Tracing Communalism in Pre-Independent India

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Abstract

Communalism in India has been the gift of mediaeval history. Communal identities existed in the pre-colonial period but communalism and communal politics took shape and acquired divisive proportions in the colonial period. The modern form of communalism emerged parallel to the process of nationalism. The process of the formation of separate collective consciousness of various religious groups began somewhere in the 1880's. It came with the introduction of the concept of modern nationhood. A multi-religious political entity of British India assumed communal overtones by which nationalism got somewhat parochialised at the level of religious communities. The formation of Indian national Congress and its tactical democratic expansion is interesting in relation to the problem of the communalism in the Indian sub-continent. In order to receive the widest possible support from diverse religious groups, the congress adopted a consensual strategy of compromise and promoted the concept to territorial nationalism. The beginning of the 20th century, the rift between the Hindus and Muslims had widened and the extremist in the two groups had assumed antagonistic postures. The communal forces—Muslims or Hindus—supported the partition of India on religious ground and this resulted in the partition of the country in 1947. Other than that, the issue of class, pre-capitalist consciousness, feudal society and divisive policies of the Britishers has also accentuated the process of communalism and division of India.

Keywords: Communalism, Nationalism, Religious Communities, Culture and Competition, Secularism.

Introduction

Banish religion and all will be well. It is said, is religion synonymous with communalism? Does belief lead to the sectarian rigidity called communalism? It is difficult to agree with this view, even though religious symbols, mythology and terminology are widely used in communal argumentation. Religion or its practice may be condemned with logical justification from the standpoint of rationalism, atheism or scientific approach but to recommend its abolition as a means of eradicating communalism is barking up the wrong tree. The very way of life of the Indian people refutes the argument. The overwhelming majority of them believe in some religion and to say that all of them or even a significant number of them are communal would be unfounded. This is not only true of the common people but also of the leaders. Nobody could ever accuse Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Azad. Dr. Ansari or Purshottam Tandon of having communal tendencies though all of them were deeply religious in their lives. On the other hand the personalities associated with the communal movements are not known for any kind of attachment to the religions which they claimed to defend or promote. Mohammad Ali Jinnah is the most outstanding example of a thoroughly secular person espousing a communal cause. V.D. Savarkar, the chief theoretician of Hindu Rashtravad, was an iconoclast if not an agnostic, and certainly not a man of religious faith. M.S. Golwalkar, the main ideologue of the RSS din not owes his reputation either to any mystical or metaphysical attainments or to ascription either to any mystical or metaphysical attainments of scriptural scholarship. This distinction lies in drawing the line between 'we' and 'they' patriots and traitors, on the basis of religious faith and on recommending Hitler's methods for nation building.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to discover the roots of communalism in India and its specificity in the sub- continent. In the process of study, it will also be attempted to explore various perspectives on the idea of communalism given by various scholars, sections of the society and government of the time as well. It will also be of great interest to understand the relationship of the communalism with the process of the formation of separate collective consciousness of various religious groups and also its

impact onintroduction of the concept of modern nationhood. In Addition, attempt will also be there to explore the interplay of communalism, nationalism, class and also the role played by the Britishers to appropriate the identity of religion to prolong their rule in pre- independent India.

