

Identity and Identity Politics in the Context of Minority Rights: A Conceptual Framework

Zahid Yousuf Khan
Shahid Iqbal

Abstract

The paper explores the relationship between identity, identity politics, and minority rights in the backdrop of democratic and plural societies. It examines the formation and politicisation of identities in response to marginalisation and exclusion of particular communities or individuals. The paper develops a conceptual framework of identity politics, highlighting the role of recognition, accommodation, and inclusion in shaping a tolerant and democratic culture. The mobilisation of particular identities and the seeking of state response to address grievances are strategies adopted by specific groups to contest exclusion, claim recognition, and seek political rights. The study does not adopt an empirical case study but follows a conceptual approach to clarify key debates surrounding identity politics, including recognition versus redistribution, universalism versus particularism, and empowerment versus fragmentation. It argues that a thorough understanding of identity politics as a dynamic and fluid process is essential for addressing minority rights in multicultural societies. The study concludes that the reconciliation of identity-based claims within a democratic framework is a hallmark of inclusive governance and democratic institutions.

Introduction

In contemporary political theory, the questions of identity, identity politics, and minority rights within plural and diverse societies have assumed increasing significance (Coulmas 2019, 1–2; Hall 1990, 222–237). Identity shapes individual and group understandings of belonging, difference, and power. While identity was once interpreted as primordial and given, it is now increasingly understood as a socially constructed and relational phenomenon (Coulmas 2019, 34–36). Marginalised communities often organise themselves around shared ethnic, religious, cultural, or social identities to seek rights, contest marginalisation, and claim recognition. Such mobilisation has enabled historically disadvantaged groups to articulate their grievances, while also generating intense debate regarding its impact on democratic governance, social cohesion, and formal equality (Bernstein 2005, 47–74; Fraser 2000, 107–120).

The classical liberal framework prioritised individual rights and formal equality and often overlooked group-based rights. However, formal equality alone is not sufficient to address the structural inequalities that hinder the free exercise of rights by minority groups (Fraser 2000, 107–

120; Kymlicka 1995, 5–8; Modood 2007, 2–5). Minority rights require recognition of cultural distinctiveness and meaningful political participation from both majority communities and state structures (Fraser 2000, 110–112). These debates became particularly salient in Canada and other Western societies, where recognition of group rights in multicultural societies achieved significance. In India, constitutional recognition of group rights coexists with deep social diversity and region-specific political challenges. Articles 25 to 30 of the Indian Constitution guarantee freedom of religion, cultural rights, and group-specific educational rights, reflecting a commitment to pluralism and tolerance within a democratic framework (Constitution of India 1950, arts. 25–30). While the assertion of identity helps minorities claim dignity and visibility, critics warn that it can also produce rigid boundaries, fragmented solidarities, and obscure material inequalities (Appiah 2006, 20–22; Fraser 2000, 110–112).

This paper develops a conceptual framework of identity, identity politics, and minority rights to examine identity formation, political mobilisation, and state responses in plural societies. The study locates identity politics within conditions of marginalisation and democratic rights. It illustrates that minority identities are shaped by historical, social, and political forces, and that constitutional protections may be diluted by broader structural and institutional dynamics. The objective of the study is to contribute to ongoing debates on identity politics and minority rights by proposing an integrated framework of identity without reducing it to a single marker. When identity politics is understood within an inclusive and democratic framework, it can serve as a critical mechanism for advancing minority rights.

Meaning and Dimensions of Identity

The issue of identity has become one of the major concerns in political theory, influencing people's perceptions of themselves as individuals and as members of groups. Identity debates began to gain ground in the middle of the twentieth century, partly due to the phenomenon of cultural Americanisation, which made identity an important issue in society, politics, and culture (Coulmas 2019, 1–2). Contemporary social, scientific, and technological advances have made it harder to distinguish between the self and the outside world, thereby challenging the assumption that identity can be defined or established in a fixed manner. Identity is now perceived as flexible and dependent upon the situation (Coulmas 2019, 34–36). Nevertheless, through social processes that organise similarity and difference, identities acquire forms of durability. These processes rely on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, which lead to the formation of group identities and also contribute to the isolation of some groups. Thus, identity is not simply a characteristic of a person but a social classification formed through interaction and recognition.

The knowledge of the self is always shaped in relation to others and cannot be detached from the desire to be understood in a particular way by society. Distinctions such as 'self' and 'other' or 'we' and 'they' are rooted in culture and language and highlight the interdependence of identity formation. Theoretical approaches to identity have thrown more light on the multidimensional nature of the concept. Social Identity Theory shifts the focus from individual psychology to group membership and shows how people build self-esteem through identification with social groups

(Tajfel and Turner 2004, 56–65). The theory explains that people categorise themselves and others into 'us' and 'them', often making comparisons that favour their own group and devalue the other (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 59–62). In-group preference and out-group discrimination demonstrate that identity is a social mechanism with strong influence on attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour. Fearon explains identity as both a social category determining group membership and a set of socially valued characteristics that individuals consider lasting (Fearon 1999, 11–26). In this sense, identity becomes a contemporary way of expressing dignity, pride, and honour, connecting personal self-understanding to larger social classifications.

