

Communalism In The Guise Of Religious Nationalism In Secular India

Mr. Mohammed Mazharuddin¹, Dr. Basavaraja G^{2*}

¹Research Scholar, Department of Studies, and Research in Political Science Tumkur University, mohammedmazharmd606@gmail.com. Mob-9738690779

^{2*}Professor, Department of Studies, and Research in Political Science Tumkur University, drbasavarajg@gmail.com. Mob-9916283637

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Basavaraja G

*Professor, Department of Studies, and Research in Political Science Tumkur University, drbasavarajg@gmail.com. Mob-9916283637

Citation: Mr. Mohammed Mazharuddin, Dr. Basavaraja G (2024), Communalism In The Guise Of Religious Nationalism In Secular India , Educational Administration: Theory and Practice, 30(5), 9301-9307

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i5.4553

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In examining the relationship between religion and communalism in India along with tracing how Indian nationalism has changed over time from being pluralistic and inclusive to becoming increasingly aggressive during the 1990s, this article offers insights and India underlines its commitment to inclusivity and tolerance while showcasing its rich cultural heritage and history of secularism. Exploring how communalism emerged due to lack of competition in medieval times, the article highlights its contrast with religion and examining how communalism manifested as religious nationalism during British rule leading to a loss of Hindu-Muslim harmony culminating with India's partition in 1947. The article emphasises the significance of the Babri mosque demolition incident in 1992 as an illustration of communalism and religious nationalism, and it also mentions how it has impacted inter-religious tensions that exist even now. This article underlines that it is essential to comprehend the complicated link between religion and communalism. Additionally, it also stresses on promoting social harmony along with inclusivity in societies that are culturally diverse.

Key Words: Communalism, Religion, Nationalism, Secularism, Political Party.

Introduction:

The diversity in India can be credited to the country's rich cultural heritage and long-standing tradition of secularism, thousands of years have passed since the inception of the country's distinctive culture which was founded on inclusivity and togetherness. 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' meaning¹ 'The world is one family' reflects this idea while stressing that All religions are equal with 'Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava' (Mukherji 2022) and Kaniyan Pungundranar - the renowned ancient Indian classical poet - once said something that still resonates with us: I am a world citizen; every citizen is my kith and kin (Kalam 2007). The fact that this sentence has endured for three thousand years speaks volumes about the everlasting secular values, demonstrating how committed the nation is to inclusivity and tolerance. The reason for the country's high position in global cultural hegemony is attributed to its religious plurality. On the other hand, due to a number of different dynasties governing the Indian subcontinent, there was an evolution in Indian culture. Additionally, India is endowed with rich natural resources but it was controlled and robbed by numerous foreign powers including the British. Wealthy and attractive temples drew the attention of many non-Hindu invaders as noted by Engineer (1995).

After ending thirty years war with Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 that brought peace to Europe, nationalism emerged during seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Cultural solidarity accompanied by territorial consciousness and ethnic loyalty emerged due to the development of the concept of nation state. The modern understanding of nationalism expanded globally and extended to India during their time under British rule,

thus the competitiveness between India's cultural bonds among Hindus and Muslims gave birth to nationalism as a religious idea. The purpose of secular nationalism was to unite individuals from various religions in opposition against colonial power, while on the other hand religious-based nationalism intended to bring together Hindus for gaining political control as a dominant group.

Muslims were given representation by their leadership through establishment of a political party named Muslim league which took place back in 1906. Similarly, Hindus were also given representation through establishment of another such entity known as Hindu Mahasabha back then on year 1915. The bifurcation resulting from conflicting ideologies among leaders from two major communities destroyed any semblance of unity between Hindus and Muslims. Under the leadership of Mr, Jawaharlal Nehru and guided by Dr, B R Ambedkar's constitutional ideals India became a secular democratic nation after achieving independence. Furthermore, right-wing political leaders in India changed the course of nationalism from being inclusive and diverse to being aggressive and divisive in the 1990s, and Lord Rama is one of the most revered Hindu deities whose worship has been promoted through religious and political rallies such as Ram Rath Yatra which took place in September 1990. The yatra involved a decorated chariot carrying an idol of Lord Rama through the streets (The Hindu 2022) still its main target was to eliminate the historic Babri mosque which stood on a disputed land claimed by both Hindus and Muslims.

