Revival and Growth of Communalism

Communalism and communal parties and organizations are very much a part of today's political environment. The communal appeal is used on a large scale for electoral mobilization. For the last nearly three decades the country has been regularly racked by a spate of communal riots. Communalism is today the most serious danger facing Indian society and polity. It is undermining secularism, has become a menace to the hard-won unity of the Indian people and threatens to unleash the forces of barbarism.

To discuss the problem of communalism in independent India, the terms secularism and communalism first need to be defined. Secularism, basically, means separation of religion from the state and politics and its being treated as a private, personal affair. It also requires that the state should not discriminate against a citizen on grounds of his or her religion or caste.

Communalism is an ideology based on the belief that Indian society is divided into religious communities, whose economic, political, social and cultural interests diverge and are even hostile to each other because of their religious differences. Communalism is, above all, a belief system through which a society, economy and polity are viewed and explained and around which effort is made to organize politics. As an ideology it is akin to racialism, anti-Semitism and fascism. In fact, it can be considered the Indian form of fascism. Further, the relationship between communal ideology and communal violence needs to clarified. The basic thrust of communalism as an ideology is the spread of communal ideas and modes of thought. Though communal violence draws our attention to the communal situation in a dramatic manner, it is not the crux of the problem. The underlying and long-term cause of communal violence is the spread of the communal ideology or belief system.

Communal violence usually occurs when communal thinking that precedes it reaches a certain level of intensity and the atmosphere is vitiated by the building up of communal fear, suspicion and hatred. Communal ideology can thus prevail without violence but communal violence cannot exist without communal ideology. In other words, communal ideology and politics are the disease, communal violence only its external symptom. Unfortunately, the presence of communal ideology as a prelude or prologue to communal violence is generally ignored; awareness of communalism registers only when violence breaks out. Communalists are also, therefore, primarily interested in spreading the communal belief system and not necessarily communal violence. In fact, the major purpose of those who inspire and organize communal violence is not genocide but to create a situation which communalizes the masses.

Secularism: Its Roots

It was one of the great triumphs of the Indian national movement that, despite the Partition of India and the barbaric riots that accompanied it, the Indian people accepted secularism as a basic value, enshrined it in the constitution, and set out to build a secular state and society. The legacy

of the freedom struggle, Gandhiji's martyrdom, Nehru's total commitment to secularism and the active support extended to Nehru by Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad, C. Rajagopalachari and other leaders in the struggle against communalism, led to its becoming dominant in the 1950s. Communal parties made a poor showing in the elections of 1952, 1957 and 1962 and for years remained a marginal force in Indian politics. Consequently, people became complacent and came to believe that economic development and spread of education, science and technology would automatically weaken and extinguish communal thinking.

Communalism, they believed, would gradually disappear from the Indian scene. It was not realized by the people or their leaders that communalism can have passive and active phases, depending on circumstances, but that it would not disappear without an active struggle. Moreover, even while communal politics lay dormant, communal ideologues continued their work and communal organizations such as the RSS, Jan Sangh, Jamaat-i-Islami, Muslim League, Akali Dal and various Christian communal groups in Kerala continued to function. Communalism became active in the 1960s, gaining in strength as seen in the rising communalization of Indian society. In the late 1950s itself, there was a series of communal riots. The number of persons killed in riots increased from 7 in 1958 to 41 in 1959 and 108 in 1961. In particular, the riot in Jabalpur in 1961 shook the whole nation. Nehru reacted by immediately forming the National Integration Council. The Chinese aggression in 1962 aroused feelings of national unity among all sections of the people and communal sentiments had to retreat. But this interlude proved to be short-lived.

Once again, in the mid-1960s, the disruptive forces of communalism were on the upswing in Indian politics and large sections of the common people became susceptible to communalism and casteism. The Jan Sangh increased its strength in parliament from 14 in 1962 to 35 in the general elections of 1967. It participated in coalition ministries in several North Indian states and began to attract considerable support in the rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The incidence and severity of communal riots also increased, the number of riots being 1,070 in 1964, 520 in 1969 and 521 in 1970; the number of those killed being 1,919, 673 and 298 respectively. There was some respite from communalism and communal riots from 1971 to 1977. The number of communal riots did not exceed 250 in any of those years and the number of killed did not exceed 1,000, as Indira Gandhi consolidated her power in the parliamentary election of 1971. In elections, the Jan Sangh's strength in parliament was reduced from 35 in 1967 to 22 in 1971. The Bangladesh war at the end of 1971 also gave a major blow to both Hindu and Muslim communalisms. However, communalism and communal violence began to once again increase from 1978 and has become endemic since then, assuming alarming proportions.