Brewer and Gardner add to this discussion by identifying three levels of identity: personal, social, and collective (Brewer and Gardner 1996, 83–93). These levels demonstrate how identity is formed through individual characteristics, social contacts, and community belonging. Identity is therefore not singular but layered and contextually determined. The viewpoints discussed above depict identity as a multidimensional, evolving, and relational process influenced by social interaction, historical context, and structural forces rather than as a fixed or inherent nature.

Identity in Political Contexts

Identity gets its political significance when it becomes the basis for people's claims to acknowledgement, rights, and representation within social and institutional structures. Identities arise through processes of inclusion and exclusion and are therefore tied to power relations that determine which identities are approved and which are pushed to the margins (Coulmas 2019, 34–36). In political situations, identity is not only a sign of belonging but also a means through which individuals and groups negotiate their position in broader social hierarchies. The political aspect of identity is clearly seen in group-based identifications. Tajfel and Turner's theory of intergroup relations illustrates that identity becomes politicised through categorisation and comparison, which govern relations between groups and their opponents (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 56–65). Such interactions often create a climate of exclusionary attitudes and strengthen boundaries that divide civic identity, particularly when differences among groups are perceived as lasting or beyond change (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 59–62). Identity thus becomes a tool used for both exercising and contesting power. Fearon's understanding of identity makes its political consequences clearer by associating identity with socially appreciated traits such as dignity and honour (Fearon 1999, 11–26). When political systems fail to acknowledge identities or treat them as inferior, groups unite around identity-based claims.

Historical accounts and cultural conversations give meaning to different identities, often supporting existing social stratifications while dismissing others. Mead's interactionist viewpoint illustrates how people's self-images are shaped by social expectations and institutional standards through daily interaction (Mead 1972, 153–186). Bourdieu's idea of habitus further shows how political and economic systems indirectly shape identity through internalised practices and dispositions (Bourdieu 1984, 1–7). Modernity intensifies the political aspect of identity by making it unstable and reflective. Bauman's idea of liquid modernity explains that the weakening of formerly solid social structures prompts individuals and groups to continuously negotiate identities

in relation to changing political and economic conditions (Bauman 2000, 4–14). Appadurai's idea of deterritorialisation complicates political identity further by showing that global flows of people and things move identity beyond fixed physical boundaries, allowing new forms of belonging that challenge older notions of citizenship and national identity (Appadurai 1996, 3–54). In such a situation, identity politics emerges as a reaction to discrimination against specific groups. Bernstein argues that identity-based movements often face the dilemma of presenting identity either as given or constructed, a tension that may also affect coalition-building among marginalised groups (Bernstein 2005, 47–74). Collectively, these viewpoints indicate that identity in politics is not simply revealed but produced, regulated, and changed through power relations, institutional structures, and historical conditions.

Identity Politics: Theoretical Perspectives

The study of identity politics has received increasing attention in social and political thought because of the growing interest in the role of group identities in political activity and behaviour. These group identities may stem from race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or other social locations. The term identity politics is primarily used to describe political action in which individuals and groups unite around such identities to fight for rights and recognition (Appiah 2006, 15–17). The unfolding of identity politics occurs alongside experiences of marginalisation and inequality, especially where established political systems lack sufficient means to address the claims of oppressed groups. When people use the term 'identity politics', they often use it derogatorily to describe the political programmes of others while presenting their own political positions as neutral or universal (Appiah 2006, 15). Appiah shows that even opposition to identity-based claims can itself operate as a form of identity politics when it excludes a category of people based on identity (Appiah 2006, 20–22). This observation highlights that identity politics is not an exceptional phenomenon but a persistent feature of political life across ideologies.

Identity politics operates through multiple dimensions, including the admission of various groups, the use of identities by political leaders, unequal treatment by the government, demands for acknowledgement, and collective mobilisation against identity-based injustice (Appiah 2006, 20–22). However, Appiah also warns that identity politics can become limiting when individuals are viewed only through one dimension of identity, thereby obscuring other aspects of political struggle such as material and legal rights (Appiah 2006, 20–21). Identity politics also signals the limitations of traditional liberal paradigms that emphasise individual rights while overlooking the conditions of whole groups. Modood views identity politics as a form of resistance against models of citizenship based on a single norm that neglect culturally or religiously different groups (Modood 2007, 2–5). From this viewpoint, identity politics challenges the liberal model that equates equality with uniformity and ignores the structural disadvantages of minorities. Multiculturalism becomes a political answer to the question of how to reconcile identity-based claims with liberal democracy by emphasising both recognition and civic inclusion.

