SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE
IDEOLOGY OF COMMUNALISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

Modernity as it has been embedded in the post-enlightenment epoch is visualised through the lens of French Revolution. The populism ignited empathetic rhetoric of French Revolution, Liberté, égalité, fraternité (liberty, equality, fraternity) echoes itself throughout in the creation of an idealized Modern World. The manifestation of these arbitrary terminologies coincided with the evolution of the idea of democratically elected government which is supposedly a government ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people’. This idea of the people’s will/mandate (Democracy) has attempted to give humanity the concept of choice; and it is on this bedrock, the idea of Secularism has been manifested.

As in the case with any other philosophy (‘isms’), the theory of Secularism was also negotiated so as to bring in diverse thinking within this same rubric. This diversity varies from the idea of American Secularism (in which there is a clear demarcation between the state and religion) to the Chinese Secularism (in which there is the promotion of irreligion). Though the framers of constitution have not employed the term ‘secular’, the Indian democrats have reworked the idea of secularism to bring out an Indian variant of the same (in which there is the equal respect for all religions (Sarva Dharma Sambhava) and keeping equal distance from all religions (Dharma Nirapekshata) at the same time).

However we are at that juncture in history where there is the attack on these democratic practices in general and Secular fabric of the society in particular. Hence it is important for us (the students of social sciences) to analyse the challenges faced by Indian secularism. If we venture into the nuances of the same, though it seems ironical, it is the very concept of nationalism (or a variant of the same) that is causing the fundamental challenge to Indian Secularism. To be specific, it is the aggrandising nature of nationalism put forth by the radically extreme sections of the Indian political spectrum that poses the challenge. It is that particular base (keeping religio-cultural practices) through which they construct their superstructure of nationalism, as opposed to the civic nationalism. Hence if one were to understand the challenges to Indian secularism, it becomes an imperative to analyse the very fundamental idea that poses the challenges to it, which is Communalism. The aim of the present paper is nothing apart from the above mentioned.

What is communalism?: an introductory note

As rightly opined by Umberto Eco (in Foucault’s Pendulum) ‘…the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth…. Social scientist in their pursuit of finding out ‘truth’ (through interpreting the above mentioned ‘enigma’), carry out two inter-related functions- they complexes simple questions and simplifies complex questions. In some instances, they perform both of these functions. One of those instances was during the analysing process of ‘Communalism’.
Before developing our definition of communalism, we need to pinpoint some of the inferences about communalism. Firstly, it is the distinctive meaning of the term ‘Communalism’ in South Asian context. In the western understanding of the term, ‘communalism’ connotes a positive phenomenon, in which there is a striving for the common good, and common economic functions (like distribution of common land, administration of church finances, etc.). The distinctively Indian/or South Asian connotation (in contrast to its definition in the West) of the term communalism has been due to the variance in conceptualising certain social realities in different societies at particular historical junctures.

Secondly this phenomenon had immense effect in the Indian subcontinent. It was this ‘communal’ feeling which changed the mind sets Muslims and Hindus who fought shoulder to shoulder in 1857 and 1920; it was this ‘communal’ feeling which forced two main mass leaders (despite having the same ‘religion’) echo completely opposite to each other at same time period; and further it was this same ‘communal’ feeling (and subsidiaries like separatism) which is the primary reason for the ‘unique partition’ of British India. Hence this subject is very delicate and problematic. Thirdly and perhaps the pertinent reason which makes communalism an important field of research is because it is a day to day real life phenomenon. Many anticipated that communalism will fade away with the vanishing of foreign power and Muslim league; but it didn’t. Rather it is more evident and persuasive in the post colonial times and the present day politics. We can understand the present only in the light of past. It is at this juncture, E.H Carr calls for the ‘dual functions of history’- i.e. ‘to enable to understand the society of the past’ (by bringing out the real analysis of the past communalism) and hence to increase ‘mastery over the society of the present’ (i.e. to counter further India-Pakistan wars to Anti-Sikh riots to Masjid- Mandir controversies to Gujarat riots to Dadri Aflaqs to Dalit lynchings).

