
THE GROWTH OF COMMUNAL POLITICS IN INDIA FROM THE 1920s

Aarushi Goyal¹

In 1947, the British Raj withdrew, ceding its dominant position to those who had triumphed in the electoral debate. From then till now, communalism still holds strong. To understand its development is hence an important factor in reaching a fuller appreciation of today's problems.

In its most simplified form, the 'history of communalism' per se, begins as a logical extension of British policy of 'divide and rule'. In its most verbose subjugation to historical debates, it is much more than, as the Oxford Dictionary suggests, a 'theory of governance by local autonomy'.

In this context it is important to untangle the confused substitutionary usage of the two terms, 'identity' and 'community'. Individual identities and the knowledge of this individuation existed ever since the descent of life; but the need to articulate this personality cult and then its integration into a larger fellowship was felt much later. It is exactly here where the debate begins. Some scholars still believe that the British raised Muslim communalism as a counterweight to Indian nationalism, thus disclaiming Modernity for providing the ground for the mobilisation of 'communalism'. Others, like Peter Hardy, emphasise the slow diffusion of more intransigent, 'revivalist' streams of Hinduism and Islam, which originated in the late 18th century and early 19th centuries but were vitalised by the spread of communications after 1860. The 'old Cambridge school', including Christopher Bayly, emphasised the importance of new arenas of local power in which local social conflicts

¹ Student, History Hons. M.S

could be played out. Dr. Sandria Freitag has provided us with valuable new insight into the popular mentalities which informed Hindu and Muslim behaviour in cases where violence occurred as a result of clashing religious festivals in Indian cities. What remains striking, however, is the unanimity with which scholars have accepted that **the quality and incidence of communal violence changed dramatically in the last third of the 19th century, forming a more strengthened structure in the 1920s; the period of operation of the Montagu-Chelmsford constitution.**

From the turn of the century, division had begun to emerge between the traditional leaders of the community – those who had a place within the system of control – and the growing body of educated Muslims. The increasing interest of the Muslim youth in the Congress threatened the credibility of the community’s traditional leaders and it is to be believed that it was in order to harness these enthusiasms to their own cause that the Muslim League was founded in 1906. While the Muslim League leaders pursued their policy of political co-operation with the Congress, the rise of communalism in the localities formed a sombre backlash to their activities.

There was a violent anti-Hindu outburst at Kohat in the North-West Frontier Province in September 1924 with 155 killed. Three waves of riots in Calcutta between April and July 1926; there were disturbances in the same year in Dacca, Patna, Rawalpindi and Delhi. The recurrent ostensible issues were the Muslim demand for stopping music before mosques, and Hindu pressures for a ban on cow-slaughter. (A modern day scholar writes of “how they let them [cows] out on the street because they cannot kill them, and do not know what to do

with them”.) Communal bodies proliferated, and political alignments made increasingly on communal bases. **On the eve of the 1920 elections, Madan Mohan Malviya formed an Independent Congress Party in alliance with Lajpat Rai with a programme of uninhibited Hindu communalism.**

According to Sumit Sarkar, the distinguished growth of communalism in the 1920s found logical explanation in the participation in post 1919 political structure. The maintenance of separate electorates along with the broadening of franchise sowed the seeds for ‘Dyarchy’ in the prolific ground of sectional slogans. Under this system of Dyarchy, certain departments of government, notably local self-government, education, agriculture etc. were transferred to the control of ministries responsible to the legislature. Therefore 1920 led to the enhancing of provincial politics.

A second factor was the considerable spread of education in the 1920s, complemented by the relative dearth of jobs. This led to frustration among the youth. As Bipin Chandra says, “Communalism was one of the by-products of the colonial character of the Indian economy, of colonial underdevelopment, thus the increasing unemployment, especially of the educated middle classes who could not fall back on land and who found government jobs to be getting scarce and professions overcrowded.”

Further, Sarkar embarks upon a very crucial point, that of fluidity. According to him fluidity remained a very significant feature of 20th century Indian history, i.e. agrarian disturbances would often turn

into communal riots, and cow protection enthusiasts or pan-Islamic agitators could also alternate as labour or peasant leaders. One might recall George Rude's comment on the pre-industrial crowd, where one type of militancy could easily turn into another.

Perhaps then, the innovation of religion as a sub-statement to 'communalism' was a need to stimulate the 'mass sensitivity' gently and with greater ease, otherwise unconscionable by dealing with individual group demands. Perhaps then, 'community identities' were formed to serve the purpose of 'communalism' rather than 'community identities' playing the precursory role to 'communalism'.

