

The Religious Politics in India

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Abstract

The people of India are professing different religions like Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity etc. and practicing different religious rites. One of the guiding principles of our constitution is to follow the path of religious impartiality and tolerance for all religious matters. Though India was divided into Pakistan and India on the basis of two nation theory, the religious fervor could not finish because the trail of memories of the partition haunted the minds of people. There are tensions and suspicions amongst minorities. The clever politicians are playing minority appeasement card for vote bank. Hindutva politics are gaining momentum. Religious festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm and excitement. Religious places are used for political propaganda and religious sentiments are excited in order to gain political control of the state. The emergence of religious based political party has threatened the secular character of India. The communal forces are becoming more powerful and are openly challenging the existence of liberal thought process of nation. Even secular parties which hasruled India for more than four decades, has found the idea of scoring quick electoral gains by tampering with secular principles and institutions too tempting to resist. Political parties seeking to stake out a position as pro-Hindu, or simultaneously pro-Hindu and a protector of the minorities, have given a fillip to religious politics. This paper shows the how politics is shaped by religion in India.

Key Words : Hinduism, Secular, Communal, Minority.

Introduction:

The Indian politics that is seems to be mature and modern, but the existence of religious flavor is felt, especially in the electoral politics. The relation between the religion and politics are rampant far or less in every state of India. The religious considerations are used as a tool of winning election such as forming political alliance, selection of candidates for nomination, election campaigning, allocation of ministry etc. The universal civil code can not be formed so that minorities can come in the mainstream of laws. The political leaders are busy for smooth and easy wining of election by various means of communal politics. The leaders are seeking bless and support from Sadhu, Sant, Moulabi, Sahi Imam etc. and they are visiting temple, masjid, gurdwara, church, math etc. The religious leaders are not reluctant to take these opportunities. The urbanisation, industrialisation, modernisation have no impact on the religious politics of India. From the very beginning of its creation of so called nation state, a lots of communal tensions engulfed the nation. The creation of Pakistan and bitter memories of it's creation had always haunted the people of India. There is a suspicion and hatred in the minds of people of India. The Indian politics can not shield from this impact. This article is divided in three sections. The section one is focused on key issues of religious political parties and politics of opportunism, the second section looks at the politics of polarization and vote bank politics of India, finally the third section examines the religious festivals and identity politics in West Bengal.

Religious Political Parties and Politics of Opportunism:

The religious politics that influenced heavily in Indian politics whether it is in the vote bank politics, formation of political parties on the basis of religion by imbibing a sense of hatred and insecurity in the minds of people, some times it seems to be divide larger India. Religious sentiments are so ripe that innocent people are killed in slightest pretext. "The Muslim League, the Akali Dal and the BJP are some well known communal parties in India. They not only represent particular communities but also thrive one communal politics. Their leaders often use them to create communal tensions so that they make fish in troubled waters. This makes it difficult to fight communal fanaticism and religious fundamentalism with the co-operation of all political parties. Besides the communal parties, there are non-political organisations like Shiv Sena, RSS, Panthic Committee, the Muslim United front and Jamaat-e-Islam. This organisations

declare that they have nothing to do with politics but they have the backing of the BJP, the Muslim League and the United Akali Dal. They continually foment fears, insecurity and separatist views” (Sikri 1989). Yet it would be premature to dismiss the challenge that the BJP and its extraparliamentary allies (popularly referred to as the Sangh Parivar or “family group” and composed of the Bajrang Dal, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) pose to secularism (Ganguly 2007). This function has continued in a large scale in post independence India, although it was expected to decline in the Secular State. This function of religion has numerically enhanced especially the Islamic parties during the last decade of the 20th century. But unlike Hindu parties, the effect of these parties among the Muslim declined in comparison to the pre-independence times. These parties, often, have social basis among associated communities. For some of them, religion has been converted to ideology e.g. Hinduism is an important part of Hinduness or Hindutva as BJP’s ideology and Islam almost constitute the basis of the most of Islamic parties