A worrisome aspect of the growth of communalism and communal violence has been its widespread character. It has covered almost all parts of the country and all the major cities, embracing even areas such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Orissa which were earlier believed to be immune to riots. Communal riots have also spread to villages and involved all religious groups. Increasingly, communal violence has been pre-planned and well organized and of longer duration. Some of the communal riots have lasted weeks and even months. Also, rioters have been provided with ample funds, firearms and other destructive materials. It is interesting that when, during the Emergency from 1975 to 1977, all the major

leaders and most of the activists of the RSS, Jan Sangh and Jamaat-i-Islami were arrested, communal violence, as well as the level of communal propaganda, came down drastically, for few were left to organize riots or to promote communal hatred. On the other hand, during the period of the Janata government, there was an increase in communalism and communal violence because of the strong influence of the RSS and Jan Sangh in the Janata Party and the government. So strong was the momentum given to communalism during this period that even the return of Indira Gandhi to power in 1980 failed to check its growth. Communalism in the country has remained quite strong since then.

Characteristics of Communalism

Like all ideologies and politics, communalism has a concrete social base or roots; it is the product of and reflects the overall socio-economic and political conditions. But this happens in a distorted manner, defeating any accurate diagnosis of the situation, its causes and remedies. Thus, communalism does not reflect any social truth: what it declares to be the social reality is not the social reality; what it declares to be the causes of social discontent are not the causes; and what it declares to be the solutions of the social malady are not the solutions—in fact it is itself a social malady. Communalism is, thus, no answer to any of the problems leading to its generation and growth. Instead, it undermines the real struggle for changing social conditions. While the society and polity of India after independence have been secular, the logic of the socio-economic system has continued to provide favourable soil for the spread of communalism. Especially important in this respect have been the social strains which have arisen out of the pattern of economic development. Indian economic development after 1947 has been impressive but the problems of poverty, unemployment, and inequality arising out of colonial underdevelopment have been only partially tackled, especially in the context of the population explosion. These problems breed frustration and personal and social anxiety among the people and generate unhealthy competition for the inadequate economic and social opportunities. In fact, capitalist development has generated sharp and visible economic inequality and the position in this regard has been worsening over the years. Though, overall, there are greater economic opportunities available for the people, there is far greater inequality than before in regard to access to them. Also, the aspirations of the people are rising faster than their possible fulfilment. The soil for the growth of communalism (and casteism) is thus always ready.

The social dilemma described above has affected the middle classes or the petty bourgeoisie with particular force. In recent years, the petty bourgeoisie have been faced with the constant threat of unemployment and adverse socio-economic conditions. Moreover, its growth has constantly outpaced economic development. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that after independence the spread of education, the pattern of social change and rapid population growth have led millions of peasant and working-class youth to look for jobs in the cities and in administration and to joining the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie, at least as far as aspirations are concerned. This line of analysis also explains why communalism remained relatively dormant till the early 1960s. Independence and the three Five-Year Plans did open up a wide range of opportunities for the middle classes because of the Indianization and expansion of the officer

rungs of the armed forces and private firms, immense expansion of the administrative apparatus, the rapid development of banking, trading and industrial companies, the growth of school and college education and other social services, and the phenomenal expansion in the training and recruitment of engineers, doctors and scientists. But this initial push to middle-class employment was exhausted by the mid-1960s. Besides, the pattern and rate of economic development were such that they failed to generate large-scale employment in the industrial and commercial sectors and also placed limits on the expansion of social services. The petty bourgeoisie was now back to a situation of job scarcity, competition, rivalry and discontent. Moreover, changes in agrarian relations threw up new strata of rich and middle peasants and capitalist farmers, that is, rural bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, who provided a fertile ground for the germination and spread of communal and casteist ideologies, movements and parties.