Thus, in the 1920s, the masses entered the organised national movement on an unprecedented scale. Congress leaders and workers got drawn into the villages as never before. At the same time, **the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements were acting as catalysts in the precipitation of 'nationalism' and 'communalism'.**

The Hindu Mahasabha and other such sectarian organisations now attained a new importance and came to adopt far more extreme positions. With the foundation of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh in 1925, the founder Dr. K.B. Hedgewar is reported to have said, "if there was no dispute about the English, the Germans and the French being the nation in England, Germany and France, why should there be any confusion about the identity of the nation in Hindustan?"

The link between elite and popular communalism was provided by the rapid growth of communal associations and ideologies. The

Muslim contribution here is well known – the spread of *tabligh* and *tanzin* from 1923 onwards, the Kohat outburst of 1924, the revival of Muslim League as Khilafat bodies petered away, and the murder of Swami Shradhanand in 1926. At its 'Lahore session' in 1924 presided over by Jinnah, the League raised the demand for a federation with full provincial autonomy to preserve Muslim majority areas from the dangers of 'Hindu domination'. It needs to be emphasised, however, that much of this was a reaction against the very rapid spread of Hindu communalism in these years.

Tabligh and tanzim were in large part a response to 'Arya Samajists', 'Shuddhi' and 'Sangathan', started after the Moplah forcible conversions and extended in 1923 by Shradhanand to western UP, in a determined bid to win back for Hinduism Rajputs, Gujjars and other converts to Islam.

Once dyarchy was established, the objective was no longer to convince the British public that India was ready to reform, but to gain a majority in any given legislature. The desire to obtain office or to prevent others from obtaining office became the main spring of political activity. This growth of competition at the provincial level provincialised all-India politics. Muslim politicians didn't have to appeal to non-Muslim; non-Muslims didn't have to appeal to Muslims. This made it very difficult for a genuine Indian nationalism to emerge.

A new phase of communalism emerged with the Civil Disobedience movement in April 1930. In March 1931, the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed. From the point of view of the Muslim Conference the most disturbing feature of these developments was that they coincided

with the main phase of negotiations regarding the future constitutions. Much to add to the situation, the Conference was proving to be a mixed bag. Firstly, there were the provincial interests, chiefly the Muslim landlords, whose degree of organisation varied from province to province. Then came a group consisting of urban constitutionalists – men like Jinnah, Shafi, Shah Nawaz etc., who had attempted in the late 1920s to do a deal with the Congress at the all-India level in order to improve their own position. Third, were the minority-province Khilafatists, men like the Ali Brothers. Lastly, there were the frontiersmen and the Sindhis. Unlike the Congress, the Conference did not have the backing of wealthy industrialists.

The Muslim Conference met its first serious challenge with the publication of the Simon Commission Report in May 1930. It put greater powers in the hands of the governor, but it did concede a measure of provincial autonomy. Thus, by the early 1930s, for both majority and minority provinces Muslims, the political future lay in the co-operation at the all-India level.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the coin, the Congress repeatedly aroused expectations and aspirations which it could not satisfy, and so the development of a Left challenge through trade unions, Kisan Sabhas, radical student organisations, Congress socialists and communists, and Right-Left confrontations within the Congress organisation itself increasingly became an important part of the country's life from the mid-1930s onwards.

The disillusionment of the radical middle class with Gandhian constraints was also contributing significantly to the growth of the Left by the end of this period, as revolutionaries abandoned the path of individual violence for mass struggle and Marxism. Though the mass upsurges of the 1930s were closely related to decisive economic changes, the worldwide Depression, which set in from late 1929 onwards also, affected India.

In several ways, however, 1930 marked a definite advance in radicalism over 1921-22. Yet it would be erroneous to give so much credit to the Civil Disobedience Movement. The stirring Hindu-Muslim unity of 1919-22 was obviously a thing of the past, for this was the time for the breakdown of Nehru Report negotiations along with a decade of intensive communal organisation and fratricidal strife. Muslim participation remained throughout the Civil Disobedience years.

While concluding, it is significant to note how numerous 'default' identities of a large social structure get linked to one strong, seemingly well designed, yet meticulously constructed, identity. The word 'default' is used here because of the artificiality of the identities. Communalism as a living institution thus was a mere construct. Transgressing the socio-economic and religious specifications of communalism in India; communalism was a larger than life carnal imagery of the pupil; a child of party politic; gaining stronger and stronger grounds with the passage of time.