

**Religions, Democracy And Governance:
Spaces for the Marginalised in Contemporary India**

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Abstract

The constitutional framework that structures the relationships between religion and politics in India reveals how the democratic and liberal concern for equal treatment and liberty for all has been pursued, along with a deep commitment to recognizing and protecting religious and cultural diversity. This paper emphasises the distinctiveness of the Indian conception of secularism. Experience of the working of Indian democracy over the last six decades reveals that competitive electoral politics compels parties to woo people from different communities. Even when a religious community has an organized religious political party that claims to speak on its behalf, not all sections of the community align themselves with that party. Other axes of identity, such as caste, divide religious communities. The spaces opened by democratic politics and the dynamics it creates need, therefore, to be factored into any discussion of religion and politics. Relationships between religion, politics and governance are further examined through case studies from the states of Punjab and Maharashtra of political mobilizations by marginalized groups within three religious communities: Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

Keywords: Religions, Democracy, Governance, Citizens, Equality, Liberty, Fraternity, Secularism

Introduction

Democratic ideals represent various aspects of the broad idea of “government of the people, by the people and for the people.” They include political characteristics that can be seen to be intrinsically important in terms of the objective of democratic social living, such as freedom of

expression, participation of the people in deciding the factors governing their lives, public accountability of leaders, and an equitable distribution of power. Therefore, when we say Indian democracy, we mean not only that its political institutions and processes are democratic but also that the Indian society and every Indian citizen is democratic, reflecting basic democratic values of equality, liberty, fraternity, secularism and justice in social sphere and individual behaviour. Democratic governance, the term recently added to the vocabulary of politics, signifies more than what the two words signify separately. A compound is not what its constituents are. From the term itself it is clear that democratic governance is not merely being democratic as it is usually understood in its minimalist sense as government of people's representatives elected in a free and competitive situation; nor is it merely governance as one of limited government charged with the task of enforcement of law and order, and overseeing the contracts among individuals living in a state or to facilitate, promote and regulate markets. Democratic governance is a condition in which the promise of justice, liberty and equality is realized in a democratic political framework, where the government is sensitive to the people's identities, aspirations and needs and where people feel secure and content. India is proud to be the largest democracy in the world. For more than sixty-five years, we have witnessed the conduct of successful elections, peaceful changes of government at the Centre and in the States, people exercising freedom of expression, movement and religion. At the same time, we quite often experience rampant inequalities, injustice or nonfulfillment of social expectations

Religions, Democracy and Governance

The constitutional framework that structures the relationships between religion and politics in India reveals how the democratic and liberal concern for equal treatment and liberty for all has been pursued, along with a deep commitment to recognizing and protecting religious and cultural diversity. Although secular, the Indian conception of secularism is distinctive. Experience of the working of Indian democracy over the last six decades reveals that competitive electoral politics compels parties to woo people from different 'communities'. Even when a religious community has an organized religious political party that claims to speak on its

behalf, not all sections of the community align themselves with that party. Other axes of identity, such as caste, divide religious communities. The spaces opened by democratic politics and the dynamics it creates need, therefore, to be factored into any discussion of religion and politics. Political mobilizations by marginalized groups within three religious communities (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) in Punjab and Maharashtra reveal important characteristics of the relationships between religion, politics and governance. Each mobilization involves a cluster of castes and occupational groups. They highlight the different ways in which religion and caste intersect and are implicated in the political process. Religious identity remains the bedrock of social life and individual experience, yet democratic politics brings out new configurations and alignments in which neat boundaries of religious difference are occasionally blurred or overwritten by other identities, which surface time and time again as a basis for articulating demands for access to opportunities and development possibilities. Such articulations of their demands by marginalized groups demonstrate

1. the existing fissures within communities
2. that religion may be seen as a reason for their deprivation or as a source of wellbeing and emancipation
3. that, while religious identity may be important to individuals, other identities also structure individual lives and social interactions
4. the complex ways in which religion gains centrality or is sidestepped in the pursuit of better life conditions. Lessons from these studies of the experience of marginalized groups in different religious communities in India include: vvvvvv The social differences within religious communities may play significant roles in shaping the relationships of particular religious groups with the state and democratic political processes
5. There is potential for democratic political processes to influence discourses within religious communities by engaging with internally marginalized groups, addressing their development concerns and weaning them away from religious parties and leaders.
6. When religion has a conspicuous place in the public sphere, electoral democracy sets complex processes into motion: in India, it brings into play other identities, allowing non-religious concerns to be put on the political agenda, but it also pushes even secular political parties into using a religious idiom and may thus reinforce religious identity politics
7. Understanding of the relationships between religion and politics needs to be based on a consideration of the spaces opened up by democratic politics and the dynamics thereby created

