

# Communal Riots in India: Social, Political and Economic Aspects

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

### Article History

Published Online: 07 September 2018

### Keywords

Communalism, togetherness, post-independence

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## ABSTRACT

The challenge of communalism in India, is the biggest internal challenge, not only to the working and stability of our domestic, secular system but also to the basic principles governing our national life. Today, India is celebrating seventy two years of independence, but still ugly forces of religious fundamentalism and rapid communalism have been raising their heads to such an extent that the unity and togetherness are at the edge of break. Communalism, needless to say, is a highly complex phenomenon like any other social phenomenon. Communal consciousness in India has not developed overnight. Its roots are deep. The character of inter-ethnic relations between Hindus and Muslims have been influenced by various socio-historical factors. In order to understand the present dimension of communalism, a brief overview of such factors become imperative. We begin herewith the study of communal history of India, but our main emphasis will be to highlight religious, social, political and economic causes, which contributed to the development of communal consciousness between the two major communities in pre and post-independence.

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## 1. Introduction

The word 'communalism' has been derived from the word 'commune' which means feeling of oneness or a community feeling.<sup>1</sup> Attachment to a religious community is not communalism. On the other hand, using a religious community against other communities and against the nation is communalism. Hence, it is an ideology which emphasizes separate identity of religious groups often a tendency to promote its own interest at their expense.<sup>2</sup> this communal ideology spreads poison in the minds of the people, slowly and gradually which often leads to tension and even rioting. As a result, there is large destruction of human life and property, rape, destruction of traditional moral values, stagnation in business and industry and terrorization of innocent people are common features during communal violence.<sup>3</sup> In India, most of the riots occur between two major communities, Hindus and Muslims. Their tensions and conflicts have been one of the major inter-group problems and the roots go deep into history. Before independence, it was the imperial interests of the British which kept the two communities apart. But after independence, besides legacy of partition, the dynamics of socio-economic and political development have to be taken into account to explain the nature of communal, riots between them.<sup>4</sup>

The medieval rulers did not encourage communal violence what a colonial masters had done. They did so not because they were uncivilized but because they were colonial. Their interest encouraged them to follow the policy of "Divide and Rule". In its first attempt, British divided Bengal (1905) in the name of administrative efficiency, but real motive behind it was to divide people on the basis of religion. After that it decided to introduce reforms based on communalism. First such reform was the Morley-Minto reforms (1909), related to elections to local and municipal committee and the second was Montagu-Chelmsford reforms.<sup>5</sup> The British intention to promote communalism was also apparent at the time of Second Round Table Conference for which the delegates were chosen on the

basis of their communal leaning. After the failure of the Conference, in 1932, it used another instrument by releasing the Communal Award, accepting not only the Muslim communal demands but further pushing the depressed classes towards communalism by introducing separate electorates for them.<sup>6</sup> While carrying on the policy is further manifested in 1939, in reply to the Congress demand for effective transfer of power. The British insisted on communal settlements and made it a pre-condition for making any constitutional advance. Even it accepted the Muslim League as sole representative organ of the Muslims<sup>7</sup>.

In March 1942, through Cripps Mission, the British gave an indirect-recognition to the Muslim claim for a separate homeland, made in the Lahore Resolution (1940). Negative approach of Muslim League and the British even seen in 1945, while forming a new executive council by including equal proportion of vote cast by both communities. As a result, Jinnah finally demanded a separate homeland for Muslims.<sup>8</sup> At last, the communal attitude of the Hindus, Muslims and support given to it by the British reached the tragic climax in the partition of the country. Hence, partition had a great impact on the communal situation in India and unfortunately, it became a wound that refused to heal even after half a century.

There are inevitable economic compulsions behind the communalistic ideology. There are many conflicts which are based on economic rivalries or uneven economic development within two communities. During the British rule, Muslims were traditionally artisan people and till the beginning of the nineteenth century, India was famous for its handicrafts. Hence, it provided employment opportunities and sources of income to a large number of Muslims. These handicrafts fulfilled largely to the need of exported, aristocrats and other urban dwellers and the army. But handicrafts, entered into an era of decline in the second half of the eighteenth century due to end of the Mughal rule and due to Industrial revolution in

Britain.<sup>9</sup>

At this situation, while the Hindus tried to come to terms with the new realities about the British rule, but the Muslims failed to do so. This socio-economic shift benefited the Hindus and harmed the interests of the Muslims. As a result, Hindu merchants and moneylenders began entering in the cotton textile industry and other industrial activities, but the Muslims were absent from such vocations. Hence the gap between the two communities widened at the turn of twentieth century especially after World War-1, when tariff protection gave a big boost to industrialization<sup>10</sup>.

