

Recurring causes of Communal Conflicts in India

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Abstract: Among all the socio-cultural problems faced by India, communalism has arguably been one of the biggest. The most vicious and extreme form of communalism is the conflicts and violence between the religious communities; most commonly the two largest religious communities of India, viz, the Hindus and the Muslims. It has not just resulted in the loss of life and property but was also the root cause behind the partition of the country in 1947. A careful study of some major communal conflicts in India in pre and post-independence era reveals that there have been some recurring causes which are behind the rifts between the two communities. This research paper focuses on these causes and also on the remedies taken by the government to eradicate them.

Keywords: Communalism, Cow-protection, religious processions, sacred sites.

Introduction: There is difference of opinion among scholars about the genesis and evolution and Communalism in India. As a word Communalism could simply mean something related to a 'community'. But, in the context of India it has a certain negative connotation; it is used to denote a strong loyalty to one's own community and a feeling of dislike or even hatred for other communities. The reason this word has acquired such a meaning lies in the colonial history when the British used policies like the 'communal award' and separate electorates to foster hatred between the various communities in India. British policies are one of the biggest reasons that the communal hatred increased in India and the country saw some of the worst instances of communal violence. Also, it was the apathetic attitude of the British that many long-standing religious conflicts could not be solved and repeatedly resulted in violence.

Research Objectives:

- 1) To study the reasons behind the communal rifts in India.
- 2) To find out whether there are any common or recurring causes behind the riots.
- 3) To study what are the measures various governments have taken to eradicate these causes.

Research Methodology:

For the purpose of this study historical sources and books of eminent historians have been analysed and the reasons of communal conflicts in Indian history have been studied. For this purpose some selected incidents of violence, which had a lasting impact on the Indian history have been analysed. For post independence period various contemporary media reports have been studied to find out the causes of communal riots. Communal violence and their causes in pre and post independence era have been compared to find out whether there are any similar or recurring reasons. Also, various laws which are made to curb the communal rifts have been reviewed to find out their effectiveness in stopping the communal violence.

Communal Conflicts in pre-independence era: Communalism became a major social problem in India during the colonial rule. Even before 1857 we find mentions of communal conflicts in India. For instance, in October 1809, a riot broke out between Hindus and Muslims over issue of Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi. The present Vishweshwar Temple was attacked and was attacked by a religious mob; next day in retaliation the mosque was attacked and communal riots broke out and around 50 mosques were destroyed and several hundred people lost their lives^[1]. In Calcutta a Durga procession was attacked in 1820. Even during the revolt of 1857 we find various instances when Hindus and Muslims clashed with each other^[2]. The hostility between the two communities is mentioned by contemporary writers too. An Englishman WS Blunt who visited India in 1883 writes that Muslims face “annoyance” because Hindus play drums and music in front of their mosques. He also mentions that cow-slaughter as one of the reasons of hostility between the two communities. Cow-slaughter remained a major point of contention between the two communities^[3]. (Blunt. p. 27, 163). In 1889, a Bill advocating democratic form of government in India was introduced by Charles Bradlaugh in the British House of Commons. It was opposed by the Aligarh students who prepared a memorandum against it induced twenty thousand Muslims to sign it at the gates of Delhi’s Jama Masjid. It was propagated as a petition against the attempt of the Hindus to ban cow-slaughter^[4].

A major riot broke out between the Parsi and Muslim community in Bombay in the February 1874. The reason was that in a book by a Parsi author there was a reference to the Prophet Mohammad which Muslims found objectionable. Though the author was made to apologize but riots broke out all over the city and military had to be called^[5]. In 1877, in the state of Janjira, which was ruled by a Nawab, Hindu-Muslim riots happened for almost a week in September. In Janjira, Hindus were not allowed to play music in their processions in the month of Ramzan, on Fridays, Sundays, or Thursday nights. In 1877, Ganapati festival and Ramzan coincided; a few concessions were given to the Hindus. This led to severe rioting for days.

