A STUDY OF RELIGION AND COMMUNAL POLITICS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In view of the intrusion of religious passions into politics one may ask whether India is a truly secular or a theocratic state. India is of course, not the only modern state where politics is related closely to religion. Church and State are linked in Italy and Germany; and in Britain the Anglican Church is established i.e. it is a part of state structure. There are two major notions of religion – the individual and social. The Former refers to religion as some sort of a psycho-spiritual experience of an individual and the later refers to its social dimensions. Where religion acquires the status of social institution or a value structure of a group in a particular social formation. Our concern here is with the second, i.e. with religion as a social institution and as a value structure consisting of ideas, concepts, myths and rituals.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Communal Politics, India, social institution

INTRODUCTION

Religion as an element of personal belief remains the strongest force in India but the trouble arises when the personal faith is converted into communal antagonism. Prof. MoinShakir of Marathwada University says that, "a large sections of the majority community is still free from communal prejudices and it is intriguing to note that the Muslim elite does not seem to have faith in healthy social set-up as a factor of promoting mutual trust."

It is with the event of colonialism on one hand and subsequent parliamentary democracy that led to politicization of religion and religious communities and thus the inter - religious clashes are in fact inter-political clashes.

Moons Raza clearly differentiate religious and communal, "Being religious involves accepting and/or respecting the system of beliefs and practices and/or respecting the system of beliefs and practices associated with the religion concerned, being communal calls for advancing the interests of a communities in isolation from and other even at the cast of the legitimate interest of a community."

Communal Politics in India:-

Under the Mughals there was no politics and, in the democratic sense, politics commenced when the Muslims found that the British manned the administration overwhelmingly by Hindus and the permanent settlement, step by step, expropriated the Muslim landlords and by the nineteenth century most of the land was owned by Hindus. Reluctance of Muslims to read English made them educationally backward before the British. Greatly distressed by the backward State of Muslims, the Muslim leaders fell into the trap of the British policy of "divide and rule" and with a view to secure more benefits for the community worked for separate "Muslim identity."

While the Indian National Congress provided a common platform for all communities to fight for the country's independence, the British Government spared no strategy to generate communal disharmony between Hindus and Muslims. In the process, it introduced the communal electorate system and encouraged Jinnah's two-nation theory that fuelled communal politics. However, while committing the people of India to secularism, the authors the constitution did not take for granted that communalism and all its variants in the Indian polity would ipso facto cease to exist. In fact, some members of the constitution-making body foresaw that the canker of communalism would persist unless new India took adequate measures to eliminate it by law. One of the members, AnanthasayanamAyyangar, moved a resolution on April 8, 1948 stating that "this Assembly is of the opinion that no communal organization which by its constitution or by the exercise of its discretionary powers is vested on grounds of religion, race or caste, or any of them, should be permitted to engage in any activities other than those essential for the bonafide and cultural needs of the community."

Intervening to the discussion and supporting the resolution Nehru observed, "We must have it clearly in our minds and in the mind of the country that alliance of religion and politics in the

shape of communalism is a most dangerous alliance, and, it yields the most abnormal kind of illegitimate blood." Judging by the recent events arising out of the nexus between religion and politics, Ayyangar's fears and Nehru's warning on communalism seem to have come true, and communalism has indeed become a pernicious feature of our national life

