

The Roots of Communal Conflict in India
Towards a New Integral Vision

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1. Introduction

This paper intends to provide a basis for discussion of the roots of the growing communal conflict in India and of possible ways of promoting greater communal harmony and national integration.

The context is one of anxiety, but not panic - anxiety about the unity of India as a nation. If there is one point at which India has been so far successful, since its independence in 1947, it is the preservation of this national unity. Precisely that unity is today in jeopardy.

At one time it was conflict between language groups that threatened our national unity. The shift from the 28 states formed by the Constitution of India (based on pre-independence administrative units) to a pattern of linguistic states began in 1952, with the agitation for Telengana begun by Potti Srivamalu, and leading to the decision to form the state of Andhra on 19th December 1952.

Here we see an interesting phenomenon of the long-standing class conflict in India being obscured and distorted into linguistic or communal or inter-regional conflict.

The largest and perhaps most resolute spate of mass demonstrations in independent India was not based on a conflict of class interests, but by the demand for a separate linguistic state on the part of all classes in Andhra. The National Question thus became oriented, not towards the emancipation of the oppressed and exploited classes, but rather towards administrative reorganisation based on linguistic interests. After two years of study (1953-55) by the States Reorganisation Commission, the political map of India was redrawn by the new law which came into force on November 1, 1956, dividing our land into fourteen largely linguistic states and six Union Territories administered by the Centre.

But the struggle for new linguistic states continued, particularly in those states which were multi-lingual (Bombay, Assam and Punjab). This resulted in more new linguistic states - Gujarat and Maharashtra (1960), Punjab and

element in the identity of a state. This is especially clear in the case of Punjab and Haryana, where the language groups of Panjabi and Hindi were also coterminous with religious groups of Sikhs and Hindus.

The Akali Dal gave to the concept of "Panjabi-Sabah" a more religious than linguistic connotation, since religious sentiments were found to be more powerful than linguistic loyalties to move the people to mass demonstrations for a separate Panjabi state. This shift from linguistic to religious basis for a state was nurtured by religious-chauvinist elements gradually taking over the Akali Dal.

The ethnic-religious element became also the basis of the Tribal States and Union Territories - Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, and so on. Tribal religions became the basis for autonomy and resistance to Hindu domination. In some cases (i.e. Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram), a form of Western Christianity becomes the dominant religion of the State.

But in the re-organisation of states care had been taken not to allow a Muslim majority state, barring the unavoidable exception of Jammu and Kashmir, where the Hindus are half the number of Muslims. But wherever Muslims are a substantial share of the population, i.e. in Uttar Pradesh (about 2 crore Muslims, and 9 crore Hindus), in Jammu and Kashmir (35 lakhs Muslims, 16 lakhs Hindus), in Assam (40 lakh Muslims and 120 lakhs Hindus), Bihar (80 lakhs Muslims, 5 crore Hindus), there are major communal tensions between Muslims and Hindus.

Even in States with a long tradition of comparative communal harmony, new conflicts erupt into violence. This is a symptom of a deep malaise. Tamilnadu and Kerala have recently had incidents involving Hindus, Muslims and Christians.

Some examination of the underlying causes of the malaise would help in a diagnosis of the social disease and prescribing remedies. What is presented here is offered as a discussion starter.

2. The Erosion of the Secular Framework and the Communalisation of the Political Process.

The notion of a "Secular State" imposed on India from above or from the west, has not taken very deep roots in our soil. Nehru's idea of modernisation - western, scientific and secular - still remains a strange notion in the minds of most of our people, though some of our elites pretend to be at home in it. We are a basically religious people, more trusting than rational, more accepting than questioning, more intuitive than analytical, more patriarchally minded than democratically inclined, exalting personal leadership over the group mind, regional and communal rather than national and secular in our basic loyalties. Verbal formulations, party platforms and ideological systems mean little to our masses. The government is our ma-baap, and the Prime Minister our god or goddess. We condone much of what the government does, just as we overlook the faults of our parents. Public opinion, as a major force in governmental decision-making, has only recently begun to emerge. Only a small elite, trained in western ways, understand the concepts of the Secular State and democratic government.

Casteism and Communalism have always dominated Indian Politics. In recent years domination has been intensified. Even as rival parties field candidates to win the votes of the same caste, candidates appeal more and more to their own loyalty to the caste. The change brought about by the election process in the caste structure itself is significant. The Brahmin Caste, once at the top, can no longer command, since their numbers are not large enough. The larger castes at the centre and bottom of the caste ladder tend to dominate or vie with each other for control of power.

This implies also the more openly religious or communal basis of several political parties - the Muslim league, the Jan Sangh, the Akalis, to cite some obvious examples. But even other minor parties conceal a communal orientation behind a democratic name (Kerala Congress for example).

But the most important thing in Indian politics is perhaps the appeal of the leader who is honest, cares for the poor and does not seek to enrich himself, the self denying, do-gooding, ascetic star as political candidate (N.T. Rama Rao, M.G. Ramachandran).