Between 1893 and 1894 many riots and clashes happened in Bihar over the issue of cow-protection. Many 'Gorakshini Sabha' were formed and cows were rescued. Riots broke out and in the Gaya District additional police had to be called. In Sahabad riots broke out after Hindus attacked a Muslim butcher. In Saran district rescued cows were taken to a police station where large number of people gathered and police had to open fire to control the situation.^[6]

Between 1885 and 1893 communal disturbances increased. Instances of riots were reported all over the country- in Karnal and Lahore (1885), in Delhi (1886), in Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Ambala, Dera Ghazi Khan (1889), and Palakod in Salem (1891), in Azamgarh, Bombay and Isa Khel in Mianwali District of Punjab (1893). On many occasions army had to be requisitioned. As historian RC Majumdar puts it "Muharram and Dusserah processions, and cow-killing at Baqr'id were the causes, and murders, demolition of mosques and temples, and looting of shops, the chief characteristics of these riots."^[7]

One of the biggest turning points of the Indian freedom struggle was the Bengal partition of 1905 which was done on communal lines by the British rulers, with the aim to divide Hindu and Muslim population. With this same motive the concept of 'separate electorates' was introduced in Morley Minto Reforms. These policies of the colonial masters gave rise to the communalism even more. As a result, in 1912 there were severe riots in Ayodhya and Faizabad on the festival of Bakrid; and in 1913 riots broke out in Agra on Muharram. Probably one of the most serious riots of the British rule up to that time occurred on Bakrid in 1917 in the Sahahbad (Bihar). Rioting started on September 30th and with a great difficulty after a hand-to-hand combat police could restore the order. But riots again started on October 2nd and continued for six days; on October 9 riots spread in the adjoining Gaya district too. About one thousand people were arrested under the Defence of India Act ^[8]. Gandhi and other freedom fighters tried to bring Hindus and Muslims together during the Non-cooperation movement and the Khilafat Movement but this was short-lived and soon there were rifts over the communal issues. "The revival of the old communal spirit resulted in discords over petty issues, such as music before mosque, cutting down the branches of papal tree, held sacred by the Hindus, which obstructed the very long pole carried in the Muslim Tajiya procession, killing of cows in public places during Id ceremony, and things of this sort."^[9]

In May, 1923 riots broke out in Calcutta over the issue of playing music before the mosque and in July 1924 riots occurred in Delhi on Bakrid over the issue of cow-slaughter. Riots also broke out in Nagpur, Jabalpur, etc on Bakrid. In coming few years there were several instances of communal clashes on Bakrid. In Nizam's territory many Hindu temples were desecrated after the Muharram processions. In Kohat in Northwest Frontier Province riots broke out over a pamphlet published by the Sanatan Sabha which contained a poem disrespecting Islam; it was published after an insulting pamphlet by the Muslims. In 1927 communal clash occurred in Kulkathi in Bengal when a Hindu procession wasn't allowed passage by a Muslim mob. Cow-slaughter and playing music in processions before the mosques were prominent and recurring reasons of communal tension could be understood by the fact that the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee approved a Hindu-Muslim Pact for Bengal which had provisions that no music should be played before the mosques and there should be no interference with cow-killing for religious sacrifices. Just a week before Bakrid riots of 1924 in Delhi prominent Muslim leaders Muhammad Ali and Ajmal Khan earnestly appealed Muslims to keep peace on

the Bakrid day; but it proved futile^[10]. The issue of music before the mosques was raised in Legislative Assembly too in August 1926, but was shelved^[11].

In 1929, Mahashay Rajpal, a publisher from Lahore was killed by a Muslim youth Ilm-ud-Din. Rajpal published a book 'Rangila Rasool' by an anonymous author; the book was insulting towards Prophet Mohammad. As a result of this controversy government had to insert Section 295(A) in the IPC which criminalizes "deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs."^[12]

The communal tension between the two communities kept on increasing for the next two decades and ultimately resulted in the partition of India. Even after the Partition the communal rifts did not cease to exist and still communalism is one of the biggest social and political problems in India.

Communal conflicts in post-Independence India: After 1947 there have been many cases of communal violence in the country. A look at few major incidents throws the light on their causes. In 1968 riots broke out in Karimganj in Assam. A cow belonging to a Muslim entered into a Hindu's house, as the Hindu tried chase the cow a fight started. This resulted in full fledged riots. In 1990 too in Hailakandi in Assam a wounded cow was found on a common land which was being demanded for the construction of a Kali Temple; this resulted in riots.^[13]

The famous Ram-janmabhumi Movement in 1980s became a point of contention between the two communities; it caused a lot of political upheaval in the country. The controversy over Ram-janmbhumi was going on for more than a century at least. In 1855 there was a conflict at Hanumangarhi between the communities, again there was an altercation in 1858 when a Nihang Sikh entered the mosque organized *havan* and wrote 'Ram Ram' over the walls with coal. Since then, there was a continuous tussle and court cases over the site. In 1934 riots again broke out in Ayodhya on Bakr-id over the issue of cow-slaughter. During these riots Babri Masjid was also attacked by the Bairagis^[14]. This conflict continued till 1980s and on December 6, 1992 the Babri masjid was destroyed by a huge mob of Karsevaks. The Ayodhya Movement was also significant in the aspect that many other communal clashes were related to it in one way or the other. After Babri demolition there were severe riots in Mumbai in January 1993, and serial bomb blasts in Mumbai a few months later in March. Even the Gujarat riots of 2002 were caused due to the burning of Karsevaks who were returning from Ayodhya.