Communalism was, however, no answer to the economic problems of the petty bourgeoisie; it did not serve the interests of this social stratum in any way. Unable to understand the reasons for their economic or social distress, growing social and economic disparity and insecurity, their anxiety tended to take a communal or casteist form. The other religious or caste groups were seen as the cause of their problems.

The communal problem did not, however, lie merely in the economic realm. For several generations Indians have been undergoing a social transition; they have been losing their old world without gaining the new. The process accelerated after independence. Old, traditional social institutions, solidarities and support systems—of caste, joint family, village and urban neighbourhood—have been rapidly breaking down. The new institutions and solidarities of class, trade unions, Kisan Sabhas, youth organizations, social clubs, political parties and other voluntary associations have, on the other hand, made tardy progress and have not been able to take their place to a significant extent. In this situation, many turn to communal organizations as an alternative focus of unity and solidarity. Also, old values and social mores, which cemented together different segments of society have been disappearing under the hammer blows of the profit motive, capitalist competitiveness, careerism, and the philosophy of the winner takes all and let the devil take care of the hindmost. The result has been a moral and cultural vacuum which is highly conducive to ideologies based on fear and hate. Individuals, groups and parties are taking the quick and easy route to political power by arousing communal sentiments and passions.

Another aspect of the communal problem has been the inevitable exhaustion of the political idealism generated by the national movement which inspired the people, particularly the youth, and gave impetus to secular ideas. After 1947, people needed a new unifying, anti-divisive goal or vision which could generate hope for the future, kindle healthy national feelings, inspire and unite them in a common nationwide endeavour, and strengthen the secular content of society. Unfortunately, such a vision has been lacking, especially after the 1970s. There is, thus, every danger that without radical social change and the sway of an inspiring developmental and egalitarian ideal, communalism and communal-type movements may succeed in destroying India's unity and hampering all efforts at social and economic development. It is, therefore, necessary to eliminate the social conditions which favour the growth of communalism.

A warning may, however, be sounded in this context. Great care has to be exercised in making

a social analysis of communalism, which should be based on serious empirical and theoretical research. At present, it is not easy to assign communal motives to various classes except in the case of the petty bourgeoisie. There is, for example, so far no evidence that the capitalist class in India backs communalism. But, of course, it cannot be asserted that it would never do so in the future.

Long-term and Short-term Causes

Just as we distinguish between communalism as an ideology and communal violence, we have to distinguish between the long-term causes of communalism and the immediate and short-term causes of communal riots and other forms of communal violence. The causes of communal violence have often been conjunctural; they have been local, specific and accidental, such as some minor religious issue or dispute, or teasing of a girl, or even a violent quarrel between two persons belonging to different religious groups. These causes have invariably become operative only when there has been prior communalization of the area concerned. These conjunctural causes at the most act as sparks which light the communal fire for which ground had already been prepared by the communal groups, parties and ideologues. There are also a few other factors which have been important in communal violence. Communal violence has often actively involved the urban poor and lumpen elements whose number has grown rapidly as a result of lopsided economic development and large-scale migration into towns and cities from rural areas. Rootless, impoverished and often unemployed, millions live in overcrowded areas without any civic facilities in terms of health, education, sanitation and drinking water. Their social anger and frustration, fed by horrid living conditions, makes them easy victims of the purveyors of communal hatred and finds expression in spontaneous violence and loot and plunder whenever a communal riot provides the opportunity. In more recent years, criminal gangs engaged in lucrative illegal activities, such as smuggling, illicit distillation and sale of liquor, gambling, drug pushing and kidnapping have used communal riots to settle scores with their rivals.