Unhappily the gathering was portrayed as a fraction of an extensive Hindu movement that has its sights set on oppressing Muslims and destroying mosques, bringing more middle-class Hindus into communal politics. The result was that Indian nationalism became even more aggressive and those who sought change used religion as a way of dividing people, leading ultimately to the destruction of the mosque. This Babri Mosque demolition incidence is etched in our memory forever for its brutality that goes against India's founding principle - Non-violence, Tolerance, Pluralistic society & Inclusion - preached by great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru & Dr, B.R Ambedkar.

Comprehending the correlation between religion and communalism at this juncture is of utmost importance as communalism is an exclusionary ideology that creates division among communities while religion inspires people to lead virtuous lives and promotes social harmony. Communalism was evidently shown during the demolishing of Babri mosque because it intended to obliterate all traces of history and culture from an entire community while causing religious conflicts which continue even today.

Rise of Communalism in the guise of religious nationalism in India

In order to comprehend this inquiry, we must bring into focus the comparison between communalism and religion. The analysis of communalism during the medieval period should start with an examination. A contemporary phenomenon emerged during medieval India due to the absence of a competitive society in terms of both polity and economy, showing that there existed a potentate who directed the domain through force. It was compulsory for all individuals regardless of their religious affiliation to obey the commands of the king and show loyalty towards him. Thus, there was no political contestation between any societal classes. In comparison to modern times when there are no intermediaries between people and the king, a feudal economy was dominated by landlords who served that purpose. Additionally, there was no import or export in the market as feudal control governed the entirety of the economy with production solely for local use. The peace that existed in this non-competitive society can be attributed to the fact that an individual's social and economic standing were predetermined at birth. Thus, society became divided into various categories such as upper and lower, which dictated what occupations people were eligible for, including jobs like priest or officer within the royal court. Menial jobs were exclusively reserved for individuals in the lower class, since everything was predetermined before birth in this medieval society people were scared of royal punishment and did not attempt any changes.

The slow spread of communalism was caused by the implementation of the divide and rule policy by the British during their arrival in India. In the aftermath of India's Rebellion of 1857, the British made it their mission to disrupt Hindu-Muslim solidarity by any means necessary. Adoption of this particular British strategy is identified as the main reason for genesis of communalism in India, as the upper-class intellectuals from both Hindu and Muslim communities were initially mobilised by the British resulting in a clash between capitalist elites. India became divided after this conflict and Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar differed from Mahatma Gandhi and Abul Kalam Azad who had different motives as leaders in India.

By exploring the viewpoints of both Gandhi and Azad - who are devout followers - we can gain a better understanding of their respective religions. Gandhi firmly believed in promoting religious harmony through unity although he did not support the division of India along religious lines (Gandhi and Kher, 1987). He declared himself as a Sanatani Hindu with pride and Abul Kalam Azad who was born in Mecca highly revered the Quran as an unwavering follower of Islam. Despite this, he did not allow for the separation of Hindus and Muslims. Azad stated during a congress session that he would never agree with separating Hindus and Muslims - not even if mandated by an angel. His statement showcases his belief in fostering communal unity and his steadfast commitment towards upholding the principles of secularism. If the partition had revolved around religion, then perhaps Congress would have thrown its weight behind Azad and not Jinnah. The viewpoint of these two non-religious leaders is that the Hindu-Muslim divide should be considered as a political issue instead of a religious one.

The partition of India along religious lines was viewed similarly by both Vir Savarkar and M. A. Jinnah still, neither of these two leaders represented the people and gave priority to their own interests. While Gandhi & Azad were devoutly following their religion, Savarkar & Jinnah on the other hand were non-believers. Personal interests are not the primary concern of devout individuals who follow a religion; instead, they concentrate on universal issues. To give an example, Jinnah spent a majority of his time overseas and did not follow the genuine principles taught in Islam. However, Jinnah's love for pork did not align with Islamic teachings but he still ate it. In fact, he mentioned that sausages were the first thing on his plate in the morning followed by a glass of scotch at night, which can be inferred from this behaviour that he does not believe in Islam but unfortunately, he proposed forming Pakistan with religion as its foundation (Engineer 2003)

