UNIT 11 COMMUNALISM*

Structure

11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the meaning of the terms communal and communalism
- discuss the social and historical background in which communalism emerged as a social phenomenon in India; and
- explain the different view points on communalism

11.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the fifth and the last block of your course on **Sociology of India**. This block titled **State, Society and Religion** deals with two major issues faced by Indian society and its unity and integrity. These issues are (a) communalism and (b) secularism. In this unit we will focus on the issue of communalism in India. To begin with, the term communalism has its roots in the term commune or community which means a group of people who swear allegiance to one's own community, religion or ethnic group than the society at large. Further, to elaborate, in sociological lexicon the concept of communalism can be seen as a form of collective outburst of one community against the other. To understand the social phenomenon of communalism, it is pertinent to understand the very nature of society. Society plays a very important role in genesis of communalism. It is important to note that Indian society was never homogenous throughout history. It was highly diverse- culturally, religiously, caste-wise and linguistically, as you learnt in the first unit of this course-Unity and Diversity in India. But there was hardly any tension between these groups. However, most of the scholars agree that communalism is a modern phenomenon and not a medieval phenomenon as it all began with the establishment of British Rule in India. The reasons that can

* Dr. Amiya Kumar Das, Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam

be taken into consideration for this disharmony are: The British divisive policies, competitive nature of colonial rule, political and social structure and backwardness of colonial society with stunted economic growth. We will explain some of these aspects in this unit.

11.2 COMMUNALISM: MEANING AND DEFINITION

The term community and commune stand for two different concepts and should not be used in common parlance as the same. Yerankar (1999:26) argues that community and communal are two different concepts. The former is used to express the fellowship of relations or feelings, common character, agreement and sharing a common culture and space. The latter means an expression of heightened sense of community feelings. Since it is associated with a religious community, it implies exclusive loyalty to one's religion and all its related dimensions. According to Seth (2000:17), it signifies inter communal rivalries and social tension, economic, political or cultural differences of the rulers and the ruled. It is an ideology which determines the gradual evolution of relationships between two communities both within and without their respective folds. Dixit (1974:1) argues that communalism is a political doctrine which makes use of religio-cultural differences to achieve political ends. When, on the basis of religio-cultural differences, a community initiates political demands deliberately, then communal awareness turns into communalism. Sabrewal (1996:130) argues that communalism as a concept emerged due to the fact that members of a multi-religious society had to witness and confront the behavioral pattern practiced by specific community per se. It clearly shows that the term multi religiosity may sound unique as a Sociological proposition, however the differences need to be understood. For instance, social unease and tension is generated in the communities by sheer differences in clothing patterns, life style, facial marks, one's language and manners. These differences are equally governed by religious sanction of each specific community that creates a specific identity for the groups in the community. Awareness of socio-religious identities gradually get established and are mutually acknowledged. The awareness of socio religious identities help one constitute useful social maps in one's mind demarcating the social territory into sacred, friendly or neutral and hostile. Generally, this may be due to the propaganda and other factors such as prejudices, hostilities and negative feelings against each other. It is therefore argued that all depends upon the nature and type of interactive patterns between people of different religions and cultures. In case they do not hurt the religious sentiments and challenge religious identities, then there is no problem. But if they do, by chance or choice develop hostility against the other this is what leads to outbreak of communal outbursts and communal conflicts. Kamath (2003) tries to explain the meaning of communalism through the concept of communal harmony in the context of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. When various communities live together within a territory with understanding and cooperation, there is communal harmony. On the other hand, whenever such groups, either ethnic or religious, fight for their exclusiveness, group identity or group interest even at the cost of national interest or try to impose their way of life on other group, there is communal disharmony and this is termed as communalism. This explanation signifies that lack of understanding and cooperation between religious communities is the basic reason of communalism.