The core of religion is its spirituality, its philosophy of life, birth and death, its quest for ultimate reality supernatural and metaphysical. The communal approach has not even a remote relationship to any such thing, it concerns itself exclusively with the here and not the hereafter with things mundane rather than spiritual It makes no attempt at religious social reform or innovation to harmonies religious belief with scientifically discovered facts or laws of life is of its concern. The communalist comes into action only when there is an opportunity to more or mobilized the followers of a faith against a usually imaginary threat as happened recently with regard to conversions. Moreover, the term communalism was first used in the India contest during the debate on Minto Morley and Motasque Chelmsford reforms References were made in these debates to communal feeling communal representation and communal principle of representation of the different religious communities_. Before we move further, it is important to understand the difference between different terms closely associated with each other but with different meaning altogether. Communal violence needs to be distinguished from communal prejudice and communal conflict. Prejudice, conflict and violence are interrelated one lead to the other, and yet these three sociological expressions of inter community relations have an autonomy of their own. Each may exist independent of the other two. Till the early sixties there was a great deal of racial prejudice against the blacks in the United States of America and yet violence remained on a low key. The Hindu-Punjabis and the Sikh Punjabis were on opposite sides of the conflict over the creation of the Punjabi Subha between 1950 and 1963 and yet there was very little violence. Two groups may be fighting each other for control over political, economic and administrative resources, like the Brahmans and the non-Brahmans in madras during 1910-40 yet the informal rules of the game of not aggravating conflict into street violence may be observed by both the groups. The Shiv Sena agitation in Maharashtra was directed against the south Indians, yet very few south Indians lost their lives. There is prejudice against Punjabis in Uttar Pradesh but it leads to neither conflict not violence. Muslims in Sri Lanka do not mix with the other communities and yet are at peace with them. Thus, it is meaningful to study prejudice, conflict and violence separately. Prejudice is an attitude that predisposes a person to think feel and act in based on ways toward a group and its individual member.

A prejudiced individual evaluates a person belonging to a certain group not as person but on the basis of this group membership when Ahmed cheats Bashir and Bashir thinks that Ahmad is a cheat but when Gupta cheat Bashir he thinks that all Hindus are cheats. Certain negative traits are first associated with members of the other group and all individual are then presumed to have those objectionable qualities

ascribed to that group prejudice results in five types of projective behaviour talking ill of the other group with friends avoidance, discrimination, physical attack and its extreme form it leads to a desire for the extermination of the other group. An average Hindu's prejudice against the Muslim community is because of his misconceived perception of firstly, the attempts made by the Muslim rulers in medieval times to destroy Hindu culture. Secondly, the separatist role played by the Muslims in the freedom struggle. Thirdly, their refusal to modernize themselves and accept the uniform civil code on family planning and lastly their having extra territorial loyalties. After the riots of Ahmadabad many educated Hindus rioters felt that they had avenged the plundering of Somnath temple by Mahmud of Ghazni. An incident which had taken place ten centuries before was still fresh in the minds of the Hindus and in their perception an attack on the present day population of Muslims meant vindicating themselves against Mahmud of Ghazni. Besides this, by and large it has been realised that the cordiality between religious communities continued till 1857.

This fact is made clear in the various proclamations issued by the leaders of the uprising. The fact has been noted, at time with concern, even by western historians of the period. In his introduction to State Papers, George William forest pointed out that among the many lessons the Indian mutiny conveys to the historian none is of greater importance than the warning that it is possible to have a resolution in which Brahmins and Shudras, Hindus and Mohammedans could be united against us and that it is not safe to suppose that the peace and stability of our dominions in any great measure depends on the continent being inhabited by different religious systems for they mutually understand and respect and take part in each other's modes and ways and doings. The mutiny reminds us that our dominions rest on a thin crust ever likely to be rent by titanic fires of social changes and religious evolutions.

Communalism and Diversity of Viewpoint

Communalism is largely considered to be a part of our medieval heritage. On the other hand, it is not so easy to locate the exactness of its roots in India. The Indian society which has a history of waves of external aggression and series of confrontations between the outside aggressors and the indigenous elements and of subsequent processes of the absorption of outsiders through their accommodation and assimilation indeed a society where the principle of co-existence has reigned supreme.. By few scholars the Medieval Indian history is depicted as the chief villain of the piece.

Those holding this view ignore the fact that though rulers of that era did profess religious faith (s), the legitimacy of their rule did not depend either on religious sanction or on the people at large. The legitimacy was based on conquest and superior military powers might was right .The tendency among the common people was to accept whoever was able to assert military superiority. They were never involved in the choice of the king or the ruler. The more extreme inferences drawn from this view of the medieval Indian state have been effectively challenged by some historians who reject the view that Hindu-

Muslims relations in medieval India were characterized exclusively by strife and confrontation. It is argued on the basis of contemporary evidence that the vast majority of Indians lived together without overt communal antipathy or bitterness.