Also, Savarkar introduced a two-nation theory similar to that of Jinnah's, although he strongly pushed for establishing India as a Hindu Rashtra or Hindu State. Gandhi's initiatives for supporting farmers and workers' causes as well as his efforts towards uplifting the poor were unmatched by Savarkar who did not champion these issues or lead any such initiatives. Notwithstanding this fact he lent his support to the separation of Hindus and Muslims based on their religion. The alignment of interests shared by Jinnah and Savarkar revealed that the partitioning of India was ultimately a power-sharing agreement among the educated elite from both major communities.

The preceding historical account indicates that communalism made its way into politics during the British era, with the assistance of leaders who endorsed colonialism and prioritised their political objectives over the greater good. Notably, the British pursued a tactic of breaking up Hindu-Muslim solidarity for administrative purposes. While religion has always played a significant role in India's culture, the British used communal divisions to their advantage, employing bigotry as an effective means of implementing their "divide and rule" policy.

In India, communalism employs various means to propagate hatred against Muslims, such as distorting historical facts. This involves spreading false information and rewriting history based on communal lines, such as portraying Muslim rulers as fanatics who demolished temples due to their intolerance towards idol worship. Similarly, Chatrapati Shivaji is often depicted as anti-Muslim. These are prime examples of historical distortion. Prof. Romila Thapar observes that throughout history, rulers of any religion have not actively propagated their faith, except for Ashoka. It indicates that kings are mainly concerned with expanding their wealth and administrative territory and are not driven by religious motives. It is worth noting that Mehmud Ghazni attacked the Muslim ruler of Multan in 1006 AD, prior to the attack on Somanath (Engineer,1995). This event raises questions about Mehmud's supposed intolerance towards only the Hindu religion since he attacked a Muslim ruler. It is essential to keep in mind that throughout history, wars have often been waged with the aim of gaining territory or wealth.

However, in contemporary times, communal leaders have taken to painting each conflict with religious overtones, portraying victories by Muslim rulers as defeats for Hindus. While it is widely acknowledged that Mehmud Ghazni destroyed the Somnath temple and looted its wealth, what is often overlooked is that he appointed Hindus to high-ranking positions within his army and administration. The Tarikh-I-Bayhaqi, authored by Abu'l-Fadl Bayhaqi cited by Asghar Ali Engineer in his work, mentions the names of several Hindu generals under Ghazni, including Tilak, Sondi, Rai Hinda, and Hajran (Engineer,1995) This historical evidence makes it clear that the wars of the time were driven by economic and political motives, rather than religious ones.

The key to studying history successfully is approaching it objectively, while a lot of historians tend to give attention only towards the destruction of temples by Muslim rulers, it is equally important to admit that Hindu kings have played their part in these actions. To illustrate this point further, one can look at the history of Kosambi which provides insight into King Harsha Deva's iconoclasm in Kashmir. A minister was specifically tasked with uprooting images known as 'Deva-Ut-Patana-Nayaka' or Minister Responsible for Uprooting Gods (Engineer, 1995). We can find records of temple looting by Hindu rulers in Kalhana's Rajatarangini, a historical text of north-western part of India and it is apparent from these events that in most cases kings place a higher importance on personal interests than on religious beliefs.

Chatrapati Shivaji's inclusive and courageous character is a remarkable aspect to be considered despite the portrayal of him being anti-Muslim. Moreover, Maulvi Haider Ali Khan being a Muslim himself served as Shivaji Maharaj's personal secretary managing all confidential matters while at war with Aurangzeb along with another fellow Muslim named Ibrahim Gardi Khan leading the artillery (Puniyani 2018). By studying history and religion concurrently we can gain insight into how communalism was spread in a secular India using false pretences.

There is no intrinsic connection between religion and communalism as depicted in the historical scenes. Instead of upholding religious beliefs in battles, Kings fought for their own political interests; yet those who truly believe in religion endorse universal values that reject brutal behaviour. Dangerous fundamentalism which undermines humanity and peace may result from extreme religious sentiments. In order to consolidate people based on their religious and cultural identities for political gain instead of seeing religion as the root cause of communalism.