especially Jamaat- Islam. These fundamental parties use their respective religion’s faith, belief for gaining electoral milestone. Now it is seen that every political party playing the communal card. The proudly claimed secular leaders are visiting the mandir during election time. Some leaders are visiting mandir, masjid, gurudwara, church etc. for gaining sympathy. The Shiv Sena's turn to Hindutva and the demonization of Muslims in the 1990s was traceable, less to economic conditions than to discursive possibilities. By the mid-to late 1980s, a number of events heightened the salience of religious identities. The Shah Bano case (which raised the issue of whether a Muslim divorced woman claiming support was entitled to a hearing under the uniform civil code) had become a political football stirring Hindu-Muslim tensions throughout North India as had the Ram Janmabhomi temple -Babri Masjid dispute. If the 1980s construction of Hindutva was the first time after independence that Hinduism was linked to nationalism, one of the cognitive mechanism by which this was accomplished in the Shiv Sena's writings was through the demonization of anti-national Muslim, over and over in the pages of Saamna as well as in the speeches by Thakeray and by some other party leaders, the denigration of Muslims is repeated in phraseologies that invoke the real or imagined political identities and claims of the minority and majority communities (Hasan 2008). The rise of Hindutva ideology is clear from the above writing of the author.

Politics of Polarisation and Vote Bank:

Politics of India is polluted by intermingling of caste, language, religion etc. In India, electoral politics including nomination of the candidates, campaigning, communal representation and so on, accentuated the process of communalism in almost every state. It has been observed that almost all political parties are in one way or the other, guilty of using religion related issues for selfish and narrow electoral gains and even the hands of religious leaders are not clean. This is perhaps because religion is a source of identity and a bonding factor in the lives of people, mainly in developing societies like India. This is why religion becomes a very important factor in electoral politics. The Constitution of 1950 repelled the provision of communal electorates. But, politicians to depend on votes, and the electoral methods almost forces them to exploit the religious segregation in society. A favorite strategy of Hindu party leaders who calculate that they will gain electorally from polarization around a Hindu identity is to organize unusually large religious processions that take new routes through minority neighborhoods, to hoist the national flag over a disputed site, or to sponsor processions to celebrate national anniversaries. At election time until 1990s, for instance, the politicians strived to persuade the voters that the threat from Pakistan or from secessionists in Punjab and Kashmir or the construction of a temple to Ram in Ayodhya, are what really should matter to them. In the initial years of post-independence in India, the dominant political discourse was secular in its thrust and was not consistent with areas governed by caste or religious domains. Whereas since the mid-1980s, the dominant political discourse increasingly became consistent with a communal, sectarian, and caste-based cultural reservoir. The political parties transformed this reservoir into electoral capital(Kumar 2007). So, the nature of electoral competition has undergone important changes during the post-independence period. The Congress Party dominated national and state politics from 1950 to the early 1970s. Between 1970 and 1990, the party faced greater opposition in both levels. It lost state elections to regional parties in some states and its seat share in the Lok Sabha declined. The next transition to multiparty competition was by the mid-1990s

(Ravishankar 2009). Religion, especially as an instrument in the hands of the opposition of Congress, has had important role in these transformations. Therefore, Indian election studies mention the demise of Congress system and rising of caste, language, religion in Indian Politics. I thing religion as a communal force has influenced Indian politics heavily. Indira Gandhi began using the 'communal card' in a much more ferocious and brutal manner than had usually been the case, first in Punjab and Kashmir and then by invoking in the 'Hindu heartland' deep anxiety about national unity and survival. The momentous sacrilege of the Golden Temple and all that followed became only a precursor of the mass hysteria of the kar sevaks that destroyed the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya (Kothari 1992). With the 1989 elections not too far away, communalism once again came to the forefront. In response to the slogan and invitation, *mandir wahin banayenge* (we will build the temple only there), several thousand holy bricks began making their way to lay the foundation (*shilanyas*) for a temple on 9 November 1989, at the entrance of the Ayodhya complex. It should be noted that on 14 August 1989, the Allahabad High Court ordered the maintenance of the status quo at the complex, and the then Home Minister assured the Parliament that no illegal activity would be allowed at the site. The VHP itself agreed to abide by the High Court's decision. But the Rajiv Gandhi government, based on a technical opinion given by the UP Advocate General, declared the place for the foundation undisputed, and a seven cubic feet hole was dug by the devotees. The VHP/BJP claimed this as a triumph, and the former decided to give a new deadline for the government to hand over the entire complex to them. With such overwhelming support for their cause, the BJP entered into an electoral alliance with the National Front to avoid splitting the anti-Congress (I) vote. After the election, the BJP supported the V.P. Singh National Front government, and later when it withdrew its support, the Singh government fell (Tummala 1993).

