

Canada is widely recognised as the first Western nation to officially implement a multicultural policy in 1971. This followed the policy of bilingualism, introduced in 1969 as a result of pressures for autonomy from the French Quebecois. With smaller immigrant groups also calling for recognition, multiculturalism was established and named as a 'fundamental characteristic of Canadian heritage and identity' (Levey, 2019: 458).

Multiculturalism amounted to a redefinition of Canadian national identity. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau declared that Canada had 'no official culture' and 'nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other' (cited in Levey, 2019: 458). In announcing the original multicultural policy, the Canadian government stated that it would 'support and encourage the various cultural and ethnic groups that give structure and vitality to our society. They will be encouraged to share their cultural expression and values with other Canadians and so contribute to a richer life for all' (cited in Berry, 2015: 38).

The original emphasis of Canadian multicultural policy was on cultural maintenance and development among all cultural groups, as well as support for heritage languages (Ghosh, 2018: 28). Government funds were dedicated to ethnic organisations and activities, such as festivals and ethnic media. Subsequently, with the arrival of greater numbers of visible

minority migrants and a period of difficult race relations in the 1980s, the focus of policy shifted towards eliminating racism and discrimination (Ghosh, 2018: 28) and promoting institutional change to enable Canadian institutions to adapt to the changing population (Dewing, 2013: 4).

Canada became the first country in the world to pass a national multiculturalism law in 1988. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act recognised multiculturalism as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society, and sought to promote cultural maintenance, reduce discrimination, enhance cultural understanding and promote institutional change. It stipulated that all government agencies were responsible for enhancing the participation of minorities within institutional structures (Dewing, 2013: 4).

More recently, official multicultural programs have focused on supporting the economic, social and cultural integration of new Canadians, promoting community engagement and civic education among at-risk youth of minority backgrounds, and addressing social exclusion and radicalisation through promoting intercultural understanding and Canadian values (Dewing, 2013: 7).

Multiculturalism has been the subject of continued debate in Canada, with prominent critics alleging that it promotes division and a culture of separation, and undermining national unity (e.g. Bissoondath, 1994). Supporters counter that the success of multicultural policies can be seen in Canada's comparative performance on many indicators. Kymlicka (2010) notes that Canada enjoys the highest level of citizenship take-up, the highest proportion of foreign-born citizens elected to Parliament, and superior education outcomes by children of migrants, compared to other nations. Moreover, multiculturalism continues to enjoy popular support,

with surveys repeatedly showing that multiculturalism is a national symbol for a majority of Canadians (Kymlicka, 2021: 124). Fleras (2019: 21) quips that Canada is the only country in the world where ‘the more patriotic the person, the greater the belief in multiculturalism as a national asset’.

Australia

As in Canada, multicultural policies in Australia emerged in the 1970s. The White Australia Policy was abolished in 1966 and the policy of multiculturalism was introduced in 1973 by the new federal Labor Government primarily to address issues of settlement experienced by post-war migrants who were subject to assimilation policies and to assist new incoming migrants. This was a response to many years of political agitation from migrant groups, lobbying for recognition of their cultural heritage and for funding and services for their communities. The socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by large groups of migrants was also a pressing concern, and this gained support within the progressive Labor government at the time (Tabar et al, 2003).

In an era of substantial social reform, multiculturalism in Australia focused initially on migrant disadvantage. Funding was increased for education, public housing, language training and employment counselling, tailored for migrants’ specific needs (Walsh, 2014: 285). Multiculturalism was closely aligned with welfare delivery, to ensure migrants enjoyed ‘equal opportunity to realise their full potential’ and ‘equal access to programs and services’ (Galbally Report, 1978).

Since the 1970s, Australian governments have funded migrant organisations to deliver services to their community members. Multicultural programs have featured activities aiming to foster belonging, inclusion, and cross-cultural respect, as well as for not-for-profit community language schools, and services for new arrivals (Wallace et al, 2021: 13). This ‘ethnic group model’, in addition to being cost effective and devolving service delivery, also allowed governments to exercise political control and patronage over ethnic organisations (Castles, 1992). A shift to ‘access and equity’ policy in the 1980s re-focused attention towards improving migrants’ access to mainstream government services (Castles, 1992).

Since the late 1980s, with the rise of neoliberalism and accelerating globalisation, the notion of productive diversity has underpinned much of Australia's approach to multicultural policy. Cultural diversity is seen as an economic asset for enhancing Australia’s international competitiveness, with migrants’ cultural and linguistic skills and international networks lauded as strategic benefits (NMAC, 1999).