In fighting against British colonial rule during Indian freedom struggle, religion had played a crucial role and it was employed as a tool for political objectives since Renaissance and Revivalism movements that strived for unifying India's population through a common identity. With the intention of revitalising Hinduism, Swami

Vivekananda - a prominent figure in this movement - emphasised the significance of traditional practices. The advent of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League brought about a transformation in the utilisation of religion within the political domain. By employing religion effectively, Mahatma Gandhi succeeded in organising and motivating Indians to resist the British occupation of India. His profound religious faith and comprehensive understanding of Muslim customs could explain his skill in connecting with a wide range of the Indian population. Introducing Ram Rajya (the rule based on righteousness and justice) with an aim to unite India's freedom movement's two major communities was accompanied by his support for Khilafat Movement that sought preservation of Ottoman Empire's Caliphate.

The significance of religion cannot be overlooked when examining the course of history and politics in numerous countries, given how it has been employed by politicians as a strategic tool for advancing their interests and centralising power. The noteworthy position Bal Gangadhar Tilak held as a leader in the Indian National Congress served as evidence of this phenomenon, showcasing his belief in employing religion as a mobilising tool to advance Indian nationalism and cultivate a sense of cohesion among ordinary citizens. He was responsible for introducing Shivaji and Ganapati festivals in Maharashtra that were widely acclaimed by the Hindu community. The aim of these festivals was to popularise the idea of Hindu nationalism and mobilise Hindus in their quest for freedom. Promoting nationalism with religion frequently resulted in the establishment of Hindu dominance and marginalisation of minorities. These festivals emphasised the use of Hindu symbols and traditions resulting in non-Hindu communities feeling excluded which further strengthened the idea that India was a predominantly Hindu nation. Likewise, the utilisation of religion within politics frequently results in communal tension and conflict amongst various religious groups. For example, within India, the implementation of religious symbols alongside persuasive language from political parties has caused a significant amount of communal unrest, including violent altercations between Hindus and Muslims. Moreover, right-wing nationalist movements across the globe have emphasised the significance of religion in politics, and the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist movement in Sri Lanka has led to a long-standing conflict and violence as it is accused of marginalising the predominantly Hindu Tamil minority. Myanmar's Buddhist nationalist government has also engaged in ethnic cleansing targeting Rohingya Muslims just like how minority Hindus are discriminated against regarding their educational attainment opportunities along with job prospects & ability to own properties specifically in countries such as Pakistan or Bangladesh. In addition, these movements advocate for an exclusive and limited version of nationalism that places importance on favouring the interests and rights of one religion's followers above those who belong to different religious traditions. Based on the given examples, it is apparent that these movements possess the ability to impose oppression and marginalisation upon minority factions, specifically those harbouring contrasting religious tenets. All citizens deserve equal protection and treatment by the government irrespective of their religious affiliation; therefore, promoting inclusivity and tolerance is crucial.

In current times of Indian politics there exists a debate over the usage of religion as some political entities employ religious symbols or language in order to secure votes at the cost of marginalising certain communities, and in specific regions of the country this approach has caused communal strife and violence. Nevertheless, efforts are being made to foster secularism and inclusivity within Indian politics which indicate the varied religious as well as cultural traditions of India. Recognising that religion can serve as an influential instrument for promoting social mobilisation and political progress, it remains important to understand the risks associated with its use in politics. Nationalism promoted through religion can inadvertently cause negative impacts such as the exclusion of minority communities and the escalation of communal conflicts. Henceforth, it is imperative to foster a wider and more pluralistic understanding of nationalism that recognizes the diversity of religious, cultural, and ethnic identities within society.

Methods used in India to foster communalism

In India, there are methods that are employed to promote communalism while masquerading as nationalism;

- **Identity Clashes**

Identity clashes in Indian society are influenced by multiple factors such as historical debates on indigenous status and ethnic & linguistic diversity along with social hierarchy & religious identity. For centuries there has been a controversial debate about who the indigenous people in India are and this argument is largely focused on determining where exactly Aryans originated from. Prof. K N Panikkar's research in 2000 provided archaeological and linguistic evidence supporting the theory of Aryan migration. Additionally, the central point of contention in this discourse is to dispute the belief that solely non-Hindus are regarded as external elements in India and to interrogate the reasoning behind constructing a Hindu state solely rooted in Vedic descent.