An important feature of Indian politics and administration in the last few decades has been the growing laxity of the state apparatuses, especially the police, in their treatment of communal violence. After all, the state alone possesses the instruments to successfully counter communal violence, and immediate and effective state action is the only viable way of dealing with it. However, in recent years, the administration has seldom acted firmly and decisively and in time and with the full force of the law and order machinery. Communal violence is, moreover, invariably preceded by the intensive spread of different forms of inflammatory propaganda. Yet, seldom has action been taken even under the existing laws against the instigators of communal hatred and organizers of communal violence. Also, communalists and communal ideology have been making serious inroads into the state apparatuses over the years. Consequently, many of the officials at different levels have betrayed communal tendencies and encouraged, overtly or covertly, communal forces. In particular, communalized sections of the police force have often made the situation worse by their inaction and sometimes even partisanship in dealing with communal riots.

Another major factor in the growth of communalism since the 1960s has been the political opportunism towards communalism practised by secular parties, groups and individuals. They have often permitted the intrusion of religion into politics and have tended to vacillate and retreat in the face of the communal onslaught. They have compromised with and accommodated communal forces for short-term electoral gains or as a part of the policy of anti-Congressism. And, far worse, they have sometimes associated and entered into alliance with communal parties. Congress was the first to do so by allying with the Muslim League in Kerala in the early 1960s. In turn, Communist parties allied with the Muslim League in Kerala and Akali Dal in Punjab in the late 1960s, justifying their action by declaring that minority communalism was understandable and democratic, and even justifiable, and in any case not as bad and dangerous as majority communalism. In 1967, the Socialists and other secular parties and groups did not hesitate to join the communal Jan Sangh first in seat adjustment in elections and then in forming non-Congress governments in several states in North India. In 1974–75, Jayaprakash Narayan permitted the RSS, Jan Sangh and Jamaat-i-Islami to become the backbone of his movement of 'Total Revolution' against Congress and Indira Gandhi. In 1977, the Jan Sangh became a part of the Janata Party. In November 1989 elections, the Janata Dal, under the leadership of V.P. Singh, formed an indirect electoral alliance with the BJP and then formed a government at the Centre with its support. The Communist parties sanctioned both steps, though indirectly.

The soft approach towards communal parties and groups has had the extremely negative consequence of making them respectable and legitimizing communalism. This policy has tended to whittle down one of the major contributions of the national movement and the Nehru era, of making communalism a dirty word even when failing to root it out. The secularists have also in recent years tended to pander to communal sentiments through all types of concessions. For example, Rajiv Gandhi did so by reversing the Supreme Court judgement in the Shah Bano case, through a constitutional amendment, and by opening the gates of the disputed Ayodhya mosque-temple in 1986. V.P. Singh did so by declaring the Prophet's birthday a holiday in his Red Fort speech on Independence Day in 1990. These concessions to Muslim and Hindu communalisms did not lessen communal tensions but only aggravated them.

It is, however, significant that, despite their crass opportunism, most of the Indian political parties and intellectuals—whether of the right, left or Centre—have themselves not been communal. This has so far prevented the rapid growth of communalism and has kept India basically secular. The Indian state has also been basically secular and opposed to communalism so far despite being ruled by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) from 1999 to 2004 in which the BJP was the dominant power. However, the quality of the secularism of the Indian state and most of the political parties has had many weaknesses and has, in fact, seldom been very sturdy. Still, a major saving feature of the Indian social and political situation has been the absence of active state support to communal ideology and communal forces. Though till 1998, the state was lacking in the political will to deal firmly with communalism and communal violence, it had not promoted communal ideology through its myriad channels, from textbooks and mass media to administrative measures. Our experience in the colonial period, the experience of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the experience of fascist movements in Italy, Germany, Japan and Spain (where they succeeded), on the one hand, and France and the US

(where they failed) on the other, clearly indicate that communal and communal-type movements cannot prevail without state support or at least the neutrality and passivity of state power. A few points may be made parenthetically at this stage. First, a sharp distinction has to be made between communal parties and parties which are basically secular but adopt an opportunistic attitude towards communalism. A communal party is one which is structured around communal ideology. Such parties have since their inception promoted communal thinking and often whipped up communal passions. Though the secular-opportunist parties have tended to vacillate and retreat in the face of communal onslaught, it is still very important that they have themselves not been communal. This fact has been a major obstacle in the burgeoning forth of communalism. Second, it is to be noted that there is no difference between majority (Hindu) communalism and minority (Muslim, Sikh, Christian) communalisms—they are merely variants of the same communal ideology and are equally dangerous. However, while minority communalisms can end up in separatism, as Muslim communalism did before 1947 and Sikh communalism did in Punjab in recent years, majority communalism can take the form of fascism. Also, in recent years, as also in the past, different communalisms have fed on and supported and strengthened each other with dangerous implications.