11.3 FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GROWTH OF COMMUNALISM IN INDIA

There may be several factors that may be attributed to the cause and growth of Communinalism in India. Some scholars attribute this cause due to stagnant economy during the British Rule. The stagnation of economy may have affected the aspirations and economic prosperity for certain sections within society. Scholars opine that this section of society usually termed as 'Middle Class' used communalism as a weapon for their own survival at the cost of other classes in society. Subsequently, other leaders from the community and political parties joined to fuel the tension of Communalism in India. This may be well illustrated with the emergence of modern politics with its roots in **partition of Bengal in 1905** and feature of separate electorate under **Government of India Act, 1909**.Later, British government also appeased various communities through **Communal award in 1932**, which witnessed strong resistance from Gandhiji and others. All these acts were done by the British government to appease Muslims and other communities, for their own political needs. This feeling of communalism has deepened since then, fragmenting the Indian society and being a cause of unrest. Let us now discuss the core factors in detail.

Box 11.0: Divide and Rule Policy of British

On the other hand, in the case of religion, the British took advantage of the existing religious pluralism. Especially, in the aftermath of the revolt of 1857 by the *sepoys* of British army, the colonial rulers realised that if they wished to continue their rule over India, then they had to break the country from within on religious lines. They adopted the policy based on Roman maxim, '*Divide et Impera*' (Divide and Rule). Even though the revolt was a result of several political, social, religious and economic factors, the unity that Hindu and Muslim *sepoys* showcased in what is considered the immediate military cause of the revolt was alarming for the British. In what was an eye opener for the colonial rulers, both Hindu and Muslim *sepoys* refused to use the cartridges of the new Enfield rifle, which were greased with cow and pig fats.

To break this unity became their primary concern. Soon after in 1905, they divided Bengal, which was then the epicentre of freedom struggle in India, on religious lines. While East Bengal became a Muslim majority state, West Bengal had majority Hindus. Then in 1909, they introduced separate electorate for Muslims through Morley Minto Act, which was a step towards breaking the religious unity and taking the advantage of religious pluralism in India. At another level, the British started giving preference to Sikhs over Hindus and Muslims for their army jobs, giving rise to the notions of Sikhs as the martial race of India. This partiality towards the Sikh was because of the support they had given to the British in the 1857 uprising. They also created the myth of martial races creating the Gorkha identity out of the hill men who were loyal to them. The British sowed the seeds of discord between the major religious communities, especially the Hindus and Muslims as it was the only way they could get control over the various Indian principalities by playing them against each other.

British Policy of Divide and Rule

In the pre-independence period the British used the policy of Divide and Rule to weaken the nationalist aspirations by creating a cleavage between the Hindus and Muslims, favoring one community against the other in terms of services and opportunities. It resulted in communal tensions between the two groups and therefore, it is considered that the Hindu-Muslim disunity took shape during the continuation of British Rule in India.

In this regard, clear demarcation was made by many historians between the ancient period of Indian history and the medieval. Prominent among them was British historian James Mill of the early nineteenth century. They endorsed that since ancient India was ruled by Hindu rulers, it was a period of much growth and prosperity against the continuous decay of the medieval period under the Muslim rulers. This readily suggests that the basic character of polity in India is defined by religion which relied on the beliefs that Indian society and culture had reached ideal heights in the ancient period. On the contrary, Muslim communalism harped upon the glory of the Muslim rulers. Such distorted texts of Indian history significantly contributed to the rise of communalism.

During the national movement, a strong Hindu religious element was introduced in nationalist thought. The orientalist writings which glorified the Hindu religion and period in history became the basis for the propogation of nationalist ideas and pride for the motherland. In the process the Muslim were seen as alien.

Other factors which are believed to fan the flames of communalism include rumors and distorted news publicized by media which disseminates false information to the public. Also, political parties resorted to the politics of appeasement whereby sanctions were used to appease different ethnic, religious, cultural groups for votes. This vote bank politics greatly followed tactics of appeasement by provisioning services and opportunities to a few sections of the population against the other sections.

Check Your Progress 1

i) What do you understand by communalism?