Despite numerous efforts to prove the indigenous origins of the Aryans, the topic largely remains as speculation due to a scarcity of solid evidence. The presence of various ethnic and linguistic groups within India presents a complex scenario with regards to claims of indigeneity. The presence of the caste system and religious identity contributes to the occurrence of identity conflicts in India. Due to historical placement by the caste system Dalits were marginalised as a result of being situated at social hierarchy's bottom while religious differences caused conflict particularly between Hindus & Muslims.

The past few years have seen a rise in communal violence as well as polarisation within India, and this escalation is attributed to political as well as social tensions. Marginalised communities are feeling increasingly

insecure as they are being excluded from the dominant Indian identity narrative. Addressing identity clashes requires both promoting inclusivity and tolerance and questioning the discriminatory structures that perpetuate them.

• **Politics of holy cow**

In modern Indian politics, there is a focus on restrictions on food habits, such as the banning of cow slaughter. This raises questions about how a secular state can enforce such a ban, given that Article 48 of the Indian constitution directs states to make efforts to prohibit in-cow slaughter. Additionally, there is curiosity about whether our ancestors in ancient times consumed beef. However, those who support the exclusivist ideology claim that the Aryans did not eat beef. Moreover, there is abundant evidence, both literary and archaeological, that contradicts this assertion.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, "H H Wilson claimed that the sacrifice of horses or cows, also known as Govmedha ("Gov" means cow, and "Medha" means sacrifice or ritual) or Asvamedha ("Asva" means horse, and "Medha" means sacrifice or ritual), seemed to be a common practice in the early stages of Hindu ritual." The notion that the Indo-Aryans engaged in cow sacrifice and consumed beef was most effectively presented by Rajendra Lal Mitra in an article that was initially published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and later included as a chapter in his book *The Indo-Aryans*, which was released in 1891 (Jha, 2001). Even though there exists historical evidence to contradict it, the act of slaughtering cows and consuming beef is currently being employed as a way to distinguish indigenous individuals from outsiders and to foster divisions within the otherwise peaceful society by communal leaders who seek to gain politically.

Still, the use of cows for political purposes by rulers throughout history has resulted in controversy regarding beef consumption in India. To show deference towards high regard for cows among Jains and Brahmins, Mughal emperors like Babar, Akbar, Jahangir, and Aurangzeb placed limits on cow slaughter. Gorakshini Sabha was established after Dayananda Saraswati initiated the Hindu cow protection movement in 1882 which later turned the cow into a symbol for political mobilisation (Jha, 2001) and communal tensions were sparked between Hindus and Muslims due to this movement's stance against the practice of cow slaughter. The rise of Hindu nationalism in twentieth-century India contributed to increased controversy over politics related to consuming cows or beef, causing an increase in violence that manifested itself through various ways like lynching and mob justice which were aimed at individuals suspected to be consuming or selling beef. Not whether cows should be consumed but instead attention is on political and social implications of organised Hindu cow protection movement.

• **Misreading India's history**

A common reason for rewriting history is to solidify a majority and establish voter trust. However, political parties driven by ambition for power have unfortunately turned history into a potent weapon to bend public sentiment according to their will by deliberately distorting important historical facts. The revision of textbooks by BJP-led governments is aimed at promoting a communal perspective of the past in the Indian states like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, which wrongly portrays the achievements and contributions of Hindus while downplaying or ignoring those made by other groups. Furthermore, in an attempt to "Saffronise" research institutions such as the Indian Council of Historical Research, The Indian Council of Social Science and Centre of Advanced Studies, the present BJP-led government has been supportive. In order to spread communal consciousness, right-wing parties have been known to falsify historical evidence (Panikkar 2000)