When the Ram-janmabhumi Movement was at its peak the government enacted the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. The Act says that the religious character of any place of worship "shall continue to be the same as it existed on August 15, 1947". That means any place of worship of any religious denomination cannot be changed into place of worship of another denomination. This Act was made with an intention to stop the controversy over the religious sites once and for all. While moving the Bill in the Parliament the Home Minister S B Chavan had said: "It is considered necessary to adopt these measures in view of the controversies arising from time to time with regard to conversion of places of worship which tend to vitiate the communal atmosphere... Adoption of this Bill will effectively prevent any new controversies from arising in respect of conversion of any place of worship..."^[15] But still communal tensions flare-up on the issue of sacred sites; Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi and Bhojshala in Dhar, Madhya Pradesh are among the prominent examples of this.^[16]

Another big cause of communal tension in recent years was the violence over cow-slaughter. There have been instances of violence over cow-slaughter post-independence era too, like the Ganjbasoda (MP) riots in January 2003^[17], Indore (MP) riots in 2013^[18] or in Rewari (Haryana) in August 2013^[19]. Cow-slaughter became a major political issue after the killing of Mohammad Akhlaq in a Dadri village in September 2015 near Delhi^[20]. Opposition parties accused the Bharatiya Janata Party of polarising the country and spreading religious hatred. Many cow-protection groups were formed in various parts of the country. Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a statement in August 2016 that many antisocial elements are hiding their activities behind the facade of Gau raksha^[21]. Cow-protection is and reverence towards cows is an important characteristic of the Indian society. It was even promoted by various social workers like Vinoba Bhave and Gandhi. To achieve this aim of cow-protection Indian Constitution has made it a part of the Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 48 of the Constitution says that the State shall “take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle.”^[22] But the Directive Principles are non-justiciable, they provide guidance and lay down a framework according to which the laws should be made by the government. Due to this total ban of cow-slaughter has not been implemented in India. Cow-protection and violence over cow-slaughter is still an unresolved issue which leads to violence in country.

Another reason of communal violence in post-independence India is insult, or alleged insult of religious figures. There were instances of violence after the publication of the book *Satanic Verses* authored by Salman Rushdie in 1988.^[23] The book was considered blasphemous by the Muslims and it was promptly banned by the Indian government. In February 1989, three people died in violent protests against the book in Kashmir and in the same month there were riots in Mumbai in which 12 people were killed and many were wounded.^[24]

Recently the issue of blasphemy again resulted in violent protests and killings after the spokesperson of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Nupur Sharma made controversial comments on Prophet Mohammad in a television debate show on May 26, 2022. What ensued were protests and violence in different parts of the country and even overseas there were protests.^[25] Two people were killed for supporting Nupur Sharma, one was a tailor in Udaipur, Rajasthan, Kanhaiyya Lal and another was a chemist Umesh Prahladrao Kolhe in Maharashtra's Amrawati.^[26]

Similarly, in April 2022 there were riots and disturbances in different parts of the country like in Gujarat and New Delhi during the Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti processions^[27]. Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath had to issue orders that no religious processions were allowed without prior and proper permission from the authorities^[28]. Since a large number of people gather in religious processions it could become a way to incite communal passions in the masses, unverified news and rumours become a major tool for such purposes. Maintaining law and order is State governments' responsibility. For such reasons law enforcement agencies have to be extra cautious during the times of religious festivals and processions. This shows that there is always an apprehension of violence or disturbance during religious processions.

Conclusion: This analysis shows that the communalism has been one of the biggest socio-political problems of India for last at least two centuries, and has frequently caused riots and even partition of the country. There are some recurring causes of these riots like the claim over a place of worship or sacred site, the issue of cow-slaughter, violence during the religious processions and violence resulting from the alleged insult of the revered religious figure of one community. The governments, both pre and post-independence, took some steps to remove these causes like introducing Article 295 (A), the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, and making cow protection a part of the Directive Principles of the State Policy. But as the research shows these measures have not been enough to stop the incidents of violence. It's needed to reassess the root cause of the communal disturbance in the society and accordingly change the policy to address the issue.

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