We cannot come to terms with the realities of Indian communal conflicts, without taking into account the fact that the secular democratic concept appeals mainly to a growing western-educated elite, and to some extent to peasants and workers trained in the socialist ideology of Marxism.

Secularism never took root in the minds of the Indian people. It is a concept alien to our culture, chosen in the context of the division of India, one part deliberately choosing to be a one-religion state, while the other consciously refused to become a religious state at all. What we should have chosen at that time was not perhaps a secular state, but a pluralistic state, which gives no preference to any one or more religions. It is high time we reconsidered the concept of a secular state and found a concept more true to our history, culture and present situation.

We should also find ways of transcending and overcoming the communalisation of the political process. This can be done only by legislation banning political parties with a clear communal basis, by insisting that political parties should have a clear commitment to the guiding principles of the Constitution, and by a voluntary effort on the part of the present parties to reduce the number of parties on the political scene and to adopt clear political, economic and social platforms by which their performance can be judged.

3. The Erosion of National Leadership

Since 1947 we had lived under the protective shadow of great national leaders who had made significant personal sacrifices in the struggle for national independence. People accepted them as national leaders, irrespective of the religion or caste community to which they belonged. People trusted them and looked to them to guard the interests of all the people of India. They can no longer do so. Many leaders today fight for regional or communal interests.

This undermines the national loyalty and national identity of the people. People retreat into narrower identities based on religion, caste, region or group interest. There is nothing in the present that appeals to national loyalty except external threats. When we are in danger of attack from our neighbours, our level of national loyalty shoots up. But once the external danger recedes, the loyalty level also goes down.

The way to reinvoke that national loyalty is to organize a national effort on a mammoth scale which transcends all communal and regional loyalties. A huge literacy and sanitation campaign, organized by all political parties together, with religious leadership participating would be one example. This will need extensive planning, training of personnel, and administrative control that can prevent mis-use of the campaign, as has happened in the past, when such campaigns have been used for promoting communalism. This would be a proposal that this seminar could launch into the public mind, and start some initiatives to bring party leaders together for planning such a campaign. Doctors, nurses, teachers, students—all could be enlisted and trained on a mass scale all over the nation. The important thing is to keep the campaign trans-communal, and not allow it to be dominated by political pressures from communal groups. It has to be led and inspired by a group of people who can be seen as being above narrow communal interests.

Such a national campaign, which will demand the organisation of multi-communal groups visiting all the villages and cities of India, would require enormous determination and organisation as well as resources. It will have to be organized by the general public with government assistance, with all political parties and religious bodies participating. If it is carried out with discipline and imagination, it could mean a significant step beyond our present communal and national stalemate. It may also throw out a new type of national leadership, different from the ones now created by local, regional and communal politics.

4. The rise of mistrust among communities

We have some 85 million Muslims in the country, (61.5 million in 1971), more than in any nation except Indonesia and Bangladesh. Our Muslim population is larger than the population of half the nations of the world. The way this

"minority" behaves and is treated by others, decides the communal temper in our country.

First comes our image of Islamic Community in India. So many people in India look upon Muslims as in some way foreign to India. Such people forget that these are the sons and daughters of the soil of India who made in 1947 a conscious choice to remain citizens of India as a "secular state", when they could have made a choice to emigrate to an Islamic State. They trusted this nation and its "secular" leadership. That trust has to be perpetually honoured. When that trust is breached, certainly mistrust will take root and disrupt our national unity. It is a sacred trust. All communities in India should honour that trust and give no occasion for mistrust.

It is equally important that all minority groups, whether Muslims, Christians, Sikhs or Parsis, earn the trust of the nation by their own conduct and attitudes.

It is a fact, however, that mistrust has been generated. Many people think that it began in 1977, with the Janata inter-regnum. The minorities feel that there was in 1977 the beginning of a policy of keeping members of the minority groups (with a few exceptions of a special kind) from key or strategic positions of leadership. There was official support for unconstitutional and discriminatory legislation (like the M.C. Tyagi Bill). The minority communities began to feel that the secular state concept is eroding and that some influential groups were trying to make India a Hindu nation, (with Jains, Buddhists and perhaps Sikhs being accepted as part of the Hindu tradition), but Muslims and Christians somehow regarded as less than Indian.

The Sikhs have always adamantly refused to be regarded as Hindus, and the growing demand for a state that is free from Hindu control has to be explained in terms of growing fear of that control. But separate autonomous states where one religious community dominates, whether it be Sikh, Muslim, Hindu or Christian, would again be a violation of the secular principle, and India cannot afford such a development, in the Punjab, in Kashmir, in the North-East or anywhere else.

How can we, in the context of such mis-trust, remain a united nation? It is clearly against the interests of our nation to foment such inter-communal distrust. It may be in the temporary interest of certain other nations who do not like the unity of India to aid and abet those who create communal conflict in India. But as a nation, it would not be responsible to keep on blaming outside agencies for our communal conflicts. We have to act on our own, resolutely and wisely.