Among all the parties, BJP has made maximum number of appeals to Hindus to vote along religious lines. However, the percentage of votes in favour of political parties that still play the 'religion' card, show that in elections in post-independence India, religion is still an important decisive factor for people. Reversal of the Shah Bano verdict breathed life into the ideology of the Hindu nationalists, who condemned the Congress for its appeasement of Muslims through this legislation. While it is doubtful how much Muslim support Rajiv Gandhi garnered in terms of Muslim votes in the 1989 parliamentary election, his move certainly alienated a large section of the Hindu community, especially the middle classes, which saw him as 'appeasing' Muslims.

This decision was cited again and again by Hindu political activists to claim that Hindus as a majority community were discriminated against. This is an absurd charge, since the discrimination is against Muslim women, rather than Hindu men (Hasan 2010). The appeasement of Muslims, reservation for SC, ST and later for OBC in education and government jobs angered the upper caste Hindu. The BJP capitalized the appeasement policy taken by the Congress party. There are many instances when Congress government taken soft policy towards minorities. The override of Shah Bano verdict of the apex court by Rajiv Gandhi government, was a clear and calculated version of policy of appeasement. There are multi- parties in Indian democracy, the political parties should be unbiased and follow the democratic ideals. But it is an ideal state in theory, in reality the political parties in India are following real-politik of electoral gain. Whether or not the BJP can make a significant electoral comeback will, in considerable measure, depend upon whether the Congress party reaffirms its commitment to principles of secular governance without resorting to sleight-of-hand favoritism toward certain minorities when electoral imperatives so demand. Too many compromises by Congress will provide the BJP with fresh ammunition for its charge that Congress and its allies “pamper” minorities, especially Muslims (Ganguly 2007). The Congress attention to Minorities led to the development of ill-feelings towards Muslims in the mind of the Sangh Parivar, though even otherwise they did not have very good feelings towards Muslims, but it helped them in creating a Hindu vote bank in their favor and almost polarizing and identifying two communities with two political parties, i.e., BJP for the Hindus and Congress for the Muslims (Jindal 1995).

The Modi government is branding the muslims male are responsible for polygamy as they are not worried about equality and right of women. “The government is intending to override a well-established norm that laws for minority communities must be enacted after holding discussions with community leaders/representatives, legal experts, and other stake holders, and after striving to reach a consensus, by tabling the bill to criminalise triple talaq. Behind this hasty move is the formulation that the Muslim woman must invariably be projected as devoid of rights and lacking agency, and the Muslim male as premodern, lustful, polygamous, and barbaric (Angeles 2018). The Congress government buckling under the pressure of conservative Muslim organisations and compromising women’s rights in 1986 Shah Bano case that the Modi government is trying to capitalise on through the title of the new bill. The bill’s title is so worded as to contrast the

illusory protection given to Muslim women's rights "on divorce" by the 1986 Act, with its own supposedly radical protection offered to them "on marriage." There is a logic behind the above argument that due to political reason Modi government is going to enact the triple bill. "The Ministry of Women and Child Development also seems to have questioned the necessity of bringing in this statute since there are sufficient legal provisions that the aggrieved woman can avail of, in case her husband pronounces instant and arbitrary triple talaq"(Nair 2017).