Nancy Fraser similarly criticises liberal solutions that equate justice only with cultural acknowledgement while ignoring economic redistribution. She argues that identity politics became

prominent partly because liberal democratic models could not adequately address structural inequalities, leading oppressed groups to articulate their concerns in the language of recognition rather than redistribution (Fraser 2000, 107–114). Frances Fox Piven analyses the emergence of identity politics in relation to global capitalism, pointing to the decline of class-based politics as a contributor to the rise of identity-based mobilisation (Piven 1995, 103). These viewpoints show that identity politics emerges not solely from cultural marginalisation but also from the incapacity of existing political frameworks to deal with economic and social inequalities.

Key Debates in Identity Politics

The central debates in identity politics concern whether it functions as a source of power and empowerment for marginalised groups or as a facilitator of fragmentation. Critics point to the negative side of identity politics, arguing that it may lead to fragmentation and indirectly produce exclusionary forms of belonging. Appiah argues that identity politics can become oppressive when individuals are pressured to make a particular identity group the central focus of their entire social life (Appiah 2006, 20–21).

The second debate concerns recognition versus redistribution. Fraser argues that excessive focus on recognition may reify group identities and divert attention from material inequalities and economic injustice (Fraser 2000, 110–112). Her status model redefines misrecognition as institutionalised subordination rather than as a distortion of identity. She therefore recommends a mixed approach that combines cultural recognition with economic redistribution. This argument brings to the surface the conflict between symbolic inclusion and material justice in identity-based movements.

The conflict between universalism and particularism further complicates identity politics. Liberal universalism asserts equal rights for all, whereas identity politics presents group-specific claims based on historical and cultural differences. Kymlicka rejects the view that these approaches are necessarily incompatible, arguing that group-differentiated rights are often necessary to guarantee equal treatment for minorities within liberal democracies (Kymlicka 1995, 5–8). By distinguishing between national minorities and ethnic groups, Kymlicka shows how particular claims can be aligned with universal liberal principles when their aim is to support minority cultures without infringing upon individual liberties. Conversely, critics such as Rutherford and Clifford warn that essentialising identity can reduce complex identities into rigid categories and thereby enable exclusion and conflict (Rutherford 1990, 11–12; Clifford 2000, 95–98). However, they also caution against completely rejecting identity politics, since such rejection may marginalise the lived realities and political power produced by identity-based movements.

Recent critiques open new ways of thinking about identity politics. Dalglish introduces 'agonistic freedom' as a concept under which identity is considered a site of conflict rather than a fixed acknowledgement (Dalglish 2013, 71–79). Giri suggests a dialogical view of self-formation that focuses on interaction and ethical openness instead of isolating communalism (Giri 2001, 267–275). Bernstein's analysis shows that identity can be a powerful tool for social movements because

identity politics can simultaneously seek cultural acceptance and economic transformation (Bernstein 2005, 59–67). Taken together, these debates show that identity politics is neither always liberating nor always divisive. It is a political field of contestation shaped by recognition, redistribution, solidarity, and power.

Linking Identity Politics and Minority Rights

The interplay of identity politics and minority rights can be illustrated through a framework that connects identity formation, politicisation of identity, and state response to minority claims in a democratic system. Minority rights in democracies operate as political tools that allow small or marginalised groups to be heard in the political arena. In multi-ethnic countries, recognition of minority rights is indispensable for the legitimacy of democracy and social harmony (Modood 2007, 56–59). The first component of the framework is identity formation, which is a product of historical, social, and political context. Minority identities are built on culture, religion, and social practices, and are often strengthened through processes of marginalisation and exclusion. These identities are not merely cultural; they are also part of broader power relations that determine access to political participation and economic resources.

The second element, politicisation of identity, occurs when identity is used as a collective rallying point, form of representation, and mode of defiance. With the emergence of identity politics, underprivileged groups come together on the basis of shared characteristics to fight exclusion and demand recognition and rights. Modood argues that elevating identity to a political level involves groups claiming a place in society where they can be acknowledged as culturally or socially distinct, especially when prevailing models of citizenship are based on uniformity (Modood 2007, 2–5). For minorities, politicisation of identity is both a method of resistance and a way to claim dignity and equal rights in society. State response is the next element of the framework and includes recognition, accommodation, or exclusion. State institutions in democracies have significant influence on which identity categories are recognised and how identity-based claims are treated. In India, Articles 25 to 30 of the Constitution ensure religious freedom, cultural preservation, and educational rights for minorities (Constitution of India 1950, arts. 25–30). These provisions demonstrate an institutional attempt to coordinate national unity with cultural plurality. However, Kymlicka argues that legal protection alone is not enough; effective enforcement of minority rights also requires institutional arrangements that ensure political participation and access to resources (Kymlicka 1995, 113–116).

