

# Rise of Communalism



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Communalism is basically an ideology on which communal politics is based. Communalism believes that the people of different religions have different interests in political and economic matters. It is sometimes said to put the interests of the community above the interests of the individual. Communalism, in a broad sense means a strong attachment to one's own community. In popular discourse in India, it is understood as unhealthy attachment to one's own religion.

However it has turned to take a negative meaning where people start promoting the interests of one community over another. It has been used as a political propaganda tool to create divide, differences and tensions between the communities on the basis of religious and ethnic identity leading to communal hatred and violence.

In ancient Indian society, people of different faith coexisted peacefully. While, religion was an important part of people's lives but there was no communal ideology or communal politics. Along with the rise of nationalism, communalism too made its appearance around the end of the nineteenth century and posed the biggest threat to the unity of the Indian people and the national movement. It is not true that communalism was a remnant of, or survival from, the medieval period. Though religion was an important part of people's lives and they did sometimes quarrel over religion, there was hardly any communal ideology or communal politics before the 1870s.

Some believe that a major factor in the growth of communalism was the existence of several religions in India. This is not so. It is not true that communalism must arise inevitably in a multi-religious society. Here we must distinguish between religion as a belief system, which people follow as a part of their personal belief, and the ideology of a religion-based socio-political identity,

that is communalism. Religion is not the cause of communalism, nor is communalism inspired by religion. Religion comes into communalism to the extent that it serves politics arising in non-religious spheres. Communalism has been rightly described as political trade in religion. As a modern phenomenon it has arose as a result of British colonial impact and the response of Indian social strata.

### **Stages of Communalism**

Bipan Chandra in his book *India's Struggle for Independence* says that communalism or communal ideology consists of three basic elements or stages one following the other.

**Communal Nationalism** - The 1st stage of communalism, according to Bipan Chandra, originated mainly in the second half of the 19th Century, due to the social religious reform movement. It is the belief that people who follow the same religion have common secular interests, which is a common political, economic, social and cultural interest. These religious units are seen as the fundamental units of Indian society.

**Liberal Communalism** - The second element of communal ideology rests on the notion that the secular interests of one community are divergent and dissimilar to the interests of the followers of the other community. The second stage is called liberal communalism. The liberal communalist was basically a believer in and practitioner of communal politics; but he still upheld certain liberal, democratic and nationalist values.

**Extreme Communalism** - The third stage of communalism is reached when interests of different communities are seen as mutually incompatible, antagonistic

and hostile. So communalism is basically an ideology on which communal politics is based. Extreme communalism is the third or the last stage of communalism. It was based on the theory that fear and hatred has a tendency to use violence of language, deed or behaviour, the language of war and enmity against political opponents. It was at this stage that both the Hindus and Muslim communalists put forward the theory that Muslims and Hindus constitute separate nations whose mutual antagonism was permanent and irresolvable.

### **Reasons for the growth of Communalism in India**

One must understand that the differences between Hindus and Muslims were actually not the reason for communalism because these differences were there during the medieval times itself. Hindus and Muslims were living with their own distinct identities, but they had a common, unifying culture. The difference of faith alone wasn't a reason for conflict. The differences arose only during the colonial period (mainly after 1857 revolt), when many developments were seen and they were responsible for the rise and growth of communalism in modern India. The major factors that contributed towards the emergence and growth of communalism in modern India involves:

1. **Divide and Rule Policy of British-** The British government used communalism to counter and weaken the growing national movement and the welding of the Indian people into a nation. It was presented by the colonial rulers as the problem of the defence of the minorities. Hindu-Muslim disunity was sighted as the reason for the continuation of the British rule. They favoured one community against the other in services and promotions. Communal demands like separate electorates were accepted and thus, they helped in politically strengthening communal organizations. The

colonial rulers showed extreme tolerance towards communal organizations and leaders and did not care to crush the communal riots.

2. **Communal Appeal of Political Parties and Organization-**

Another factor for the rise of communalism in India was that in the 19th Century, several religious organizations were formed by the Hindu and Muslim communities whose goals were poles apart by now. These were organizations that began to play communal politics. It is important to note that on the surface, their declared agenda was different, but deep within, their agenda and activities were contradictory to what they were claiming. Issues like cow slaughter, Urdu-Hindi conflict, Dussehra and Muharram falling in the same month, clashes for procession, etc. often led to clashes. Petty issues were taken up and were used in such a manner which demonized the other community.

At the time of elections, the political parties and organizations make an appeal to the people on communal lines to garner their support and keep their communal feelings alive. They find the appeal in terms of communal lines more paying in terms of votes. In many instances, the communal riots are often politically motivated. These are pre-planned and most of the times are preceded by almost identical incidents which rouse religious sentiments among the people. This would lead to a chain of events that would ultimately lead to the partition of India.