Hence the growing prosperity of Hindu traders and industrialists in urban areas created a sense of deprivation among the poor Muslims of neighboring '*bastis*'. Sometimes this uneven economic development led to the loot of houses of rich Hindus. When communal riots broke out in September 1918, houses and properties of Marwari businessmen were looted in Calcutta by the Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

Another factor after independence, is due to migration of the urban professional Muslim class to Pakistan, the percentage of Muslims in government job declined and continued to be low due to lack of preparedness and sufficient educational qualifications.<sup>12</sup> Even during the era of planned economic development, a large number of new industrial and commercial units emerged in the private sector, but among them, the proportion of Muslim owned units were very small. Hence employment opportunities for the Muslims in private sector have remained extremely limited and they have suffered great hardships.<sup>13</sup> This has further increased Muslim sense of frustration.

Since 1960, most communal riots have taken place in industrial towns and cities such as Jamshedpur, Ranchi, Kanpur, Meerut, Ahmadabad and the satellite area of Bombay etc. In these areas, the Muslim artisans and businessmen have achieved a relative high degree of prosperity. As in case of 'Varanasi', so long as there was no threat, Hindu dealers in saree business, there was communal harmony and Hindu dealers and Muslim artisans went on merrily. Once the Hindu dealers saw the emerging Muslim dealers, the former incited and funded communal riots.<sup>14</sup>

Excess urbanization also created the problem of communalism. Many people migrated to cities in search of livelihood, where they found themselves completely cut off from their organic roots. There prevailed a sense of insecurity, when they failed to get satisfactory employment- In these conditions; they were attracted towards communal activities.<sup>15</sup> This urbanization also created the problem of accommodation. As in 1999, an inter-communal marriage was opposed and a vicious campaign launched against the Muslims, in which three hundred families were forced to leave.<sup>16</sup> Even in some cases, communal solidarity raised to break the unity of the workers. It fulfills the interests of ruling class and they used it to disrupt and divide the working class movement. This policy had been used in Kariamagani riots in 1968.<sup>17</sup> Hence, from the above, it is clear that economic rivalries, unequal development, competition for jobs, urbanization and lack of accommodation, poverty, hunger, unemployment, jealousy for employment and

promotion etc. incited communal violence.

A large number of ideological, social and cultural elements contributed to the rise and growth of communalism. As the Hindus-Muslims are two well defined religious communities in India, these are divided by different languages, religious beliefs, practices. Sometimes these different religious, cultural practices also became the immediate cause of communal tension. As before 1947, almost all the communal riots occurred around such religious issues, such as music before the mosque, cow slaughter, cutting of a peepal tree, throwing of colored water during or some other festivals<sup>18</sup>. Apart from these differences, social exclusiveness and lack of social contact between them made its own contribution towards the growth of communalism. In big cities, Hindus and Muslims had a tendency to live apart in different *mohallas* or areas due to the relative absence of inter-dining and inter-marriage.<sup>19</sup> Apart from this, the bitter relationship of the Hindu-Muslims in remote past still continues to exist in people's memory. The Hindus still feel, that they were treated unfairly by their Muslim rulers and separatist role played by Muslims in freedom struggle. The Ram Janma Bhoomi agitation during December 1992 goes to prove this. Similarly, the fact of partition too has not yet been forgotten<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, Muslims in India have acquired the psychology of a deprived group. They compare their status with Muslims of other Muslim majority states or with their own status during Mughal or British days. Therefore they have not been able to come to grips with the changed realities of a secular country.<sup>21</sup> Hence in this atmosphere, it was easy for feeling of mistrust, fear and suppressed violence. In such conditions, not only Muslims, who were religious minorities, but Hindus also suffered equally and the communal leaders took full advantage of this anxiety and fears felt by them. The Muslim communalist constantly played up the theme of Hindu domination over Muslim's culture and religion undermined and overthrown by overwhelming Hindu majority. Similar theme had been used by Jinnah in 1937 to build up his political campaign to popularize the Muslim League<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, the Hindu communalists tried to instill the same feelings in Hindus by declaring that danger arose because Hindus were a milder, weaker, unorganized people. Hence an intensive propaganda on these lines resulted in outburst of communal fury in Pune in February 1982.<sup>23</sup>

The embitterment of Hindu-Muslim relation was also growing with the growth and rise of many Hindu and Muslim militant organizations. These organizations advocate militancy among their supporters in a systematic manner. In 1951, there were about a dozen communal organizations and now their number is estimated to be five hundred, having about ten crores as their members.<sup>24</sup> The Hindu organizations advocate uniform civil code, government control over Church and Mosques, restoration of all those temples which are converted into the Mosques, establishment of Hindu Raj and change in the name of India, that is *Bharata* to *Hindu Rashtra* 25 On other side, considerable number of Muslim organizations have come into existence which not only keep anti-Hindu sentiment alive, but instill a sense of separate identity in the Muslims.<sup>26</sup>