At the same time, the minority communities have a major responsibility here. Especially in the case of Christians and Muslims there is an apparently justified charge that these communities are receiving large sums of money from outside, and that this money and the influence it brings may be used along lines inimical to our national interest. Many Christian communities have been for a long time dependent on outside money and too often outside ideas. This is a hang-over from our colonial past, and should soon be remedied. It is a fact, however, that some Christian money from abroad is used for development projects ostensibly in the national rather than communal interest. But even such money leads to the enhancement of institutional power and political influence for some Christian communities.

The influx of Muslim money from abroad is more recent in origin and not so directly connected, with our colonial past. Yet, it is a fact that this outside money of Christians and Muslims is a major factor in increasing the mutual distrust among religious communities.

On the other hand, there is some substance to the charge that the religious revival among the majority community is also partly financed by outside money, especially contributions from European and American converts to Hinduism, but possibly also some political money interested in promoting communal ^{disharmony} ~~harmony~~. Whatever be the facts about this, it is true that the fear of foreign money and its power becomes connected with the resentment about conversions from one religion to ^{another} ~~other~~. Such problems cannot be settled by legislation about religious conversion.

It is up to the religious communities themselves to disclose the facts to the public about money received from outside and about how it is utilised. A major study undertaken by an objective institute, with the full support of the religious leadership could bring the facts before the public, and permit discussion on the basis of facts. It may also lead to religious communities adopting greater self-discipline in diminishing reliance on outside money, ideas and personnel. Such a study may expose some unpleasant and inconvenient facts, perhaps more embarrassing to Christians and Muslims than to others, but it could lead to policy decisions on the part of religious communities and their foreign benefactors, decisions which could contribute to greater mutual trust among the religious communities.

5. The general climate of acquisitive greed which foments narrow communal loyalties.

The conflict of group interests becomes aggravated by transformations in the political process whereby governments have to make decisions in response to pressures from groups of voters. Few politicians can keep their backing of voters unless they fight for the narrow interests of the groups that vote them to power. And when Government itself becomes the largest dispenser of wealth in the country, the greed of groups to get as much as possible from the government also becomes acute. The political process in India today has become a system of politicians paying back those who financed them and voted them to power, or are likely to do so in the future. The civil service also becomes full of people who will not issue any order or even move a file unless their palms are greased. Salaried people who find it difficult to balance their budgets or to send their children to better schools can hardly resist the temptation to pocket a bribe. And the bribery situation has become so blatant, that most people do not even need to hide the taking of bribes, but have made bribery institutional and convenient.

It is in this context that one has to see the erosion of the higher values in religion. Piety now becomes a way of invoking the deity for greater gains and for protection from being caught. When religion itself thus becomes an instrument of greed, it loses its higher and universalistic content

and becomes base and parochial and contentious^u, even fanatical. Fanatical communal loyalty and strife may be partly explained by a guilty conscience seeking appeasement through religious fanaticism.

The need today is to bring out the best in each religion. The noble[?] sentiments in all religions lead to communal harmony, while the base and more aggressive tendencies in each religion are encouraged by a climate of greed.

The ultimate solution to the problem of communal harmony can come only from a just economic order where justice does not become a casualty^S of greed, and the political process is not at the mercy of those who have money. The transition from a greed-based political economy to a more socialist, egalitarian and rigorously just and uncorrupt society is perhaps the only long lasting remedy for the growing problem of communal conflict. Communal disharmony is likely to grow in a political economy where injustice has become rampant and persistent.

The struggle for communal harmony cannot thus be separated from the struggle for a more just, more socialistic and humanitarian society than the present.

The remedies proposed in the next section are at best palliatives. They cannot solve the problem. The issue is one of justice and of commitment on the part of all to the welfare of the whole.

The steps proposed are therefore timidly and hesitatingly advanced, knowing that they do not resolve the problem in the long term. But they could still have some temporary value.

6. Some Practical Steps - An Incomplete List

(a) The organisation of large public meetings for communal harmony, and full media coverage for these.

(b) the organisation of inter-communal vigilance groups in all areas, who will watch the developments and keep in touch with religious groups and their leaders;

(c) the production of children's literature promoting sympathetic understanding of Indian religions^u, and their introduction into the school curriculum.

- (d) the organisation of mass demonstration and silent processions for communal harmony;
- (e) appeals by religious leaders for prayer for inter-religious harmony in all religious bodies and institutions; where possible common prayer vigils;
- (f) the conduct of seminars on communal harmony and the production of books and pamphlets on the subject, especially in the regional languages;
- (g) the organisation of a nation-wide movement for communal harmony with religious leaders from all communities taking a leading role, financed by voluntary contributions, and having a regular publication (popular level) for nation-wide circulation among the masses and in regional languages;
- (h) the development of short documentaries and video-tapes for use in places of public entertainment like movie houses.
- (i) a major study of foreign finances received by religious communities, leading to steps for their utilisation in the interests of communal harmony rather than inter-communal distrust and conflict;
- (j) a major inter-religious study on the relation between the noble and baser elements in religious belief and commitment; how loyalty to noble religious belief becomes corrupted into narrow communal loyalties and greed-inspired conflicts.
- (k) a major inter-religious project for the study of the history of the religions of India, and of their present state.
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