

Communalism in India

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term communalism has its roots in the term commune or community which means a group of people who swear allegiance to one's own community, religion, or ethnic group rather than the society at large. Further, to elaborate, in the sociological lexicon the concept of communalism can be seen as a form of a collective outburst of one community against the other. In other words, it is an ideology that emphasizes the social, political, and economic unit of the group of adherents of each religion, and emphasizes the distinction, even the antagonism, between such groups. To understand the social phenomenon of communalism, it is pertinent to understand the very nature of society. Society plays a very important role in the genesis of communalism.

There are various views regarding the genesis of communalism in India. Colonial thinkers like Hugh McPherson in his work 'Origin and Growth of Communal Antagonism' rejected the idea that 'communalism' is "a modern invention, the product of recent political developments", which refers specifically to the politics of separate electorates. To prove his point, he refers to the Benares riot of 1809, the 'Anti cow killing society' established by Tilak, the age-old animosity between Hindus and Muslims. On the other hand, for the nationalist 'communalism' is a colonial problem with its remedy being nationalism. For the nationalist, while both 'nationalism' and 'communalism' were responses to colonialism, the former was the 'right' response and the latter, the wrong one.

Louis Dumont considered communalism a bit ambiguous. It can finally appear either as a genuine transition to the nation or as an attempt on the part of the religion to oppose the transformation by allowing for the external appearances of a modern state. It is a kind of political Janus, looking both backward and forward. Scholars like Bipin Chandra also attributed 'communal politics' to colonial origins, since, any form of popular politics could not have existed before the advent of the British. He also advocated that communalism has three basic elements or stages one after another as follows:

1. **Communal Nationalism:** The 1st stage of communalism, according to Bipin 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.
2. **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.
3. **Extreme Communalism:** The third stage of communalism is reached when the 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 tend 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 leading to the partition and formation of Pakistan and India. In the context of India, society was never homogenous throughout history. It was highly diverse- culturally, religiously, caste-wise, and linguistically. But there was hardly any tension between these groups. However, most of the scholars agree that communalism is a modern phenomenon and not a medieval phenomenon as it all began with the establishment of British Rule in India. The reasons that can be taken into consideration for this rise of communalism are; the British divisive policies, competitive nature of the colonial rule, political and social structure, Hindu and Muslim revivalist movements, the backwardness of colonial society with stunted economic growth, etc.

As to Louis Dumont, considering authors like Beni Prasad, there were the following main factors for the political division between Hindus and Muslims in India.

1. Lasting social heterogeneity of the two communities:

- During the period of Muslim domination, 'general social fusion' could not take place. There were reciprocal influences and a cultural fusion only. Hinduism became more rigid in the Muslim period as a consequence of its being deprived of its normal temporal powers. The equilibrium between religion and power was being maintained by various mutual compromises.

- Also, a **communal and distorted view of Indian history**, particularly of the ancient and medieval periods, was responsible for the growth of communalism in India. Moreover, the British and communal historians attacked the notion of a composite culture in India.

2. Change in the distribution and nature of power:

- British conquest brought a change in power which struck the upper Muslims directly and indirectly. Either immediately, or later and progressively, they lost practically all their means of livelihood, along with political power itself. While the Muslims were thrown down from their position of power and affluence, the Hindu merchants and moneymen were promoted to powerful positions.

- In his classic and dramatic description of the decadence of the upper-class Muslims of Bengal, William Wilson Hunter talked about the loss of their quasi-monopoly over employment and their dominant positions in relation to land.

- Muslim upper classes consisted mostly of zamindars and aristocrats. Because the upper-class Muslims during the first 70 years of the nineteenth century were 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 the 19th century made them view Hindus as competitors and aspire for political dominance. It was easy for the British officials and the loyalist Muslim leaders to incite the educated Muslims against the educated Hindus in these circumstances. Syed Ahmed Khan and others like the National Muhammad Association raised the demands for special treatment for the Muslims in the matter of government service and also for separate representation of the minority in the local self-government. They declared that if the educated Muslims remained loyal to the British, the latter would reward them with government jobs and other special favors. Therefore, the religious distinction between communities coincided with social and class distinctions resulting in communal disharmony.

