

## Understanding the Sociology of Communalism

Every time this country witnesses a threat to the consolidation of its nationhood owing to an Ayodhya vandalism, a Bombay blast or a Gujarat holocaust, the prophets of doom start bawling, screaming blue murder over the systemic degeneration, which has set in in this country and we are pressed hard to ponder over the hydra-headed problem of communalism. After all, what is it that has seen the rise and sustenance of communalism right since the heyday of the British *Raj* in this country? Is it mere politics propelled by crass opportunism that is the root cause of communalism in India? Or is it something else? There are many more such questions, which need to be answered, and many more complex issues which need to be vetted before we attempt a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon called 'communalism' in India. One would attempt to show in the following passages as to how the present day politics propelled by crass opportunism has not only divided the Indian society along communal lines but has also weakened the institutional structure of the Indian State to the detriment of its very survival.

Defined simply, communalism denotes attachment or concern of the members of a particular community towards its own welfare or well-being. Defined thus, even casteism, regionalism or linguistic groupism would appear as only myriad expressions of communalism and, in fact, that is what they are. But for the purposes of this write-up, we would confine ourselves only to the religious connotations and implications of communalism.

The moment we try to trace the rise of communalism in this country, we very conveniently hark back to the days of British Raj and truly so. After all, it were the British who in their bid to continue to possess the 'jewel in the British Crown' tried through their reviled 'divide and rule' policy to divide the Indian society along religious lines. And once planted, the communal seed grew further stronger owing to the fortuitous combinations of many incidents and events, be it the use of many overt or covert emphases on religious symbolism as a strategy to continue the freedom struggle or be it the occasional communal conflagrations as a consequence

thereof. The final nail in the coffin came with the division of the civilisational entity called India along religious lines on August 15th, 1947, the day we won our political freedom.

So, the communal problem also came to us as a legacy from history but its continuance even in today's India can easily be attributed to present day politics, which seem to be propelled more by crass opportunism than anything else. But politics definitely is not the only cause; there are several other factors, which need to be understood before we satisfactorily try to explain the phenomenon of communalism in this country. In the same breath, one would also like to add that politics is the root cause of many other related problems like casteism, regionalism or linguistic fanaticism.

In fact, while vetting an issue like communalism and the threat it poses to our nationhood, one should keep in mind her capacities, constraints, liabilities, strengths and assets. When India earned her freedom on that fateful day of 15th August 1947, she had not only inherited an emaciated economy from her colonial rulers, her social fabric was also in tatters. A country with a very low industrial base, a huge population with very poor social and physical infrastructure and an agriculturally dependent country was still trying to delineate the contours of her identity. And such conditions are very ripe for the rise of the communal phenomenon.

Actually many problems facing this country are nothing but symptomatic of the overall crisis afflicting this country. Observers feels that things like corruption, nepotism, communalism, linguistic fanaticism, terrorism, infra-nationalism, secessionism and all other such cognate problems go on to show that unless something is done urgently, the very survival of this country would be threatened. But wait, do our intelligentsia and think tanks really need to get so down in the dumps? Well, like Dr. Pangloss, the overoptimistic fictional character in Voltaire's classic work, 'Candide', I don't think so. Undoubtedly, measures need to be taken to stem the creeping rot but there is nothing so untoward or unnatural with the overall scenario as to threaten this country's very existence. Rather than carping about the failure to successfully deal with these problems, it would be worth its while to find out the reason behind those problems and proffer solutions therefore.

In fact, India hardly existed as a state before 1947, not to speak of its existence as a nation-state. Even though an idea of India was always there, so, Jawaharlal Nehru did not have to invent an India, he merely discovered it as the title of his celebrated book, 'The Discovery of India' itself reveals. Against her colonial background which underdeveloped her more than it developed and against her meagre resources and myriad constraints, if India has managed to survive in one piece for more than five decades, that itself is an achievement. The problems including communalism, which look so minatory, do so because of this very fact, i.e., India's survival as a democratic state for over half a century. The very functioning of a democratic system quite naturally unleashed the democratic forces that now seem to have got so out of control as to threaten the very system. The competitive party politics which form the very pith and substance of an open, liberal-democratic system has in all these years mobilised the teeming millions of this country and this mobilisation has been accompanied by an alleged deinstitutionalisation process which has only worsened the problem further.