Communal Politics in the 20th Century:-

When Lord Minto became the british Viceroy Governor-General of India on 18, November, 1905, he appointed a committee to consider suggestions regarding various matters including that of increasing the representation of Indians on the coastal and provincial legislative councils. A deputation representing the Muslims of India headed by this Highness the late Aga Khan met LortMinto on 1 October, 1906 at Simla. It is from this deputation that the origin of the All India Muslim League dates and with this the introduction of separate electorates, i.e. a communal representation occurs in the constitutional history of India marking a significant phase in India's communal history as well. This communal division was further institutionalized in the census operations, which established a Hindu "majority" and a Muslim "minority" that in turn became the basis of electoral, representative politics. These census operations, as SumitSarkar says, "necessitated the drawing of sharp distinctions, of religion, caste, language, or whatever else the administrators had decided on as worthy of being counted" . Here we must remember that already from the 1770s the British had followed the way of administering in matters of so-called 'personal' or 'family' laws, according to Hindu or Islamic sacred texts and in consultation with Muslim Ulema and Brahman Pandits, differently for these two major religious traditions. Thus in all major day-to-day situations in the British India, one had to declare oneself a Hindu or a Muslim (or any other religious tradition that had a personal legal system of their own). The separate electorate created by the British of involve Indian representation in the administration as part of the "divide and rule" policy of the British contributed to making a clear cut division between 'Hindu majority' and 'Muslim minority and helped to make each group as social and political categories. Later the separate communal electorate was extended by the British to other minorities, like Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians and even Europeans and Scheduled Castes in the British Raj. Tara Chand points out that "the British pursuing their ambitions for dominations over India discovered very early that the key to success law in exploiting the divisions in Indian society". And they were successful in their divide and rule policy.

Mr. A.O. Hume formed the Indian National Congress in 1885, with the laudable objective of fusing into one national whole all the different and discordant elements that constituted the Indian population. It is from this beginning that gradually the Congress became the harbinger of the rising national movements. The Indian National Congress soon represented the interests of native bourgeois and thus enlisted support of the Indian masses by including their demands to get concession from the British. The Congress in general seems to have accommodated all the impoverished masses in its agenda without making any religious distinctions among Hindus and Muslims and others, though there were many pro-Hindu Right people within the Congress. The Congress led by its secular leaders and apparently projecting a secular vision took the masses within its ambit and thus managed to isolate most of the extreme rightists among the Hindus represented by the Hindu Mahasabha though there still remained some in the Congress who supported the ideology of the Hindu Mahasabha. During this time, the deobandiUlema led by Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani and Ahmad Gangohi, called upon the Muslims to join the Congress and fight shoulder to should with their Hindu brethren to drive out the British. Some among the Ulema, who formed an organization, called the Jamiat-ul-Ulema (1919) always stood by the Congress and Indian Nationalism. But there were few others among the DeobandiUlema who supported the Muslim league like MaulanaAshraj Ali Thanvi and Shabbir AhmedUsmani. Many eminent persons among them had rightly argued that the partition of India demanded by Jinnah and other Muslim elites what in the interest neither of Islam nor of the Muslims, for Islam in the sub-continent would be weakened by division and those Muslims who remained behind would not only suffer but remain weak. This apprehension was proved right after partition. It was a terrible human tragedy that had happened, both for the Muslims and for the non-Muslims, during the Partition riots in India as well as in Pakistan. Here Jinnah, a Shiite was a Muslim leader who never followed the rites of Islam, but whipped up a religious frenzy among Indian Muslims for a separate homeland of their own. Some Muslims believed that Pakistan would give them a chance to create an ideal Islamic State Partition worsened relations between Hindus and Muslims in the sub-continent. Muslim and Hindus became unwanted strangers and felt orphance when both of them were forced to became a minority either in India or in Pakistan after partition which created widespread riots and suffering and uprooting of millions of people from their homes, land and birthplace. That time sensing the gravity, Mahatma Gandhi announced on 12 January, 1948 his intention to undertake a fast even at the cost of his life until the communal

peace resumed in the country and particularly in the capital. On 17 January, Gandhi put forward seven conditions whose fulfillment alone could induce him to break his fast. But it is alleged that while Gandhi went on to fast unto death demanding the security, protection and full citizen's rights of the Muslims in India during the Partition riots, which was enough to calm down the feeling of most Hindus, 'no outstanding persons or groups in Pakistan made any effective attempts to ensure the security of the Hindus' who decide to stay on there.