Since the 1990s, Australian multiculturalism has seen a greater emphasis on civic obligations, assimilation and social cohesion. Funding for ethnic organisations was dramatically reduced in the 1990s, and their capacity for advocacy curtailed. And in the aftermath of 9/11, support for cultural difference was eclipsed by concern for national security and cohesion, with concerns about Muslim Australians ‘failing’ to integrate (Ho, 2013).

Most recently, Levey (2019) argues that Australia has entered a period of mainstreaming and ‘post-multiculturalism’, with policy statements indicating that multiculturalism has succeeded and that special measures are no longer necessary. In line with prevailing neoliberal principles of individual self-reliance, multiculturalism has been articulated not as a

government responsibility, but about individuals feeling included and a sense of belonging to the nation (Levey, 2019).

Despite weak or waning official commitment to the concept of multiculturalism, acceptance and support remains strong at a community level. And Australia has not seen the emergence of ethnic ghettos, significant race riots, separatist movements or a racially stratified under-class (Walsh, 2014: 297).

Britain

Although there is no central law defining multiculturalism in the UK, since the 1970s, the concept of multiculturalism has been popularised in political and media discourse.

Multicultural frameworks have been crucial in managing a culturally diverse population that reflects the legacy of colonialism and the Commonwealth.

British society has been profoundly transformed by immigration since the Second World War. The British Nationality Act (1948) granted a right to immigrate to the UK to the majority of individuals in the Empire and Commonwealth, leading to unanticipated large scale non-white immigration (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2018). By the mid-1960s, the emphasis on migrant assimilation had shifted towards integration, which then Home Secretary Roy Jenkins stipulated included cultural diversity and mutual tolerance (cited in Mathieu, 2018: 46).

Expanded welfare was to enable integration, with funding to address the needs of minority communities and a series of exemptions from laws for ethnic and religious minorities, for example, on dress, work and worship (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2018). Race Relations Acts since the mid-1960s have aimed to criminalise racial discrimination and hate discourse (Mathieu, 2018: 47).

Hall et al (1978: 394) observed in the 1970s that in Britain 'race is the modality in which class relations are experienced'. In other words, race relations have been entangled with social deprivation and poverty. This was graphically demonstrated in the series of riots in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s centred in disadvantaged communities dominated by ethnic minority groups. While typically classified as 'race riots', scholars including Amin (2002) argue that socioeconomic deprivation and inequality underpin what are seen as 'racial' factors.

A highpoint of British multiculturalism was the 2000 report of the Runnymede Trust's Commission for Multi-Ethnic Britain which called for action to address racism, to reduce economic inequality and to create a pluralist human rights culture. As Jakubowicz (2013: 20) writes, the report 'marked the apogee of enthusiasm for the ideals of multiculturalism'. However, terrorist attacks from 2001 and the War on Terror undermined support for the report.

Instead, as in Australia, the early 2000s saw a shift towards the language of social cohesion. The emphasis was on assimilation of British values and traditions, with the introduction of a new nationality test, tightened immigration and asylum law, and implementation of draconian anti-terrorism legislation (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2018: 6). Following the 2005 London bombings committed by 'home-grown' British-born and educated terrorists, multiculturalism was

blamed for minorities 'self-segregating' and adopting anti-British values. The government boosted its emphasis on identification with Britain and speaking English. Prime Minister David Cameron declared in 2011 that state multiculturalism was a failure.

However, despite the rhetorical push towards civic integration, some scholars argue that the fundamentals of multicultural policy have been sustained in practice. State funded programs for ethnic organisations and activities continue, as do affirmative action frameworks and regulations providing accommodations for ethnic minorities. As such, Mathieu (2018: 59) argues that the civic integration agenda still promotes a liberal pluralist conception of the nation.

Conclusion

The global diversity of multicultural policies demonstrates how such policies are deeply rooted in national and historical contexts. The legacy of colonialism has shaped, in different ways, the contours of multiculturalism in all of our five case study nations, while all are confronted with the challenges of contemporary global migration and global geopolitical tensions. This paper has provided an overview of how multicultural policies in India, Singapore, Canada, Australia and Britain have responded to the needs of their diverse populations, while also challenging the conventional wisdom that multiculturalism's origins are exclusively Western. In many ways, the approaches to multiculturalism adopted in India and Singapore are more thorough than Western ones in their provision of rights to minorities, particularly in the form of affirmative action programs. While multiculturalism in all settings entails respect for cultural difference and accommodating cultural minorities, taking this

comparative approach allows us to understand how the challenges of cultural diversity have created such diverse responses by governments over the last century.

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