• **Communal politics over historical monuments**

For having a rich cultural heritage that spans centuries, India is held in high esteem on the global stage. However, communal politics has become prominent in recent times with politicians manipulating Hindu-Muslim conflicts for their personal advantages. Consequently, there are now organisations like Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti whose goal is to document the history of all districts across India. Efforts have been made by certain individuals in this group including P.N Oak to revise history and describe all medieval monuments as Hindu edifices (Panikkar, 2000). In his attempt to declare Taj Mahal as a Hindu structure, Mr. Oak even approached the Supreme Court of India with his plea, according to (Panikkar, 2000). It highlights how dedicated sectarian forces are when it comes to advancing their agenda and painting India's heritage with a saffron shade. Efforts made towards rewriting of the historic events are common in many parts of the world including India. Instances of manipulating past narratives for personal gain can be observed in various parts of the world among politicians and certain groups, and it is considered a dangerous trend when important cultural and religious identities are erased by undermining the integrity of historical records. In light of India's ongoing challenges with communal politics and attempts at revising its past, it is vital that citizens remain vigilant in guarding the integrity of their nation's diverse cultural legacy. By acknowledging India's varied religious and cultural traditions from the past, it can help it move towards creating a more inclusive and tolerant future.

• Changes in School Curriculum

The impact of political parties on school textbooks sparks controversy in many countries. Textbooks have the intention to present neutral and fair guidance, however, they can also be utilised as mechanisms for advocating certain ideologies or agendas. Critical thinking and analysing various sources of information are emphasised as important aspects. The impact stated has been illustrated through the example of schools managed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India. The spread of hatred against Muslims and Christians via textbooks, in addition to promoting a viewpoint which portrays both Islam and Christianity as foreign belief systems, has been noted. It is alarming to note that even in the Indian state like Rajasthan, which was ruled by the BJP, textbooks have been prescribed that praise fascism and suggest that it is more desirable for India (Anand and Lall 2022). This showcases how political parties can use educational textbooks to promote their agenda and control the thoughts of young individuals.

Furthermore, how textbooks illustrate a country's history and culture can profoundly impact the comprehension of these aspects by young individuals. Notably, school textbooks are not inherently biased or political. Truly speaking, they can act as robust tools for fostering diversity, inclusion, and critical thinking. Political parties should avoid using school textbooks to push their own agenda. Textbooks that are impartial yet supportive of values such as acceptance, consideration, and comprehension can be highly effective in promoting social harmony. To be responsible and informed citizens of their country, students need to receive a well-rounded education, which this ensures.

Conclusion:

The multifaceted nature of nationalism stems from the combination of its benefits and limitations, creating varying impacts on different societies. Nationalism, when embraced, can evoke a strong connection and appreciation for the cultural and historical legacy inherent in one's nation. Citizens have the opportunity to collaborate on this platform and collectively pursue objectives like fostering economic growth, social welfare, and political stability. In contrast, nationalism might play a role in nurturing biased and alienating perspectives towards minority communities, potentially leading to intolerance or even violent incidents. In the early twentieth century, nationalist ideology was utilised by fascist regimes to provide justification for engaging in wars and aggressive behaviours. With respect to nationalism in India, religion, especially Hinduism, holds considerable significance. Nevertheless, the rise of right-wing political parties using Hindu nationalism as a majoritarian ideology has contributed to heightened communal tensions and sectarian violence. Incidents such as the Babri mosque demolition in 1992 or lynching of Muslims under pretence upholding cow protection demonstrate how religious nationalism can cause harm by dividing communities and endangering India's secular identity.

Additionally, nationalism has been employed by political parties and business elites for their personal gains, resulting in the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups including Dalits, Adivasis, and Minorities. A frequent result of prioritising power and profit over the interests of ordinary citizens is an erosion in democracy along with a loss in accountability or transparency. India's society that consists of various religions as well as ethnicities requires recognition for its diversity and wealth within this particular context, and to avoid conflict or division it is important that we preserve the individuality and beauty inherent in every religion. Consequently, using nationalism as an instrument to promote the interest of a specific ethnicity or religion is unacceptable. The main focus ought to be on acknowledging India's diversity while simultaneously fostering inclusiveness and upholding social justice and human rights. To become a truly democratic and vibrant nation that can lead the world in the twenty first century India must embrace diversity and respect differences.

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