Communalism: Historiographical Debates

In this section, we will attempt to summarize some of the main historiographical debates associated with communalism. Broadly these debates try to analyse/answer the pertinent questions like: Is communalism a modern or pre-modern phenomenon? How important is religion for communalism? Is one communalism reactionary to other communalism? Etc.

Let us first focus on the modernist version of Communalism, (i.e the theory of modernity and the break with the past). There are some set of scholars who sees communalism with the emergence of colonial ‘modernity’. These set of writers refute the notion that it was a part and parcel of India's hoary past, existing for centuries. Instead, its emergence is located in the context of the British colonial impact, and the response of different Indian social classes, strata and groups. A classical example for this modernist version is K. B. Krishna (The Problem of Minorities, or Communal Representation in India). He sees communalism as the product of superimposition of capitalism on the existing feudal systems under imperialism. Though Wilfred Cantwell Smith sees communalism emerging from the pre-modern times; he sees communalism as ‘developing processes. He supports the ‘Lag theory’ and sees the economic conditions of colonial times as the chief culprit for communalism. Largely, he is trying to bring out the ‘economic basis for the growth of communalism’ (i.e. how capitalism or capitalist environment under the colonial presence creates a condition for growth of communalism) and hence sees its politics as largely a fight (through the institutions like separate electorates)
between the bourgeoisies of both communities. A.R. Desai too (in his Social Background of Indian Nationalism. 1948) defined communalism as ‘the form within which the struggle of the professional classes of different communities over posts and seats carried on’.

One of the main proponents of modernist version is Bipan Chandra, who sees a sharp break with the politics of pre and post-1857 period. For him, it was a middle-class, petty bourgeois phenomenon, product of the unique socio-economic and political situation of colonial India. To him, Communalism is a ‘false consciousness’, as it presents reality in a distorted form. This false consciousness fills in gaps created by the inadequate development of ‘true Consciousness’ (which he considers as Nationalism). He defines communalism at three levels, at first level, it is a ‘is the belief that people who follows the same religion have common secular interests; at the second level, it believed that the secular interests of one religious community are dissimilar and divergent from that of other communities and in the ultimate stage of communal ideology, the interests of different communities are seen to be mutually incompatible, antagonistic and hostile. For Salil Misra, the ‘idea of communalism is inclusive of two separate though interconnected themes’. First was the ‘transformation of religious communities into political constituencies’ under the modern conditions laid down by British. To him, this 19th Century transformation was such that it displaced ‘local syncretic communities’ by ‘pan-Indian religious communities of Hindus and muslims’; Second theme was the 20th century development in which these pan-indian communities were placed at the service of large political ‘projects’ involving their mobilization to fulfil specific demands. To him, the ‘project’ of this transformation is taken by British through census operations (which pushed for the ‘perception of crisis’) and separate electorates (which was effectively utilized by the communal organizations).

For Prabha Dixit (Communalism -A Struggle for Power, 1974), communalism is a consciously conceived political doctrine of one section of traditional elites; that which makes use of religio-cultural differences and awareness, and turns these into communalism in the form of a political doctrine. Hence Dixit sees reactionary nature of communalism. Even W.C.Smith, opines that Hindu communalism was a ‘reactionary’ to Muslim one. However Mushirul Hasan argues the vice versa (i.e it is the Islamic communalism that was the reactionary to the Hindu communalism).