The attempted integration between communities was evident at the Khanqahs of Sufis,an institution of cultural adaptation; the Khanqahs provided a means of incorporating Hindu religious customs and beliefs into an eclectic system. But it was found convenient by the colonial rulers to ignore this reality; there can be no doubt that the British played an important part in heightening communal consciousness and in giving credence to many stereotyped notions about various communities. They laid special emphasis on the conflicts and divisions in medieval Indian society in order to emphasize the unifying and centralizing impact of British rule as well as to counter the claims of the Indian National Congress to represent all classes and communities of Indian society.

Meanwhile, the entire Mughal period that preceded the British colonization, was period of constant wars between expanding Mughal empire and the resisting regional regimes. These wars caused destruction not only of the people and property of the local communities but also demolition of places of worship and loot of valuable, the weaker and vulnerable groups from among the conquered population were also weaned away from their primordial ties of religion through forced or lured conversions. The religious minded Hindu carried the grudge all among and worshipped those Hindu kings such as shivaji of Maharashtra, and Pratap of Mewar who put up a strong resistance to the invading Islamic rulers.

Communalism and Nationalism

It can be said that the communal phenomenon is intricately linked with the growth of nationalism in India. The process of formation of separate collective consciousness of various religious groups began somewhere in the 1880. It came with the introduction of the concept of modern nationhood. A multi religious political entity of British India assumed communal overtones through which nationalism got somewhat parochialised at the level of religious communities. Thus, while nationalism united the various regions, it created rifts between people of various religious groups. Exploiting religious sentiments, some leaders tried to equate nationhood with religious affiliations and advocated a two nation theory to describe the Indian reality. Moreover, it has also been noted that Communalism among the Hindus is associated with the territorial sentiments because of old connections of Hinduism with India, though Hinduism also arrived here from outside with the Aryans. In the case of the Muslim communalism got linked with pan Islamism. Randhir Singh considers the emergence of communal nationalism as a counterpoise to secular nationalism. According to him, it was the British design to weaken the secular national movement by creating a communal rift between the Hindus and Muslims. It was a strategy to counter the growing congress nationalism which was attempting to bring the two communities together to fight the British rule. Historians are of the view that relations between the Hindus and Muslims were cordial during the medieval period when there was mutual respect for each other and an atmosphere of tolerance prevailed. It all began to change with the arrival of the British. The first riot about which dependable information is available had taken place in Ahmadabad in 1730. The immediate cause of the dispute was a trivial one. The district Gazetteer of Banaras make reference to a not that broke out in that city in 1809 on the issue of mosque allegedly built by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb on the site of an old temple. In the years that followed riots involving the Hindus and the Muslims broke out in different parts of India, on one pretext or the other.

Britishers and Communalism

After going through the factual knowledge of the riots and the social, human loss of it, it becomes more important to understand the British policy in this fragile social landscape of the country. The British Government singled out the Muslim community for deliberate repression in the years immediately after the Mutiny of 1857_. The policy was subsequently replaced by one of appeasement of the Muslims. The success of these policies was made possible by the unequal development of the various communities, as indeed of various regions. Except for the united provinces where they were relatively better placed in the professions and government service, Muslims were economically and educationally a backward community. They formed and insignificant portions of the rudimentary Indian bourgeoisie, i,e, being far removed from the commercial and industrial centres of the Empire Calcutta, Bombay and madras. It was for this reason that leaders like Syed Ahmed Khan claimed special concessions and safeguards. Above all, these leaders saw the future progress of the muslins as inextricably linked with the fortunes of the Raj. Syed Ahmed Khan, in particular, professed and preached loyalty to the government: this was the corner stone of his politics.