Religious festivals and politics:

The religious festivals of Baisakhi, Diwali and Holi are often used to promote communal solidarity by unfolding plans and programmes which are community oriented. The unusual increase in religious ceremonies and processions such as 'Bhahwati Jagran', 'Durga Puja', 'Rath Yatras' etc. has increased opportunities for the political leaders to impart communal colour to religious ceremonies. However, by far more disturbing is the change that has come in the role of the priestly class. The mullahas, sadhus and jethars have gradually assume roles that ought to have been played by the party leaders the so-called religious leader (Sikri 1989). There is a great energy and enthusiasm for celebration of religious festival, meetings, conference, foot march as these occasions are used by politicians for electoral gains. They encourage to celebrate and also sponsor the festivals for political reasons. The recently celebrated Shabe Barat, Shivaji Jayati, Ram Nabami, Hanuman Jayanti etc. promote religious polarisation. "Mandir wahibanayenge" slogans were also raised at these rallies (Indian Express 2017). In West Bengal TMC supremo is playing identity politics to combat the danger of BJP's foot print in West Bengal politics. "No sooner did her party become dominant, than she fell back on the Congress brand of identity politics. Massive hoardings of the TMC supremo offering prayers can be seen in Muslim dominated areas of the city. The state government's decision to providing monetary and other benefits to Imams, ban immersion of Durga idols after Dussehra last year, and open support to triple talaq are some manifestations of the TMC's identity based politics (Roy 2018). The BJP and the rest of the Sangh parivar has been quick to call this another example of Banerjee's "appeasement of Muslims" at the cost of Hindu rites, and are threatening to violate the order (Roy 2017). Hanuman may have been one of the greatest devotees of Lord Rama as depicted in the Ramayana, but things are turning on their head in West Bengal now, with ruling Trinamool Congress organising worship of the monkey God to counter the BJP's aggressive Ram Nabami

celebrations in April, 2017(Indiatoday 2017). BJP is making an effort to emerge as the main alternative to the Trinamool in the eastern state, as also other Sangh Parivar outfits have made elaborate preparations to celebrate the festival on an unprecedented grand scale. Notwithstanding its political opponents' accusations that the Sangh Parivar was using the celebrations to further its hidden agenda to bring about a communal polarisation, the Hindutva brigade seemed unfazed. The BJP and its affiliate organisation are taking advantage of minority appeasement policy followed by TMC. Festivals like Ram Navami are important because they help Hindutva party reinstate the Bengali Hindu identity. Several bordering districts are witnessing huge demographic imbalance due to infiltration. It can't really blame BJP for this. Special monthly grants are given to Imams, while Hindu organisations are neglected. Obscure festivals have been added to the holiday lists. The recent incident of purification of statue of Syama Prasad Mookerjee at Tallygunj by bathing with milk is clear signal of Hindutva politics gaining momentum in the land of liberal Bengal.

Conclusion:

In India identity politics and secularism seem to go hand in hand. Over the years the politics of religion has made considerable headway in India, but it has not overwhelmed secular politics. Hindu nationalism and Hindutva have enabled the BJP to shift India's political agenda in the 1990s, but it has so far not been able to shake the foundations of the secular state. It has enlarge its political support in a major way, as having power in centre and in most of the states. The stunning verdict in favour of a secular government in two successive parliamentary elections (2004 and 2009) is an indication of the strong opposition to the politics of religion and sectarianism. Though in 2014 General election BJP came power by making allegations of corruption against the previous UPA government. The appeasement of Congress and other parties and Hindutva politics is a major concerns for Indian democracy. To rise above the religious politics is the need of hour for everyone. Every political party should follow the path of secular politics. Today the large sections of our population are suffering from poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, superstition and about 26% of the population live below poverty line and they

need to be provided social and economic justice. Similarly, many people in India die without getting timely medical aid and all these are challenges for the Indian political system. The politicians need to rise above the issue of Mandir and Masjid and try to solve the problems of food, cloth and shelter, so that marginal section of society feel that they are also Indian.

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