The problem of deinstitutionalisation has been noted and comprehensively discussed by the social scientists for quite some time, which include people like Atul Kohli, Rajni Kothari, Sudipta Kaviraj, Partho Chatterjee, Paul Brass, Robert Stern, and others. These scholars have noted as to how an irresponsible section of the political class with vested interests has been constantly chipping away at the various institutions of the system. The party system, bureaucracy, police, parliament, *panchayati* system, judiciary and all other such institutions which should have been there for the smooth functioning of the system and to carry forward the developmental agenda, have all ended up emasculated at the altar of the political Moloch.

The institutions whose better functioning could have added to the strength of the leadership in the resolution of the sundry problems facing this society, their weakening only reinforces and aggravates those problems. In their bid to harvest rich electoral dividends, this class has not only compromised on the very democratic ethos which inform our constitutional structure, but they have also mobilised electorates on all those parochial and primordial ground which if stressed beyond a point could turn into the veritable Frankenstein's Monster which eventually devoured its own creator. Communalism forms only one such primordial basis for political mobilisation.

But the employment of narrow identities provide very convenient grounds for predicated politics in a society where different sections and regions are on different scales of development and where owing to corruption and such other reasons including the financial weakness and deinstitutionalisation of the system, leadership finds it difficult to attend to the real issues. Here primordial identities and iniquitous developmental processes provide easy fodder for the political machine. Ethical degeneration of a section of society further removes those pangs of conscience, which could have acted as a barrier to such politics as give rise to the demon of communalism. Also, the very fact that our society is still very backward in more than one sense of the term rooted deeply in its primeval identities and is not educated and aware enough as not to be preyed upon by the populism of the reckless politicians creates further ground for communal politics.

One feels that today slowly but steadily the Indian state is consolidating itself and the various problems it seems to be swamped with will go with time and the signs thereof are there for all to be seen. Over five decades of democratic existence has given birth to a lively civil society, which spurred by the demonstration effect in the age of information and communication boom is spoiling for more. The revolution of rising expectations has been taking on various hues and expressing itself in such forms as the increasing assertions of the civil society aided by the instrumentalities of public interest litigations, activism of non-governmental organisations and conscientious people's leadership exemplified by such people as Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Anna Hazare.

As the Indian democracy matures and as a better educated Indian society becomes enlightened through more constructive politics, one is sure that slowly but steadily the employment of narrow identities for political mobilisation shall soon become passé and communalism shall cease to exist as a problem, posing threat to the unity and integrity of our beloved country.

## Salient Points

- Opportunistic politics has not only divided the Indian society along communal lines but has also weakened institutional structure of the Indian State.
- Communalism in India is traced to the British 'divide and rule' policy to divide the Indian society along religious lines.
- A backward society with huge societal diversity create conditions for the rise of the communal phenomenon.
- Indian democracy has unleashed the democratic forces that now seem to have got so out of control as to threaten the very system.
- Number is the only resource left to people in a democracy when everything else fails. Numbers come handy to seek favour along communal lines.
- Employment of narrow identities provides convenient grounds for predicated politics in an inegalitarian society.
- Ethical degeneration removes those pangs of conscience, which could have acted as a barrier to such communal politics.
- Communalism shall soon become passé in a more mature and educated Indian society.

## Glossary

**Vandalism:** wilful destruction of public and private property

**Bawling:** shouting

**Degeneration:** loss of desirable physical, mental or moral qualities

**Crass:** utter insensitive

**Connotation:** meaning

**Implications:** things that is suggested or implied

**Reviled:** criticised

**Meagre:** small

**Deinstitutionalisation:** weakening of socio-political institutions of governance

**Emasculated:** weakened

**Primordial:** narrow

**Frankenstein's Monster:** a thing that becomes destructive of its maker

**Primeval:** instinctive and unreasoning

**Iniquitous:** unequal

**Passé:** outdated