Muslim Communal Organization's

Apart from the accursed legacy of the partition, the Muslim leaders, preachers and Muslim communal organizations have contributed to the protracted longevity of communalism. Communalism has been instrumental in the promotion of communal organizations which leads to strengthening of communal elements and the weakening of the secular forces. The All-India Muslim League was formed at Dacca on December 30, 1906. The communal politics of the Muslim League, which spearheaded the partition of India in its resolution on March 22, 1940 led to a large-scale communal riots in different parts of India in 1946 and 1947. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) was born after the partition of the country and the centre of its activities was Madras. Due to its participation in electoral politics it became a pressure group and political leaders of various parties did not hesitate to ally themselves with the IUML for partisan ends.

In Bombay, the Muslim League is a force to reckon with at corporation level as well as in Parliament and Assembly elections. The league thrives on the fundamentalism and conservative idiom such as opposition to the idea of a uniform Civil Code and singing of VandeMatram and supporting the inclusion of Urdu in the VIIth Schedule of the Constitution. It may be mentioned that the question of the singing of VandeMataram accentuated tension which culminated in Poona riots.

The Jamaat-Islami was founded on September 25, 1941 by AbulAlaMawdudi, about eighteen months after the Muslim League resolution demanding a separate Muslim State. He came from a middle class Muslim family which traces its descent to KhawjaMoinuddinChisti. After the partition the name was changed to Nammat-e-Islami(Hind). It maintains the exclusive character of the community to strengthen the communal identity. The Jammat postulates that Muslims cannot and should not associate with non-Muslims the impact of which leads to the strengthening of communal elements. The communal activities of Jammat are mostly confined to illiterate and poorer sections of the community, mostly living in the dark and dingi slums.

"What was uppermost in my mind," Mawdudi wrote in an article in Tarjuman al Quran, his monthly journal, "was to keep alive in Muslims a sense of their separate entity and prevent their absorption in a non-Muslim community." Earlier in his book Al-Jihad fil Islam he advocated a jihad for the defence of Islam, its honour and for the Muslims as a whole. According to him the real object of jihad was to depose Kufr from the seat of authority. Mawdudi considered nationalism in India as Hindu nationalism in which Muslims could not be partners.

It is important and necessary to know the Jammat's ideological position, itssubtilty of operation and the impact it has had on relations between communities because in the current atmosphere in the country the Jammat is making efforts to carry the process of communal polarization further. For example, after the Moradabad riots in August 1980 sedulous attempts were made, and with a certain measure of success, by the Jamaat to invigorate the process of what may be called Muslim consolidation. The first step it took was to invite Muslim leaders belonging to different political parties on one platform and issue a joint statement on August 14 the day after the Moradabad riots. The Jamaat is always keen on promoting a separate identity of the Muslims.

BJP and Congress in the Indian Political Scene:-

Ever since 1967 when the country witnessed coalition governments in several states it was realised that in those constituencies where the Muslims were in large numbers, the outcome depended on the way they voted en bloc. Parties believed that the Muslims could swing the election results. This realization has affected the party strategies and logistics. No party could afford to ignore such a large percentage of voters; each party adopted a strategy to win the favour of the Muslim voters. In this regard, Paul Brass has observed: "The belief that Muslims can be mobilized to vote en bloc for the party or a candidate perceived to be their protector leads to a competition for the Muslim vote which is often the largest or second largest potential voting bloc in Uttar Pradesh constituency. The heavy concentration of Muslim votes in several towns encourages competition among the various political parties for the mobilization of the Muslim vote. However, Muslims and Schedule Castes are considered to be the committed vote banks of the Congress Party. When this committed vote bank remains solid and the opposition is fragmented, a huge Congress landslide occurs, but when the opposition is united and major defections occur among the Muslims and the Scheduled Castes, then a big non-Congress victory is always likely." Therefore, each political party tries to penetrate this solid vote bank to change the balance of power. "In fact, ever since 1967, when signals had come from various corners that

Muslims were not happy with the Congress it was realised that in a large number of constituencies their votes were more than just a force to reckon with, they could swing the results…. Courted in 1971, appeased in 1974, watched with amazement in 1977, Muslims in 1980 were sought after in the most blatant fashion. Discarded in 1984 they were to be wooed again in subsequent years."