The Legacy of British Colonial Rule: Twisted Relations between Secularism and Communalism

The problem identified in the previous section shows the essence of a thorny issue imbedded in the process beginning with the advent of British colonial rule in India, through the post-independence era, and continuing till today. This problem, in India's context, can be described as characterised by a twisted relationship between secularism and communalism. There is considerable debate over the usage and definitions of these terms, but this paper will not go into these matters in detail. Suffice it here simply to call attention to two points. First, viewing a different religious group as an enemy involves an attempt to absolutise religious differences, ignoring various other cultural elements, and the term communalism, which is translated as religious confrontationism, is valid as long as it discusses this subjective viewpoint. Second, as for secularism, which means separation of religion and politics, studies have been done of the distinctively Indian usage of secularism that is different from secularism in its original Western sense, as well as of the distinction between secularism in its narrow, political sense and secularism with more positive implications. The complex character of secularism is itself a topic of discussion in this paper. Neither of the two terms, communalism and secularism, can be used simplistically, but let me say in advance, that with such reservations, I use them to begin dealing with the essence of the issues facing modern Indian society. In this section, the paper focuses on how the contradictory structure of the twisted relationship between secularism and communalism was fundamentally formed during the British colonial era.

The British rule of India, beginning during the eighteenth-century enlightenment period, was fraught with internal conflict between the Orientalist stance of non-intervention (represented by the East India Company, rightist Tories), which affirmed the distinctiveness of Indian society and culture; and the Anglicist stance of intervention, which sought to universalise the values of British society and apply them to India (represented by evangelists, Utilitarians and free traders). Both shared some universalism, in that they primarily considered modern Western values to be superior. The Orientalists, however, were closer to cultural relativism than the Anglicists, because the former tried to understand the qualities inherent in Indian society, albeit in a distorted way. Implemented amid such discord between the two camps, actual colonial policy vacillated between intervention and non-intervention. The governing policy, therefore, was a compromise mix of 'transcendental' and 'inherent' standpoints.

The British colonial government's basic understanding of Indian society was expressed in its broad division of the Indian population into Muslims, Hindus, and tribal peoples and further dividing the majority Hindus into castes. Division between Muslims and Hindus according to religious differences; separation of tribal peoples from the Hindus as a result of the combining of the myth of the 'noble savage' with anti-Hinduism; and caste social stratification on the basis of the idea of Varna categories – in all these divisions, identity was provided through classification from above, the *transcendental* position of the ruler. Once the division was made, however, homogeneity of each group was assumed, and its objectification led to the creation of 'an imagined community' within the *inherent* viewpoint of each group. There

emerged a cultural pluralism in which standardised social customs were approved for each group, and it became necessary to deal with the new situation.

Specifically, the principle of personal law, respecting the customary law of each of the separate groups, was introduced to the courts by the Governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings, in 1772. This allowed the law of Hinduism to be applied to Hindus and the law of Islam to apply to Muslims. Because, such customary law was made part of the framework of the modern judiciary, co-ordinating customary law and modern judicature later became a very difficult task. In other words, a contradictory structure of 'non-intervention within intervention' was incorporated on a practical level into the governing system. It should be kept in mind that relative independence was accorded to religious groups (as with the case of introduction of personal law) by the political philosophy of secularism that separated state politics from religion, as well as by the presence of the colonial ruler, Great Britain, as the pressure that kept inter-group violence from erupting. Serious contradictions thus became endemic, contradictions originating from transforming religious groups into social units and building a ruling structure on the basis of the separation of politics and religion. As long as relative independence was officially provided to religious groups, potential communalism was inevitably involved. This situation is what this paper calls 'twisted relations between secularism and communalism.'

This framework, shaped by colonial rule, continued to primarily determine the social conditions of independent India in the post-colonial era. In that sense, we cannot summarily reject those who blame British colonial rule for the communalism plaguing India at the end of the twentieth century. It is a fact that during the colonial rule a possible path toward communalism was constructed.