Hindu and Muslim Communalisms

Since the early 1960s, communalists in India have been taking recourse to religious issues to impart passion and intensity to their politics. Muslim communalism flourished in the 1940s in colonial India on the basis of the cry of Islam in danger, but Hindu communalism remained weak in India and a marginal force in Indian politics as it had not been able to appeal to religion or arouse religious passion. Hindu communalists raised the cries of Hindus or their culture being in danger but were not able to arouse Hindus emotionally as effectively as Muslim communalists. This was because of several factors: Hinduism is not an organized religion—it is not based on the sanctity and authority of a single sacred book or a hierarchical priestly class. Hindus do not have one God or one set of beliefs—consequently there is immense religious diversity among them—in fact, there are no strict rules determining who is a Hindu. Hindus also have a long tradition of religious tolerance and broad-mindedness. It was also not easy to convince Hindus, who constituted the large religious majority in India, that their religion was in any danger. Hindu communalists found that without the strong emotional appeal to religion or a religious issue the progress of communal politics was tardy. Taking a leaf out of the pre-1947 Muslim League politics, they began from the late 1970s to grope for a religious issue around which to develop their politics. Such an opportunity was presented to them in the early 1980s in the Babri Masjid (mosque)–Ram Janmabhoomi (birthplace of Ram) issue, which could inflame Hindus, for Ram occupies a unique place in India. He is the incarnation of the values that a Hindu, in fact an Indian, cherishes. His name touches the hearts and minds of millions. Over the years, the BJP and its sister organizations, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, all carefully nursed by the RSS, succeeded in using this issue and its religious appeal to gain influence with a large number of Hindus all over the country and to weaken their resistance to communalism. A brief history of the controversy follows.

A mosque was built by a governor of Babur at Ayodhya (in Uttar Pradesh) in the early sixteenth century. Some Hindus claimed in the nineteenth century that it was built over a site which was the place where Ram was born and where a Ram temple had existed. But the issue did not take a serious turn till December 1949 when a communal-minded district magistrate permitted a few Hindus to enter the mosque and instal idols of Sita and Ram there. Sardar Patel, as the home minister, and Jawaharlal Nehru condemned the district magistrate's action, but the Uttar Pradesh government felt that it could not reverse the decision. However, it locked the mosque and barred it to both Hindus and Muslims. The situation was more or less accepted by all as a temporary solution for the period of the dispute in the court. The resulting quiet lasted till 1983 when the VHP started a whirlwind campaign demanding the 'liberation' of the Ram Janmabhoomi, which would entail the demolition of the mosque and the erection of a Ram temple in its place. The secular parties and groups did not do anything to counter the campaign; they just ignored it. Suddenly, on 1 February 1986, the district judge, probably at the prompting of the Congress chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, reopened the mosque, gave Hindu priests its possession, and permitted Hindus to worship there. As a result, religious and communal passions were aroused leading to communal riots all over the country; sixty-five persons were killed in Uttar Pradesh towns alone. Soon, powerful Hindu and Muslim communal groups led by the VHP and the Babri Masjid Action Committee were ranged against each other. The Hindu communalists demanded the demolition of the mosque and the construction of a Ram temple on its site; the Muslim communalists demanded the restoration of the mosque to Muslims. The secular and nationalist-minded persons, parties and groups now suddenly woke up to the enormity of the problem. Even then the issue was allowed to fester so that both communalisms got consolidated. Clearly, over the years, certain necessary steps should have been taken. In a country with centuries of history there are bound to be problems of this nature—there are bound to be prolonged perceived periods and instances, real or otherwise, of injustice, oppression, suppression, discrimination, and so on, just as there is the immense tradition of tolerance, of the development of a composite culture, of happy common living. But, clearly, the present cannot be used to set right what went wrong in the past.