3. **Communal view of Indian history-** A communal and distorted view of Indian history, particularly of the ancient and medieval period, was also responsible for its growth. A beginning in this regard was made by the British historian, James Mill in the early 19th century, who described the ancient period of Indian history as the Hindu period and the medieval period

as the Muslim period. Other British and Indian historians followed him in this respect. This divided the historians also in two categories:

- Historians with Hindu communal tinge claimed that Indian society and culture in ancient times under Hindu rulers had reached ideal heights but fell into permanent decay under the Muslim rulers.
- Historians influenced with Muslim communalism labelled the rule of Muslim rulers as the ‘golden age of Islamic achievement’ in West Asia and hailed their cultural achievements. They glorified the Muslim rulers including the religious bigots like Aurangzeb.

British historians and, following them, Indian historians failed to bring out the fact that ancient and medieval politics in India, as politics everywhere else, were based on economic and political interests and not on religious considerations. Rulers as well as rebels used religious appeals as an outer colouring to disguise the play of material interests and ambitions. Moreover, the British and communal historians attacked the notion of a composite culture in India.

#### 4. **Economic and Educational Backwardness of Indian Muslims-**

Muslim upper classes consisted mostly of zamindars and aristocrats. Because the upper-class Muslims during the first 70 years of the nineteenth century was very anti-British, conservative and hostile to modern education, the number of educated Muslims in the country remained very small. Consequently, modern Western thought with its emphasis on science, democracy and nationalism did not spread among Muslim intellectuals, who remained traditional and backward.

The relative backwardness of the Muslims and their failure to benefit from the socio-cultural reforms of 19<sup>th</sup> century made them to view Hindus as competitors and aspire for political dominance. In these circumstances, it was easy for the British officials and the loyalist Muslim leaders to incite the educated Muslims against the educated Hindus. Sayyid Ahmad Khan and others raised the demand for special treatment for the Muslims in the matter of government service. They declared that if the educated Muslims remained loyal to the British, the latter would reward them with government jobs and other special favours. Therefore, the religious distinction between communities coincided with social and class distinctions resulting in communal disharmony.

5. **Stagnant Economy-** The stagnant economy of India devoid of any development was also an important factor in the growth of communalism in India. It was deeply rooted in and was an expression of the interests and aspirations of the middle classes in a social set up in which opportunities for them were inadequate. The communal question was, therefore a middle class question par excellence. It is, however, important to note that a large number of middle class individuals remained, on the whole, free of communalism even in the 1930s and 1940s. According to Bipan Chandra communal politics till 1937 was organised around government jobs, educational concessions and the like as also political positions - seats in legislative councils, municipal bodies, etc - which enabled control over these and other economic opportunities.

According to him communalism developed as a weapon of economically and politically reactionary social classes and political forces. Communal leaders and parties were in general allied with these classes and

forces. The vested interests deliberately encouraged communalism because of its capacity to distort and divert popular struggle, to prevent the masses from understanding the real issues.

6. **Hindu Tinge in Nationalist Propaganda-** During the national movement, a strong religious element was introduced in nationalist thought and propaganda. They tended to emphasize ancient Indian culture to the exclusion of medieval Indian culture. Hindu idiom was introduced to its day-to-day political agitation. For instance, Bal Gangadhar Tilak used the Ganesh puja and Shivaji Mahaotsav to propagate nationalism. Incidentally, association with god Ganesh and Shivaji was used as a tool by the communal Muslims to alienate Muslims. This was also a reason behind non-participation of Muslims in large numbers in Indian National Congress till 1919.

In fact, in the early decades, only about 8-9% of the members of the Indian National Congress were Muslims. Similarly, the agitation against partition of Bengal began with people taking dips in the Ganges. Also, prominent personalities like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee often cited Muslims as foreigners in their writings. All these incidents played with the emotions of the Muslims and alienated them from the Hindus.

This proved to be particularly harmful as clever British and pro-British propagandists took advantage of the Hindu colouring to poison the minds of the Muslims. The result was that a large number of educated Muslims either remained aloof from the rising nationalist movement or became hostile to it, thus falling an easy prey to a separatist outlook.

7. **Side-effects of socio-religious reform movements-** Reform movements such as Wahabi Movement among Muslims and Shuddhi among



Hindus with their militant overtones made the role of religion more vulnerable to communalism. Reforms, at times, were seen as a process of insulating one community from the influence of another religious community.

## **Growth of Communalism in India-**

Hindus and Muslims had fought shoulder to shoulder during the Revolt of 1857. Till 1870 the British oppressed the Muslims greatly for they held them responsible for the revolt. After 1870 the British changed colors and instead started favoring the Muslim community. The rise of nationalism had threatened the British power in India and their efforts obviously were directed to suppress it.

To check the growth of a united national feeling in the country, they decided to follow more actively the policy of 'divide and rule' and to divide the people along religious lines, in other words, to encourage communal and separatist tendencies in Indian politics. For this purpose they decided to come out as 'champions' of the Muslims and to win over to their side Muslim zamindars, landlords and the newly educated. They also fostered other divisions in Indian society. It readily accepted communal leaders as authentic representatives of all their co-religionists.