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ii) Tick the true (T) or false (F) statement

a) The British policy of divide and rule during pre-Independence period was to facilitate their rule in India. ( )

b) The diversities found in Indian society did not allow the British to rule over India ( )

c) British historians like James Mill during early 18th century associated ancient India when it was ruled by Hindu rulers to be an age of prosperity. ( )

d) One of the factors that gave rise to communalism was rumours and distorted news publicized by media. ( )

11.4 COMMUNAL RIOTS

Having discussed the concept of communalism, the other concept which needs discussion is "Communal Riot", which is a collective manifestation of religious feelings and sentiments against the others. A communal riot, in general refers to a collective violent manifestation of one's identity, ideas and beliefs, etc. in relation to other religious community for the realization of certain interests. These differences are sometimes openly manifested and sometimes hidden but presented in a subtle way. It is, most often, a consequence of the spread of communal ideology. Many examples of communal riot could be cited in the Indian context. Infamous among them are the following-

- **Partition of India,1947**
- **Anti-Sikh riots, 1984**
- **Ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Hindu Pundits in 1989**
- **Babri masjid demolition in Ayodhya, 1992**
- **Assam Communal violence,2012**
- **Muzzaffarnagar violence, 2013**

Activity 1

Read the newspaper/journals/books on any one of the above mentioned communal riot and write a report of one page on its cause, leadership and ultimate consequence. Discuss your report with other students at your Study Center.

11.5 UNDERSTANDING COMMUNALISM

This section tries to understand the various view points offered to explain communalism in Indian contexts.

11.5.1 Colonialist Viewpoint

The British seemed to see 'Hindu-Muslim antagonism' much earlier than the term 'communalism' emerged. Colonial thinkers like Hugh McPherson in his work 'Origin and Growth of Communal Antagonism' rejects the idea that 'communalism' is "a modern invention, the product of recent political developments", which refers specifically to the politics of separate electorates. In order to prove his point McPherson cites the Benares riots of 1809 and the testimony of a "landholder of Bengal" to the age-old animosity between Hindus and Muslims which dates back to the Muslim invasion of India. McPherson emphasizes that "the religious basis of communal dissension" began to be "reinforced by political factors" with Tilak's establishment of the 'Anti-Cow-Killing Society' in 1893, which he suggests was designed to "stimulate the militant spirit of Hinduism and establish its domination of the Indian political world"

11.5.2 Nationalist Viewpoint

For the colonialist, 'communalism' is a pre-colonial problem which is irremediable. For the nationalist, 'communalism' is a colonial problem with its

remedy being nationalism .Under this rubric, communalism in India develops as a concomitant to Indian nationalism and is nothing but nationalism driven into religious channels. For the nationalist, while both nationalism and 'communalism' were responses to colonialism, the former was the 'right' response and the latter, the wrong one. The nationalist project a unitary and symbiotic culture of historic co-operation between Hindus and Muslims which was thwarted with the colonial rule especially with the policy of Divide and Rule, of the British rulers in India which gave rise to communalism.

11.5.3 Some Scholarly Responses

The most notable theorist on 'communalism', Bipan Chandra, who wrote *Communalism in Modern India* in 1984 worked very clearly within nationalist frames. Chandra and other nationalist historians emphasised that the phenomenon of 'communalism' is a 'modern' one and could not have existed before colonialism. Clearly, since any form of 'popular' politics could not have existed before the British advent, Chandra attributed 'communal politics' to colonial origins.

As Chandra writes "Communalism was not a partial or sectional view of the social reality; it was its wrong or unscientific view. Communalism was not narrow or false because it represented only one community but because it did not do either. The communalist not only failed to represent national interests, he did not represent even the interests of the 'community' it claimed to represent" (Chandra 1984: 17).

Thus, nationalism represented the struggle for national liberation from the colonial state and for the formation of an independent state. It was historically valid at the moment as it provided a real solution to a real problem – national liberation as against colonial domination (Chandra 1984: 22).Colonial and nationalist explanations of 'communalism' seemingly do not enjoy much credit today. Most contemporary work on 'communalism' would be dubbed constructivist. The foremost in this section is Bernard Cohn. However, Cohn's brand of constructivism has seen several tributary developments and branches. While Cohn's basic argument was that the colonizer's structure of administration generated sociological categories (such as, the schedules castes, scheduled tribes etc.) that often became the source of conflict in India. His supporters and followers have found a variety of reasons besides colonial administration to prove that the colonisers succeeded in implementing not only sociological categories through administrative techniques but identities, consciousness and nationalism also emerged through the prism of the colonial knowledge system. Gyanendra Pandey's (1992) writings reflect these views. Pandey treats 'communalism' as a product of nationalism. However, he seeks to distinguish his stand from those who have considered communalism as 'deviant' or 'under-developed' nationalism.