The British government recognized the necessity for enlisting Muslim support and extended special favors to them in recognition of their historical importance". The introduction of separate electorates was one such favour. This was recognized as a counterpoise to the growing strength of the anti-colonial movement. The principle of communal representation inevitably leads to the creation of political camps organized against each other and teaches men to think as partisans and not as citizens".The formation of Indian national Congress and its tactical democratic expansion is interesting in the relation to the problem of the communalism in the Indian sub-continent. In 1885, the Indian national congress was established as a nationalist organization meaning thereby an organization founded on secular principles seeking membership from all sections of the Indian society. It served as an umbrella organization to provide cover to a variety of interest groups including the Hindu revivalist. In order to receive the widest possible support from diverse religious groups, the congress adopted a consensual strategy of compromise and promoted the concept to territorial nationalism. But, many Muslim leader were very apprehensive, they felt that the westernized Hindu

elite who controlled the congress did not adequately promote Muslim interest.

As a consequence, they began to consolidate Muslim support in the country for the protection of the interests of the Muslim community. Thus, Ghulam- Us- Saqlain proposed in 1903 for a separate political organization for Muslims. He justified this by saying that owing to the want of such an organization the interest of the Muslim community have already suffered in variety of ways and are still being trampled under boot_. He also dissuaded the Muslims for joining the congress on the plea that it stood for the elective principle of competitive examination. He asked the Muslims to join the congress on the condition that the party would discard this principle. It was at this crucial juncture that the Viceroy, Lord Curzon decided to partition the province of Bengal in 1905 on the communal basis. Thoughthe British government stated that the objective of the partition was purely administrative, it was seen by many as a step intended to create a gulf between the Hindus and the Muslim. The Hindu objected to the partition of Bengal and began an agitation against it. In their view, this act was artificially destroying the cultural integrity of the region where Hindus and Muslim co-existed for centuries; people of both the communities inhabited all the parts of the province, and dividing it on the basis of religious concentration.

On the other front, Many Muslims on the other hand, adopted a pro government attitude and sought protection from the government against the rioters. The agitation against the partition of Bengal, thus, took a communal turn. Since the Muslimswere the beneficiary of the partition, most of them naturally sided with the government and opposed the predominantly Hindu agitationist.Encouraged by this signal of the britishers, a delegation of 35 Muslim leaders, headed by Agha Khan called on the Viceroy, Lord Minto at Shimla in October 1906 and requested him to introduce the principle of separate representation for Muslims at all levels of government . The Viceroy gave them a sympathetic hearing an assured them of full protection of their interests. Thus, prompted the Muslims to form a separate political organization of their own. The All India Muslim League thus came into being at Dhaka on 30 December 1906. That was the first major communal political party. It was communal in the sense that is membership was confined only to on community i.e. Muslims and its programme was charted for the political and general wellbeing of the Muslims_. Thus orientation of the All India Muslim League was in contrast to the Indian national Congress, the member ship of which cut across communal lines. Of course, as a reaction to the creation of the Muslim League, some Hindu leaders also decided to organize themselves, the united Bengal Hindu movement and the Punjab Hindu Sabha (set up in 1907) were the first responses from the Hindus. Eventually, Akhil Bharat Hindu Maha Sabha was created. At its first meeting, the leaders of the Sabha, however, announced that "the Sabha is not a sectarian or denominational one, but an all-embracing movement and does not mean any offence to any other movement whether Hindu or non-Hindu. It aims to be ardent and watchful in safeguarding the interest of the entire community in all respects_.