In the rise of the separatist tendency along communal lines, Sayyid Ahmad Khan played an important role. Though a great educationist and social reformer, Sayyid Ahmad Khan became towards the end of his life a conservative in politics. He laid the foundations of Muslim communalism when in the 1880s he gave up his earlier views and declared that the political interests of Hindus and Muslims were not the same but different and even divergent. He also preached complete

obedience to British rule. He also began to preach that, since the Hindus formed the larger part of the Indian withdrawal of British rule. He urged the Muslims not to listen to Badruddin Tyabji's appeal to them to join the National Congress.

The separatist and loyalist tendencies among a section of the educated Muslims and the big Muslim nawabs and landlords reached a climax in 1906 when the All India Muslim League was founded under the leadership of Aga Khan, the Nawab of Dhaka, and Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk. Founded as a loyalist, communal and conservative political organisation, the Muslim League made no critique of colonialism, supported the partition of Bengal and demanded special safeguards for the Muslims in government services.

Later, with the help of Lord Minto, the Viceroy, it put forward and secured the acceptance of the demand for separate electorates. Separate electorates meant grouping of constituencies, voters and elected candidates on the basis of religion. In practical terms it meant introducing Muslims constituencies, Muslim voters and Muslim candidates. It also meant that non-Muslim voter could vote for a Muslim candidate. All this was to have disastrous consequences.

Initially Muslim League was only confined to the educated class of Muslims. At around the same time the Indian National Congress began garnering mass support from its members and also consisted of young Muslims. Mohammed Ali Jinnah one of the major forces behind the creation of Pakistan was in fact a member of the Indian National Congress till 1920.

Thus, while the National Congress was taking up anti-imperialist economic and political issues, the Muslim League and its reactionary leaders preached that the interests of Muslims were different from those of Hindus. The Muslim

League's political activities were directed not against the foreign rulers, but against Hindus and the National Congress. The League soon became one of the main instruments with which the British hoped to fight the rising nationalist movement and to keep the emerging intelligentsia among Muslims from joining the national movement.

The Khilafat agitation was a product of a particular political climate where Indian nationalism and Pan-Islamism went hand in hand. This was first the religious political movement in India involving common Muslims. The Khilafat Movement received the support of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, who related his Non Cooperation Movement with it. It witnessed Muslims' participation in the national movement at an unprecedented level. However, communalism started making inroads into Indian politics and society, just after the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement.

The arrival of the Simon Commission and its near unanimous boycott by all sections of political opinion, once again provided an opportunity for unity. A section of the Muslim League, under the leadership of Jinnah was willing to give up separate-electorates in favour of joint-electorates, if certain conditions were met. Their demands were accepted by the Congress. But its rejection in uncompromising terms by the Hindu Mahasabha in the All Party Conference (1928) complicated the matter. The Nehru Report was rejected by the Muslim League as it did not incorporate all their demands. It led to the estrangement of Jinnah who called it a 'Parting of the Ways' with the Congress. He went back to the separate-electorates and formulated his famous fourteen points which became the text of the communal demands.

The mass popularity that the Indian National Congress was enjoying led to The Muslim League feeling increasingly sidelined. This got worse in 1938 when the congress prohibited communalists from functioning within the Congress organization. Thus the congress was criticized for preaching that Hindus were the only Nation living in India. This led to the Hindu fundamentalist's version of 'two nation theory'. The 'two nation theory' included Hindu Maha Sabha wherein it states that the country belongs to only Hindus and the Muslims should find their own home or should remain obedient to Hindus. And other 'the Muslim League' wherein it states that Pakistan is the only option to protect the interest of Muslims as it has the maximum population of Muslims.

Soon this drifting apart was to reach a point of no return. This was the starting point of communalism transforming into an irresistible mass force. Post 1937 election and dismal performance of Muslim League, a massive campaign for the popularization of the League was launched by Jinnah. The Muslim League actually broke out of its elite shell and began to acquire a mass character. By 1940, all the communal demands were to pale into insignificance in front of the new demand-the demand for Pakistan, as a separate homeland for Muslims.

In 1940, at the Lahore session, Jinnah came up with the two-nation theory. It said that Muslims were not a minority, they were a nation. Hindus and Muslims, consisted of two nations, as they were different people economically, politically, socially, culturally and historically.

After the outbreak of World War – II, Viceroy Linlithgow constantly promoted the Muslim League and the Pakistan power was used to contradict the Congress command that the British should promise to liberate India after the war and as evidence of honesty, shift actual power of Government to Indians

immediately. Before promising or coming to a concrete solution the British wanted an agreement between the Muslims League and the Congress organization which stated that no political settlement should be made which was offensive to the Muslims League. This agreement would give Jinnah a type of a 'veto' power which he would use in future.

As the Muslims were not united during the pre partition days, the aim of the Muslim League was to provoke religious passions to dedicated path. Communalism soon became one of the biggest threats to national movement and the unity of the people in India. It was also at this stage that both the Muslim and Hindu communalists put forward the theory that Muslims and Hindus constituted separate nations whose mutual antagonism was permanent and irresolvable. Therefore the Muslims of India should have a sovereign state for themselves. Hence lay proposal for Pakistan as a separate homeland for Muslims. This demand was finally achieved in 1947 with the partition of India.