Anti-Modernist

The last section is essentially devoted to the work of only one scholar who speaks not of 'communalism' so much as an analysis of 'secularism'. It is perhaps ironic that one can see the problem in greater clarity in his work. In his '*The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance'* (Nandy,1998), Nandy begins by explaining why one needs to examine the "category" of secularism. His proposition is that "post-colonial structures of knowledge in the

third world" are often characterised by a "peculiar form of imperialism of categories" which hegemonize a "conceptual domain" so effectively that the original domain vanishes from our awareness and is replaced by a concept that is produced and honed in the West (Nandy 1998: 321). His project then is to recover the domain of 'religious tolerance' which is the question relevant to South Asia, from the hegemonic discourse of 'secularism. He goes on to suggest that traditional India had answers to questions of religious tolerance.

Nandy's arguments get caught up in a binary mode of tradition/modernity and faith/ideology. He acutely points out how colonialism has subjected certain knowledge domains to an imperialism of categories such that all traces of the original problem disappear. Given this proposition, his investigation of the concept of secularism is well founded. However, he does not answer why he sets out to rescue 'religious tolerance' from the domain of secularism. Was secularism an answer to religious intolerance in India? Nandy traces a trajectory of the concept of 'secularism' in Indian politics but ignores the fact that the word gained legitimacy in colonial India.

Thus, Nandy's problem itself seems a little skewed. He presumes that there was peace within traditional society and that this peace was connected to religious tolerance and it is this traditional religious tolerance that he wants to recover. Instead one could ask whether tolerance had anything to do with religion at all.

11.6 COMMUNALISM IN INDIA: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The projection of the idea of India being a Hindu majoritarian state found its expression among the writings and discussions for an assertive Hindu ideology in the colonial era as mentioned above. This deliberate engagement with history became an important component in the political self-making in the 1800's.Even within the colonial models of historiography, history was interpreted which exemplified Hindu artistic achievement which declined and was then defeated by the Muslim invaders, who then is replaced by the colonial rulers. It is important to understand that this construction of nationalist historiography is the very ground on which the current Hindu nationalist models of India's past is based. Many contemporary religious and non-religious movements come to share idioms which see the nationalist state within the Hindu pantheon.

During the British rule, it was important to reimagine a single idea of nationhood in order to drive away the Britishers. Thus, the task of glorifying only selective instances of certain episodes of history such as the Rajput states and the Maratha confederacy which resisted the Britishers coming to India. Gradually there began a symbolic representation of Hindu Motherland. Towards the later part of the 19th century, this idea was then borrowed and extended by Hindu reformist organisations such as the Arya Samaj which advocated a return to the Vedas and had confidence in the narrative Hindu decline with the advent of the colonial rulers which needs to be revived. Another strand borrowed from the European race theory, that India is a land of the Aryans was also injected to the nationalist paradigm.

In the writings of Savarkar reflected this notion and he writes that only those who could establish Aryan descent qualify to be within the Hindu "rashtra" and not others belonging to the other religious groups.

Jawaharlal Nehru's secular notion of Indian identity was given cognizance, after the inception of India as a republic after 1947.The then prime minister was against the intrusion of any religious identity politics within the workings of the post colonial state. Here, what Nehru meant was to separate religion from state and to give importance to all religions. This is so because in order to overcome the divisive politics of the colonial state of dividing the Hindus and the Muslims. The alternate of portion and aftermath of partition and derisive politics in pre-independent India made it important that the solidarity of the nation was given a priority and corrideration.

Thus under, Nehru's secular guidance and Gandhi's stewardship the Congress party that led India to Independence endorsed inter-communal tolerance rather than strong secularist ideology.

Check Your Progress II

i) In what ways did the colonialist viewpoint of communalism differed from the nationalist viewpoint? Discuss.