The initiative soon passed into the hands of the Hindu communalists. In 1989, the VHP, keeping in view the impending Lok Sabha elections, organized a massive movement to start the construction of a Ram temple at the site where the Babri mosque stood. As a part of that objective, it gave a call for the collection of bricks, sanctified by water from the river Ganges, from all over the country—villages, towns and cities—to be taken to Ayodhya. The Lok Sabha elections took place in an heightened communal atmosphere. There was also an indirect alliance of the Janata Dal and its left allies with the BJP, which increased its strength from two in 1984 to eighty-six in 1989. Moreover, the new government at the Centre formed by V.P. Singh relied on outside support, of the CPI and CPM as well as the BJP. To consolidate its increased popular support, the BJP now officially adopted as its objective the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya. To popularize the objective, it organized in 1990 an all-India rath yatra headed by its president, L.K. Advani. The yatra aroused fierce communal passions and was followed by communal riots in large number of places. Thousands of BJP–VHP volunteers gathered at Ayodhya at the end of October 1990, despite the Uttar Pradesh government, headed by

Mulayam Singh Yadav, banning the rally. To disperse the volunteers and to prevent them from harming the mosque, the police opened fire on them, killing and injuring over a hundred persons.

The BJP thereafter withdrew its support to the V.P. Singh government, resulting in its fall. Elections to a new Lok Sabha were held in 1991. The BJP with 119 MPs emerged as the main opposition to Congress. It also formed governments in four states— Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. To consolidate and further enhance its political gains, the BJP– VHP organized a huge rally of over 200,000 volunteers at the site of the mosque on 6 December 1992, with the major leaders of the two organizations being present. To allay the fears of injury to the mosque, the BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh, had given an assurance to the Supreme Court that the mosque would be protected. The assurances had been repeated by the BJP leaders in parliament. In spite of these assurances, the BJP–VHP volunteers set out to demolish the mosque with hammer blows, while BJP leaders looked on. The central government also lay paralysed. The entire country was shocked by this event which had other disastrous consequences. Communal riots, the worst and the most widespread since 1947, broke out in many parts of the country, the worst hit being Bombay, Calcutta and Bhopal. The riots in Bombay lasted for nearly a month. In all more than 3,000 people were killed in the riots all over India. Even though the good sense of the Indian people has since asserted itself and communal passions have abated, the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi issue has continued to fester like a running sore in the country, and the communal forces have continued to grow politically. In the 1996 elections to the Lok Sabha, the BJP won 161 seats, while in 1998 and 1999 it succeeded in winning 182 seats and forming governments with the help of its allies. The biggest blot on the NDA government, led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was the communal carnage in Gujarat during 2002 and the failure of the Vajpayee government to suppress it.

This section may be concluded by pointing out that though on the surface the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi issue appears to be a religious one, in reality this is not so. In fact, the communalists are not interested in religion; they are interested only in the manipulation and exploitation of religion and religious identity for the communalization of the people for political ends. Religious differences as such are neither responsible for communalism nor its root cause. Communalism is not the same as religious-mindedness. In fact, the moral and spiritual values of all religions go against communal values. It is the intrusion of religion into politics and affairs of the state which is undesirable. As Gandhiji put it in 1942: 'Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics.'[1]

Conclusion

Despite the growth of communalism and communal parties and groups in recent years, and being ruled by the NDA under BJP's hegemony, India still is a basically healthy secular society. Even though communalism is perhaps the most serious challenge facing Indian society and polity, it is not yet the dominant mode of thought of the Indian people. Even when the communalists have succeeded in utilizing communalism as the quick and easy route to political power and have won elections, the people who have voted for them have done so to express their discontent with the

existing state of political and economic affairs. They have not yet imbibed communal ideology significantly. The Indian people are still basically secular, and the believers in communal ideology constitute a fringe. Even in areas where communal riots have occurred, there does not exist a permanent divide between Hindus and Muslims or Hindus and other minorities. In no part of the country is 'an aggressive majority arranged against a beleaguered minority'. In fact, popular consciousness has posed a major barrier to the spread of communalism to a significant extent in the rural areas and to large parts of urban India. This also explains why communalism, making a beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, has still failed to strike deep roots in large parts of the country and has taken such a long time to acquire even its present strength.