3. The separation effect of 'revivalism':

- The Hindus, and later on the Muslims, in order to reaffirm their religion, or their culture, in the face of the Christian and Western challenges had to resort to their past glories and reform religion through revivalism.

- 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.

- Hindu reformist organizations such as the Arya Samaj advocated a return to the Vedas and had confidence in the narrative Hindu decline with the advent of the colonial rulers which needs to be revived.

- Examples like Bankim Chandra Chatterji's 'Bande Mataram' reflect the limits reached by the Hindu intelligentsia in its effort to build up nationalism. There can be no place for the Muslims in a patriotism whose images are the Hindu goddesses.

4. The undertones of Congress nationalism:

- When we look at the actual agitation of the Congress through the initial phases of its history, we observe that as in the case of Bankim from the moment the supposedly pure nationalist leaders wanted to enlist

the energies of the people immediately, they were naturally led to mobilize its actual deeper collective emotions, that is they had to appeal to religion in the name of the nation-to-come.

- 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 pooja and Shivaji Mahotsav to propagate nationalism. Incidentally, association with god Ganesh and Shivaji was used as a tool by the communal Muslims to alert Muslims. Tilak's tendency can perhaps not be called communal, in so far as it was directed in the first place against the British, but it necessarily bred communalism in the simultaneously antagonized Muslim partner.

- This was also a reason behind the non-participation of Muslims in large numbers in the 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 the 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.

- According to Louis Dumont, Mahatma Gandhi also tried to integrate nationalist aspirations within the Hindu framework of 'non-violence', and had two objectives; first, to attain independence; and second, to save Hinduism. Congress as a whole appeared to have a communal tinge.

5. Divide and rule policy of the 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 defense of the minorities. Hindu-Muslim disunity was sighted as the reason for the continuation of British rule. They favoured one community against the other in services and promotions. Communal demands like separate electorates and special representation were accepted, and thus, they helped politically strengthen communal organizations. The colonial rulers showed extreme tolerance towards communal organizations and leaders and did not care to crush the communal riots.

Along with these points enlisted by Louis Dumont, some other points that can also be included are-

6. Rise of communal and fundamentalist parties:

- 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, the Urdu-Hindi conflict, Dussehra and Muharram falling in the same month, clashes for a procession, etc. often led to clashes. Petty issues were taken up and were used in such a manner that demonized the other community.

7. 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 setup in which opportunities for them were inadequate. The communal question was, therefore a middle-class question par excellence. According to Bipan Chandra communal politics till 1937 was organized around government jobs, educational concessions, and 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.

All of these factors contributed to the growth of communalism in India which resulted in the partition. During the final phase of events when in 1937, the Muslim League was beaten in the elections, and the Congress, through the formation of homogeneous cabinets and the inauguration of its Muslim mass contact campaign, exacerbated the communalist feeling among Muslims. The major trend in Muslim league policy in the years that followed, apart from reorganization, use of the traditional religious leaders, and standing aloof from the extreme nationalist attitude of the Congress, was its adoption of the motto of Pakistan, i.e. of the Muslims to have their own territory as per Jinnah's two-nation theory. The next elections in January 1946 were a triumph for the Muslim League and this, as the basis of Jinnah's intransigence in the negotiations of the following years, was a main factor of partition. This demand was finally achieved in 1947 with the formation of Pakistan making communalism resemble nationalism.

Louis Dumont considered partition as inevitable as a lesser evil in so far as the feeling of the Muslims of being socially distinct was disregarded by the leaders of the nationalist Congress. The attempt was made to coerce India into the abstract framework of modern political theory instead of recognizing its duality and trying to build the union of the two communities, at least for a long intermediary period, on their very separateness. This is probably also what Beni Prasad meant when he said that the State was not necessarily to be uni-national.

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