Religion in pre-colonial, pre-modern society was naturally different from religion in the modern era, when separation between the spiritual and secular, between politics and religion, was promoted. Under the rule of pre-modern divine kingship, religion must have permeated the entirety of people's daily lives. In the modern period brought by colonial rule, by contrast, the diffusion of dualism that divided people's way of living into spiritual and secular made it possible to separate religion from worldly affairs and to see it at a certain distance. Religion, in other words, became an object of conscious manipulation and choice. Here paradoxes occurred. At the time when the system dividing the Indian population into Hindus and Muslims – a system that made religion look as if it were the most important element of people's identity – became established, a secularisation of religion, that is, religion no longer coinciding with the entire identity of the people, was also in progress. Secularisation, needless to say, reduces religion to just a part of life. People are thus placed in a double bind religiously. They are suspended between the basic proposition of secularism – that religion should withdraw from government (a state that does not intervene in matters of religion) – and the proposition that religion is employed as the criterion for division into social groups (a state that intervenes in religion). In a secular state, a solution to this double-bind situation is generally to divide the life of a person into private life and public life, and to allot religion to private life.

Implementation of this solution, however, inevitably leaves people with a sense of oppression, because it is unnatural that a person should draw such a clear line between the private and public aspects of life. In India, this general solution can work all the less, because the official recognition of religious division is institutionalised. Thus, British colonial rule in India brought into being a secular state system which used religion institutionally for its own ends and in which it was difficult to maintain a balanced administration.

Through the medium of this double-bind state system, secularism paved the twisted path to communalism. The formidable problems that faced the anti-British nationalist movement that rose up for independence toward the end of the nineteenth century can be attributed to the nature of a secular state that utilised religion. The problem was that anti-British nationalism was twisted into anti-Muslim communalism, as seen in the case of Hindu nationalist BalGangadharTilak. The development of Indian nationalism proceeded side by side with the Hindu purification movement. This combination of nationalism with communalism was a projection of the victim consciousness that surfaced under British rule, and back to the time of the Muslim conquest of India. This stretch of imagination was basically accelerated by the British policy of rule by religious division. It strengthened religious divisions to such an extent that nationalist leaders reacted sensitively to the demarcated religious borders of government and eventually led to Partition (independence of two separate states).

Let us outline, drawing on the work of Naitô, the birth and growth of the Hindu nationalist forces that fought against Muslims under the anti-colonial movement. Stimulated by the Bengal Partition in 1905, a blatant manifestation of the colonial government's utilisation of religion, and by the formation in 1906 of the Muslim League, Hindus organised the Hindu MahaSabha (HMS) in 1915 through the medium of the Punjab-Hindu Sabha set up in 1907. Initially, the HMS had close ties with the Indian National Congress Party, but in the 1920s it parted with the Congress, attacking Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi ((Mahatma Gandhi) and other Congress Party leaders' Muslim leanings (as exemplified by their approval of Muslim partition election and the development of the Khilafat Movement). Then, together with the Arya Samaj ('society of Aryans'), HMS launched a forceful re-conversion movement.

By that time, Hindu-Muslim communal conflicts had spread widely. Under these circumstances was born a communal organisation called RashtriyaSwayamsevakSangh (RSS or, literally, Association of National Volunteers) in September 1925. RSS was founded by K B Hedgewar and its philosophical basis was the idea of *sangatan* (organising), aimed at forging a unity among Hindus that sustained HMS. The idea is epitomised in *Hindutva* (The Essence of Hinduism), one of VinayakDamodarSavarkar's major works. The concept of *hindutva* is based on Hinduism, but goes beyond it. By 'Hindus', Savarkar means people born in the 'land of India' (Hindustan), who recognise the land as the holy place of their ancestors. They make up an ethnic entity united by the love for this common homeland and by common blood. The goal of the idea is, therefore, to establish the ethnic entity, Hindu *Rashtriyatva*. The *hindutva* doctrine defines Muslims, Christians and other 'heretical' minority groups as those whose land of origin is elsewhere and who, therefore, cannot love the land of India, thereby providing

communalists with a rationale for expelling them from Indian society. By extension of that rationale, it came to be argued that if they remained in India, they could not be on an equal footing with Hindus.

The RSS, which defined itself as a cultural organisation, expanded to 500 local branches with a total of 60,000 members by the end of the 1930s. Many (most) RSS activists were upper caste members and middle-class people in urban areas. In 1940, Hedgewar died and M S Golwalkar became president, and the RSS movement directed its efforts toward Indian independence. In 1941, in rivalry with Hindu nationalist activities like those of the RSS, a Muslim communal organisation, the Jamaat-e-Islami, was established. The development and radicalisation of such communalism eventually resulted in Partition. The Partition was particularly humiliating to Hindus, whose sense of communalism was strong, based on their reverence for the entire land of India as Hindustan. Indian independence, thus, left in its wake further heightened communalism, for the presence of Muslims within India after Partition always reminds Hindu nationalists of the humiliating sense they bitterly felt at the time of independence, and of their powerlessness.