Ayodhya and the electoral politics

The degrading defeat of the BJP in the 1984 LokSabha elections forced it to abandon its liberal and moderate posture and move to an aggressive and uncompromising stand on the issues of secularism and nationalism. As the congress had already moved rightward after 1980, the BJP leadership felt that only by evoking the theme of majoritarianism and confrontationist attitude towards the minorities would enable it to regain Hindu votes further, the congress role in Shah Bano Controversy and Ayodhya dispute made BJP fully convinced that Rajiv Gandhi government was but upon playing the Hindu card in the next general elections as well. This was clearly perceived as a threat by BJP. A worried AtalBehari Vajpayee remarked: "We must not lose Hindu votes by letting him do that."

In the years following the elections, the politics was surcharged by two major issues, namely, the controversy created by the decision of the Supreme Court in Shah Bano case, and the growing demand by the Hindu to claim back the Ramjanmabhoomi in Adyodhya with an equally determined opposition by the Muslims with a view to protection the historical Babri masjid. The Vishwa Hindu Parishadlaunch a nation-wide movement to construct the Ram Temple at the site of the Babari mosque. A RamjanmabhoomiSanghrshaSamiti was formed on 7October 1984 to press the demand for allowing access to the Hindus to their religious site. This was strongly opposed by the Muslim leaders who formed the Babri Masjid Action Committee. Both these organizations launched counter movements – one for the Ram Temple and the other for the protection of Babri Masjid. The Congress government had the difficult task of trying to appease both the communities.

CONCLUSION

The position has not improved since then, rather it is deteriorating daily. Though the leaders mentioned about the evil forces and warned everybody of the dark days ahead if these were allowed to thrive, and talked of national integration every now and then, hardly any meaningful and concrete steps were taken to uproot these evil forces from the society. It is a problem

confronting every citizen-whatever might be his religion, language caste or race. The problem becomes all the more acute if people get themselves aligned community-wise even in matters which are remotely communal in character. One may or may not be a victim of communal forces but one is affected by it in the long run. It affects him either directly or indirectly. It affects him physically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, economically and in all other material respects.

And communalism is spreading every day, if the ever-increasing number of communal incidents is any yardstick. But why this phenomenon has crept in? Surely this cannot be the handiwork of a few persons or the result of their efforts over just a few years. This is the cumulative effect of a number of factors, interaction of facts and forces spread over a long period – whether it is traced back to 11th or 12 century, as analysed by the 'communal' historians or to less modern times, says the British period, as viewed by the 'progressive' historians. Whether it is an 800 year old or 200 year old phenomenon is no doubt a matter of debate but it is unquestionable a fact that is being felt, noticed, seen and experienced by everybody irrespective of his community leaning. Now, the question is, why this should happen, especially in free India. During the pre-partition days there was a third party in the British Government to protect its various interests but after partition that third party no longer exists to guide, control and foment communalism as it was in a position to do in the pre-partition days. But the seed of communalism that was shown has now developed into a big tree with its branches spread in all directions so much so that even those areas which did not experience the horrors of 'Direct Action Days' and their aftermath, are witnessing them almost everyday. What did really happen during this interregnum of 68 years after independence that communalism and communal forces instead of being completely routed could so firmly entrench itself in our body politic that everybody feels helpless before its mischievous and monstrous power? The political leaders and writers are looking at it from their individual points of view. 'Whenever there was communal disturbance Nehru presumed the failure of the destruct authorities and the activity of Hindu Communal elements.

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