However, as the two organizations grew they got polarized taking the shape of two opposite camps. The British encouraged this rift as it adversely affects congress unity and thus served the British cause.We can also say that by the beginning of the 20th century, the rift between the Hindus and Muslims had widened and the extremist in the two groups had assumed antagonistic postures. The hardened position taken by the leaders of the Muslim League led them to distance from the Congress, as a consequence, the Congress party came to be led mainly by the Hindus. The British and the Muslim league projected the congress as the representative of the Hindu culture and tradition. The lead taken by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in observing Ganapati festival and Shivaji Utsava was interpreted by them as an assertion of Hinduism by the congress. The agitation against the partition of Bengal was also seen in the same light. At the same time, the famous Bengali, Hindi and Urdu writers often referred to the Muslim as foreigners in their writings and identified nationalism with Hindus. The Muslims, in turn referred to Hindus as Kafirs. But the nationalist freedom fighters did their best to keep the secular character of the national movement intact carefully avoiding participation in communal bickering and promoting a feeling of goodwill toward each other whereas, on the other hand, the British had different motives. They wanted this rift to widen to serve their interest of continuing India's colonization. They further fomented, communalistic feelings with introduction of Morley Minto reforms in 1909 through which separate electorates were established on communal lines. Under this system, separate constituencies were set up for Muslims from where only Muslim candidates could contest. Such separatism restricted inter-community interaction and turned the legislative bodies into arenas of communal conflicts. About this situation, Macdonald wrote in his book. The Awakening of India, that the Muslim leaders are inspired by certain Anglo-India officials and these officials have pulled wires at Shimla and in London and of malice aforethought sowed discord between Hindu and Muslim communities by showing to Muslims special favours. The result of separate electorates has not only been the creation of gulf between the two communities but also of its widening progressively. Several factors including of course, the strong resentment of the people from West Bengal contributed to the reversal of the decision by the British government in regard to the partition of Bengal. This annulment took place in December 1911. This came as a rude shock to the Muslims and their movement received a serious setback. The Muslims also got agitated over the attitude of the British government towards Turkey during the Tripoli and Balkan wars. However, they were also puzzled at the sympathy expressed by the national press towards the Muslim brethren in those countries. They were in real dilemma the British backing out from their earlier decision to partition and also acting against the interest of the Muslim in the Middle East on the one hand, and the Indian nationalists supporting the cause of the Turkish people.

With whom to side with? This was a major question. Moreover, to treat Muslims as a distinct political interest was a conscious, but mistaken policy pursued

by the British colonialist. The Muslims community, like the Hindus, was divided at all levels political, economic and ideological.

Their political interests were not alike; they varied from class to class and from region to region. These contradictions came to the fore at the end of 1917 when Montagu and Chelmsford received 44 deputations from Muslims bodies each claiming to speak for the community. Lord Ronaldshay, Governor of Bengal from 1917 to 1922, observed that the Hindu-Muslim differences were significant, since the "division are not only those due to religious belief and practice but also to a profoundly different outlook on life resulting in social systems which are the very antithesis of one another." Such notions established a Muslim identity in Indian politics and encouraged the growth of communal alignments. It is noteworthy that the Congress did not successfully challenge the assumption made by the British rulers about Indian Muslims. In fact, they also assumed that Muslims possessed common economic and political interests and were distinct from Hindus. This was the logic in the Lucknow Pact. By approving the principle of communal representation, the Congress was guilty of accepting and perpetuating the misleading and artificial communal categories created by the imperialists.

Conclusion

The origin of communalism though got its roots from mediaeval times and having its blowout reaching independence had made its extension in the post-independence period which can be grasped by taking into account a number of important factors. Firstly, the communal identities existed in the pre-colonial period but communalism and communal politics took shape and acquired divisive proportions in the colonial period. British policy of Divide and Rule created an artificial division and fostered the growth of communal organizations and of communal politics in India. Further to it, the anti-colonial movement led by the congress compromised with communal elements and with pre-capitalist forms of consciousness consequently the movement witnessed a low level of struggle and had to rely on the narrow levels of consciousness prevailing in India society.

The incompleteness of the anti-feudal revolution had also created conditions of backwardness in which the communal ideology found a fertile soil upon which to grow. Moreover, the political and economic crisis of the system produced conditions in which completion of intra-class and interclass rivalry were aggravated. Further to it, the ruling classes often resorted to the communal strategy as a diversionary tactic to conceal the weakness and fragility of the system. Many Indian leaders, particularly of the congress, maintained that the withdrawal of the colonial power would bring to an end the communal disputes and animosities. How non-prophetic this belief was, is proved by the subsequent history of communal relations in post-independent India. The promised era of communal harmony has eluded us and the hope of establishing a secular society has not been full-filled.

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