It should be kept in mind that resistance in the form of anti-colonial movements are apt to follow the framework of the governing structure. Resistance activists thus tend to form their organisations along the lines of religious divisions when the ruling side utilises religion, and along the lines of caste divisions when the ruling side utilises the caste system. As in the case of the escalation of Hindu nationalism from anti-British to anti-Muslim, the energy of resistance accepts group divisions from above and assumes an immediate foe therein, projecting a false image. Consciously or unconsciously, politicians make effective use of this mechanism of false projection in mobilising people. This is how ideologised religion encouraged by nationalism takes shape.

Amid the dynamic intersection of differences between religious groups, between castes, and between regions (languages), anti-colonial nationalism has been twisted in various ways. To cite but one easily visible example in history is sufficient to surmise the complexity of the situation. Westernised Indian elites, who received their education in Britain, experienced inner struggle over the question of how to build India as an independent modern state against colonial forces. Jawaharlal Nehru is an example *par excellence*. A man whose mind worked like a modern Western rationalist, Nehru must have been annoyed by his spiritual attraction to Mahatma Gandhi, who seemed irrational, even unrealistic. Things were complicated because Gandhi was torn within himself between ideal and reality and between Hindus and Muslims. Such inner split developed in the face of the twisted secularism-communalism relations that were rooted in the double-bind governing structure discussed earlier. Those twisted relations were carried over to post-independence India, and have been reproduced.

Political issues

Social issues

The lack of homogeneity in the Indian population causes division between different sections of the people based on religion, region, language, caste and ethnicity. This has led to the rise of political parties with agendas catering to one or a mix of these groups. Parties in India also target people who are not in favour of other parties and use them as an asset.

Some parties openly profess their focus on a particular group; for example, the DravidaMunnetraKazhagam's and the All India Anna DravidaMunnetraKazhagam's focus on the Dravidian population and Tamil identity; BijuJanata Dal's championing of Odia culture; the Shiv Sena's pro-Marathi agenda; Naga People's Front's demand for protection of Naga tribal identity; People's Democratic Party ;National Conference's calling for Kashmiri Muslim identity and The Telugu Desam Party was formed in United Andhra Pradesh by late Shri N.T.Rama Rao which demands for rights and needs of people of the state only. Some other parties claim to be universal in nature, but tend to draw support from particular sections of the population. For example, the RashtriyaJanata Dal (translated as National People's Party) has a vote bank among the Yadav and Muslim population of Bihar and the All India Trinamool Congress does not have any significant support outside West Bengal.

The narrow focus and votebank politics of most parties, even in the central government and central legislature, supplements national issues such as economic welfare and national security. Moreover, internal security is also threatened as incidences of political parties instigating and leading violence between two opposing groups of people is a frequent occurrence.

Economic Problems

Economic issues like poverty, unemployment, development are main issues that influence politics. *GaribiHatao* (eradicate poverty) has been a slogan of the Indian National Congress for a long time. The well knownBharatiyaJanata Party encourages a free market economy. The more popular slogan in this field is *SabkaSaath, SabkaVikas* (Cooperation with all, progress of all). The Communist Party of India (Marxist) vehemently supports left-wing politics like land-for-all, right to work and strongly opposes neoliberal policies such as globalisation, capitalism and privatisation.

Conslusion

The crisis of governance in India today is a consequence of the breakdown of democratic institutions and the emergence of an unholy nexus between inefficient, corrupt civil servants and vote-hungry politicians. As a result, more than six decades after independence, despite low place in the human development. The basic fabric of good governance does not occur by chance. Good governance is associated with responsible political leadership, enlightened policy-making and a civil service imbued with a professional ethos. The presence of a strong civil society including a free press and independent judiciary are the pre-conditions for such good governance. It must be demanded by citizens and nourished explicitly and consciously by the nation-state.The recent resurgence of religiosity has been associated with the growth of

intolerance and, in some cases, the outbreak of conflict in the country. The government of India contemplated a move to bring an anti-cow slaughter law and the whole thing just snowballed from there. The beef ban gave the power to many radical groups, who took it upon themselves to implement it. A Muslim man was dragged out of his house, lynched and killed on the suspicion that he and his family in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh had stored beef in their refrigerator. The road to making India's government more accountable goes uphill and the problem seem to get worse.

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