The communal phenomenon is political in genesis. Communal tension arises as a result of the skilful manipulation

of the religious sentiments and cultural ethos of the people by its elites. The major cause of communal conflict before and after partition was the struggle for political power. After independence, the problem of communalism has been targeted by adopting the secular design of the constitution, but it was not easy to translate the constitutional ideals into practice in a society as complex as India.<sup>27</sup> There were no riots for several years due to Congress hegemony, but it proved to be a temporary respite. The crisis of Congress hegemony became obvious in the late 1960's, when Indira Gandhi came to power after splitting the Congress. With this, a new phase of communal politics started in post-partition India<sup>28</sup>. The riots of 1960s and after, found systematically engineered by vested interests for political power. Indira Gandhi at the end of 60's was attacking Hindu communal organizations for fomenting communal riots thereby ensuring her political survival and consolidating her position, as result of massive communal riots organized in 1969 in Ahmedabad<sup>29</sup>. Hence a close study of communal violence shows that whenever the need arises, political parties use religion without hesitation.

There is hardly any political party, which has not used religious symbols and idioms for purely electoral purposes and utilized them for its narrow political gain. Mostly, it came up with deceptive slogans and issues to divert the attention of the people from their miserable existence.<sup>30</sup> As focusing on the Ayodhya issue enormously helped the Bharatiya Janata Party to achieve electoral success<sup>31</sup>. In some cases, political parties also adopt placate theory for minority votes- As result, the greater the efforts to placate minority groups, the more aggressive, the majority groups tend to become. Moving on this theory, Rajiv Gandhi government's decision to allow Muslims to follow their own 'Personal laws' after Shah Bano case. As a reaction, the Bharatiya Janata Party fully exploited the passage of the bill in Parliament, as an act of appeasement of Muslims. Thus the uniform Civil Code became an important item on the Hindutva agenda. Then Rajiv Gandhi, as a balancing act, got the Babri Masjid doors opened for Hindus to worship Ram Lalla.<sup>32</sup> It would also be seen that the ruling political parties both at the Centre as well as in the States, encourage communalism in order to ensure maximum number of votes. Sometimes politicians make most opportunity alliances on caste and communal basis. As alliance with Muslim League, both by Congress as well as the Communist Party (Marxist), gave the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) a chance to establish its foothold in Kerala.<sup>33</sup> Even not only communal ideology, some communal riots have been used as a strategy to capture power. Political parties incite communal feelings and then step forward at election time and claim to be the protectors of the voters.<sup>34</sup> This game plan is adopted from time to time, by almost every political party.

Hence in election years, there have been a sudden jump in communal violence and brutality. Mostly political parties, through their manifesto raise abstract emotional issues. As Congress manifesto assures Muslim that it is against any external interference in Muslim personal law, made Urdu the

second official language, protection of places of Worship Act in 1991 etc.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, Bharatiya Janata Party in its manifesto committed to the concept of one Nation, one people, one culture; construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya etc<sup>36</sup>. So in this way, they also sow the seeds of communal ideology for their motives.

Some time political authority's decision becomes the cause of communal riots. As Ahmedabad riots of February 1985, were organized to topple the government of Madhavsingh Solanki. Solanki announced reservation in government jobs and education institutions to get votes, in 1985 election<sup>37</sup>. Similarly Mandal reservation policy and its threats sowed the seeds of the Ayodhya incident.<sup>38</sup> Communalism has also been sustained by the structure and pattern of political mobilization. Thus in various ways, communalism serves the interests of the dominant classes.

Besides all these factors, there are many other factors which are responsible for communalism. First the role of communication media is undoubtedly an important one in spreading or combating communal violence. Mostly economically or politically powerful people have manipulated and controlled the means of communication to propagate their thoughts and ideologies. While reporting of riots by media is another area, where we find that a slight carelessness version can lead to further fanning of the religious and emotional sentiments resulting in violent chain-reactions and brutality. As the coverage of the Jabalpur riots and the articles written on the Moradabad riots by the editor of a leading *National -Daily* are the most glaring example of this prejudice.<sup>39</sup> Godhra was indeed the first major communal riot that got a wide media coverage particularly from the satellite channel. there biased reporting as it can further encourage the communal elements to instigate the masses.

## 2. Conclusion

Hence, from above, it is clear that to develop a comprehensive theory of communal conflict for the contemporary Indian society, one will have to take macro as well as micro factors into account. Among the macro factors are countrywide socio-economic changes, the policies pursued by the ruling political parties, communal groups for ensuring victory at the hustling, deliberate attempts to encourage religious fundamentalism by the ruling classes etc. At micro-level one must take into account factors like proportion of Muslim population, nature of economic competition, history of communal riots in area, role of the anti-social elements etc. But from last two decades the emergence of hindutva politics in last two decades has been a cause of communal riots in India. In this phase the local factors have also helped in instigating riots. This reveals that communal riots are not caused by religious animosity. The arise due to conflicting political interests, which are often linked to economic interests.

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