Now let’s focus on the scholars whose theory can be clubbed as the ‘The Pre-Modernist Version’ (i.e the theory of antiquity and continuity). These scholars sees Communalism as a phenomenon which existed since time immemorial, because it provided the only means for the pluralities or religious groups to interact with, as well as counteract, each other. Therefore, they conclude that the phenomenon of communalism is not modern at all. For Anil Seal, in such a ‘shapeless’ country with divergent and mutually exclusive societies, politics had always been structured around religion, caste, community or factions, and hence motivated by 'self interests'. Christopher Alam Bayly tries to build ‘continuity’ in the story of communalism. He suggests that many conflicts in the period 1700-1850 bear close resemblance to the communal riots that took place during the late 19th and 20th centuries. To him, the 'land wars' of 18th century which saw the rise of agrarian Hindu and Sikh peasantry against Muslim rural gentry; it was not less communal than the riots in eastern U. P. in 1920s or in eastern Bengal in the 1930s and 1940s. Hence he criticises the assumption of communal violence was an export
from the towns and that the syncretism of rural religion, which excluded the possibility of communal violence. Lious Dumont too echoes in the pre-modernist lines and opines that Islamic rule made Hinduism more rigid and traditional. To him, there were only ‘partial syntheses’ (like Kabirs and Sikhs) made during medieval times, thus making the community profile in medieval India rigid.

II. CONCLUSION

This section has two components. First part is drawing out conclusions (made from the above readings) and trying to answer the questions raised in the beginning of the Second Section. With these conclusions and answers, I’m attempting to outline a definition for this concept-Communalism. Being an amateur scholar, this flawed definition isn’t an argument but a tentative formulation.

By and large, the Pre modernist’s writings neglect the crucial impact of the colonial intervention and the modernists completely forgets about the identities present in the Indian soil from ancient times. There is no doubt that there was a community consciousness in the pre-modern times but there was also not pan-Indian community feeling. The ‘imposition of capitalism in the existing feudal conditions of India under imperialism’ has contributed for the emergence of this politics. Since it was ‘arrested development’ (which created more employees than employment) happened under this condition, It seems that there is substance in the LAG theory. But neither was religious pluralities the ‘seed’ of communalism (but they are the ‘fruit’ of communalism) nor was religious difference ‘the causes of communalism’ (but they are ‘the products of communal ideology’). Consider for example, both Gandhiji and Maulana Azad was highly religious in their personal life; however both of them aren’t communalist in their approach. But at the same time, though both V.D. Savarkar and M.A. Jinnah were not religious, their politics was communally aligned. This proves the inter connection between religion and Politics. Or in other words, being religious doesn’t make one communal and vice versa.

It is indeed necessary to stress the distinction (like K.B.Krishna, W.C.Smith and Bipan Chandra has done) between ‘communal tensions’ and ‘communal politics’. There may have been instances of ‘communal tensions’ in the pre-modern times but the emergence of communal politics is a modern phenomenon. After 1940s, what emerged is a mixture of two communalisms which culminated in the partition.

Communalism (like the emergence of nationalisms or class struggles) was ‘not historically or socially inevitable’. There was something in the social, political and economic situations of colonial India which favoured the growth of communalism. However it will be historically untrue to view communalism as a creation of British colonial policies. British have from time to time, devised many legitimizing tools for their perpetuation; and one among them was encouraging (not creating) communal feelings. With the Revivalist movements and propagandas of communal organizations, communalism flourished within the framework and institutions which British provided. But no communalism is reactionary to the other. As Jawahralal Nehru opined, ‘one communalism doesn’t end the other; each feeds on the other and both fatten’.

An attempt to define ‘communalism’

Like all other ‘isms’ (like for example Nationalism, Socialism, Conservatism, Fascism, Feminism, Fundamentalism etc) Communalism too is an ‘ideology’. As rightly opined by Andrew Vincent, ideologies operates in both at theory and in practice level. Hence being an ideology, communalism should also be understood at these
two levels (theoretical and practical). In the theoretical level, it requires an ‘imaginative’ (to borrow use Benedict Anderson’s terminology) plane (or platform) to sustain. It requires so because it believes in ‘internal standardization’ and ‘external differentiation’. Coming to the practical level, it needs institutional manifestations (like communal organizations) to fulfil its portrayed pan-communitarian interests, by utilizing the existing socio-political conditions created by Central agency (or state).

This definition neither views communalism as inherent in religious pluralities, nor does it consider the age of communalism as an important question. But it necessarily considers politics (both the politics played by a central agency and the politics played by communal organizations) as an undisputable factor for the perpetuation of communalism.

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III. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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