The third aspect concerns outcomes for minority groups, ranging from protection and inclusion to marginalisation and dissent. Eisenberg argues that public institutions should support equality and inclusion instead of dismissing identity claims as divisive or merely subjective (Eisenberg 2009, 93–96). The effectiveness of minority rights is therefore determined not only by formal recognition but also by the capacity and willingness of institutions to implement those rights. This framework highlights the necessity of treating identity politics as a major aspect of minority rights while also recognising the limitations of a purely conceptual approach.

Implications for Minority Studies and Policy

This conceptual framework contributes to academic discussions on identity politics by linking theoretical debates with the discourse of minority rights. It strengthens the argument that identity politics should not be viewed only as cultural assertion but as a political process tied to democratic participation, institutional recognition, and economic justice. The framework reveals how identity-based claims interact with democratic structures rather than necessarily running contrary to them. For policymakers, it indicates the need for inclusive governance and sensitivity to context in discussions around minority rights in plural societies. Bayart argues that democratic states are obliged not only to acknowledge minority identities but also to provide equal access to political and economic resources necessary for meaningful participation (Bayart 2005, 92–95). In India, the National Commission for Minorities and related institutional arrangements play an important role in the protection of minority rights (National Commission for Minorities Act 1993, sec. 3). Moreover, the framework suggests that minority policies should move beyond symbolic recognition toward the tackling of structural inequalities. Fraser's distinction between recognition and redistribution explains the importance of combining cultural rights with economic justice in reducing persistent forms of marginalisation (Fraser 2000, 154–157). Democratic inclusion must therefore cover not only political representation but also economic opportunity and institutional accountability.

Conclusion

The paper has provided a broad view of identity, identity politics, and minority rights while highlighting the interrelation between identity formation, political mobilisation, state response, and democratic outcomes. Identity politics emerges as a reaction to marginalisation and exclusion, especially where liberal democratic arrangements do not adequately address group-specific inequalities. In democratic systems, minority rights act as primary methods for political involvement, cultural protection, and social justice when they are integrated into institutional structures. The Indian Constitution recognises minority rights through a strong legal base. The works of Modood, Kymlicka, Eisenberg, Bayart, and Fraser collectively suggest that a democratic society must uphold national unity without making minority inclusion meaningless. Recognition and protection of minority rights must therefore include the raising of social, economic, and political status. Ultimately, the coexistence of minority rights within democratic systems depends on inclusive governance, institutional responsiveness, and a comprehensive understanding of identity politics. Recognising identity as a matter of both culture and politics is central to democratic equality and the maintenance of pluralism in diverse societies.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2006. "The Politics of Identity." *Daedalus* 135 (4): 15–22.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bayart, Jean-François. 2005. *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bernstein, Mary. 2005. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31: 47–74.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brewer, Marilynn B., and Wendi Gardner. 1996. "Who Is This 'We'? Levels of Collective Identity and Self-Representations." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71 (1): 83–93.
- Clifford, James. 2000. "Taking Identity Politics Seriously: The Contradictory, Stony Ground." In *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, edited by Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie, 94–112. London: Verso.
- Constitution of India. 1950. Arts. 25–30.
- Coulmas, Florian. 2019. *Identity: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dalgliesh, Bregham. 2013. "Problematising the Political Theory of Identity Politics: Towards an Agonistic Freedom." *Kritike* 7 (1): 71–79.
- Eisenberg, Avigail. 2009. *Reasons of Identity: A Normative Guide to the Political and Legal Assessment of Identity Claims*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fearon, James D. 1999. "What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?" Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2000. "Rethinking Recognition." *New Left Review* 3: 107–120.
- Giri, Ananta Kumar. 2001. "Civil Society and the Limits of Identity Politics." *Sociological Bulletin* 50 (2): 267–275.
- Hall, Stuart. 1990. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222–237. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Kymlicka, Will. 1995. *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Mead, George Herbert. 1972. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Edited by Charles W. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. First published 1934.
- Modood, Tariq. 2007. *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- National Commission for Minorities Act. 1993. Government of India.
- Piven, Frances Fox. 1995. "Globalizing Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics." *Socialist Register* 31: 102–126.
- Rutherford, Jonathan, ed. 1990. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. 2004. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *Organizational Identity: A Reader*, edited by Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz, 56–65. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zahid Yousuf Khan, Research Scholar, Department of Political Science,
University of Kashmir

Shahid Iqbal, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Political Science, Jamia
Millia Islamia,