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ii) Fill in the blanks:-

a) One of the notable theorist on communalism ————wrote the book "**Communalism in Modern India"** in 1984 where he has written that it is a ————phenomenon.

b) During the British rule, it was important to ———————— a single idea of nationhood in order to drive away the ———————— from India.

This traditional secularism as propounded by Nehru and the Congress was based on religious freedom, neutrality and reformative justice. Though this notion of secularism did not appeal to many who felt it was pseudo secular, as they felt it oppressed certain communities over others.

However, it is not only the voices of some who were skeptical of independent India's secular polity but also many intellectuals who have been criticising the notion of secularism on which the Indian Constitution was based. They see secularism as a myth and alien to India's needs. Critics such as Ashish Nandy, Partha Chatterjee ,T.N. Madan and Gyanendra Pandey vehemently oppose the

Hinduistic notions of the Hindutva wagon as well as the Indian state which aspires for a homogenising modern state. Borrrowing from Gandhi's concept of villages being little republics and whose very nature is local and fragmented, they argue that both Hindutva and secular nationalism are intolerant of diversity. Although these critics are powerful, we still need to comprehend that the issue of secularism produces equality in general, and therefore the idea of political democracy.

Box 11.1

We need to understand that the modern communalism or the rule of majoritarianism finds its justification from the historical past. And hence it is of utmost relevance to be aware of the communal approach to the interpretation of ancient and medieval history as well. The Hindu communalists try to project an ideal Hindu society while the Muslim communalists do the vice-versa .We should not forget that the historical interpretation can be the product of contemporary ideology. The choice of events that are chosen might be guided by the subjectivity of the historian. Hence, historiography is critical of such interpretation of the past that might not be objective. Historical writing is one of the most sensitive intellectual areas with repercussions on popular nationalism and beliefs. There are many instances and assumptions in relation to Indian history which might not be outrightly communal but can be fitted within the purview of communal viewpoint as certain instances and assumptions are not understood within its historical context. As for instance, Mahmud Ghazni, being a Muslim was assumed to be despoiler of Hindu Temples since Islam is against idol worship. Little effort is given to understand further the causes of Mahmud's such behaviour.

Such communal approach is crucial because of two factors .Firstly, communal interpretation of history is poor quality history and secondly, historians cannot accommodate their discipline to degenerate to the extent that false history becomes instrumental in the promotion of political mythology .These factors are crucial and needs to be taken into account in order to understand all the forces that went into the making of India's past.

Communal violence is common now days throughout the world. They are known by various alternative names, as in China, the communal violence in Xinjiang province is called ethnic violence. Communal violence and riots have also been called non-State conflict, violent civil or minorities unrest, mass racial violence, social or inter-communal violence and ethno-religious violence. The Indian society will continue to experience such violent caste and communal eruptions as long as it does not find political and economic equilibrium in terms of castes and communities. The rise of OBCs on one hand, and impact of globalisation on Indian economy on the other, will continue to cause occasional eruption of violence in Indian society for quite some time. Caste and communal polarisation will be with us as long as we are not able to create an egalitarian society.

11.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit on 'Communalism' we explained to you the meaning and definitions of 'communalism'. What are the basic reasons which cause the situation of communal tension and disharmony in a multi-religious society. Here in this unit

we have described to you the main factors which have led to the rise of 'communal' feelings in India. We have given the past history and described the three different viewpoints on communalism in India and tried to explain the different responses of different social scientists on communalism in India.

11.8 REFERENCES

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11.3 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

I) Check Your Progress I

i) When different socio-religious, ethnic communities live together within a territory fight with one another for their exclusiveness, group identity or group interest even at the cost of national interest or they try to impose their way of life on others, thus causing communal disharmony and violence. This is so called communalism

ii) (a) T (b) F (c) T (d) T

II) Check Your Progress II

i) The colonialist believed that 'communalism' was a pre-colonial phenomena which is irremediable i.e. which cannot be treated. However, the nationalists believed that 'communalism' could be tackled effectively by nationalism itself since they believed that 'communalism' was nothing but nationalism gone the religious way. Nationalism was the right way while communalism was not, to deal with colonial rule in India.

ii) a) Bipan Chandra, modern

b) reimagine, British

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