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## COMMUNAL APPROACH IN HISTORY WRITING

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Since 1980 some Indian writers and their western counterparts have adopted an aggressive and irrational approach to the study of ancient India. They identify it with Hinduism. Under British rule, Colonialist historians deliberately denigrated India's achievements and attributed elements of Indian culture to external influence. Indian Historians underlined India's contribution to world culture. Hence, in the interpretation of history, there was continuing struggle between colonialism and nationalism. Now the situation has undergone a change. The struggle now is between communalism and irrationalism, on the one hand, and rationalism and professionalism, on the other. Though most writers are rational and professional, some have become communal and irrational. The latter overplays myths and legends, arguing for the existence of Rama's Ayodhya without historical evidence. They ensure all critical studies of the brhmanical social structure and even support the caste system by ignoring the social inequity stressed by Manu.

Those who once attributed the painted Gray ware to the vedic people and looked for it outside India now declare the Indo-Aryans to be indigenous Indians. Such generalizations need to be examined on the basis of a rational reading of the sources. In the context of Religion, neither Hindu or Hindu dharma is known to any ancient sanskrit text. The communal writers go on harping on Hindu and Hindutva. Historians wedded to objective and scientific criteria have to be alert and adhere to reason and long established historical standards.

Communalism or communal ideology consists of three basic elements or stages, one following the other. First, it is the belief that people who follow the same religion have common secular interests, that is, common political, economic, social and cultural interests. This is the first bedrock of communal ideology. From this arises the notion of socio-political communities based on religion. It is these religion-based communities, and not classes, nationalities, linguistic- cultural groups, nations or such politico-territorial units as provinces or states, that are seen as the fundamental units of Indian society. The Indian people, it is believed, can act socially and politically and protect their collective or corporate or non-individual interests only as member of these religion-based communities. These different

communities are alleged to have their own leaders. Those who talk of being national, regional, or class leaders are merely masquerading; beneath the mask they are only leaders of their own communities. The best they can do is to unite as communal leaders and then serve the wider category of the nation or country.

The second element of communal ideology rests on the notion that in a multi-religious society like India, the secular interests, that is the social, cultural, economic and political interest, of the followers of one religion are dissimilar and divergent from the interests of the followers of another religion.

The third stage of communalism is reached when the interests of the followers of different religions or of different 'communities' are seen to be mutually incompatible, antagonistic and hostile. Thus, the communalist asserts at this stage that Hindus and Muslims cannot have common secular interests, that their secular interests are bound to be opposed to each other.

Communalism is, therefore, basically and above all an ideology on which communal politics is based. Communal violence is a conjunctural consequence of communal ideology. Similarly, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian communalisms are not very different from each other; they belong to a single species; they are varieties of the same communal ideology.

Communal ideology in a person, party or movement starts with the first stage. Many nationalists fell prey to it or thought within its digits even while rejecting the two other elements of communalism, that is, the notion of the mutual divergence or hostility of the interests of different religion-based communities. These were the persons who saw themselves as Nationalist Hindus, Nationalist Muslims, Nationalist Sikhs, etc., and not as simple nationalists.

The second stage of communalism may be described as liberal communalism or, in the words of some, moderate communalism. The liberal communalist was basically a believer in and practitioner of communal politics; but he still upheld certain liberal, democratic, humanist and nationalist values. Even while holding that India consisted of distinct religion-based communities, with their own separate and special interests which sometimes came into conflict with each other, he continued to believe and profess publicly that these different communal interests could be gradually accommodated and brought into harmony within the overall, developing national interests, and India built as a nation. Most of the communalists before 1937- the Hindu Mahasabha, the Muslim League, the Ali Brothers after 1925, M.A. Jinnah, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lajpat Rai, and N.C. Kelkar after 1922-functioned within a liberal communal framework.

Extreme communalism, or communalism functioning broadly within a fascist syndrome, formed the third or last stage of communalism. Extreme communalism was based on fear and hatred, and had a tendency to use violence of language, deed or behaviour, the language of war and enmity against political opponents. It was at this stage that the communalists declared that Muslims, 'Muslim culture' and Islam and Hindus, 'Hindu culture,' and Hinduism were in danger of being suppressed and exterminated. It was also at this stage that both the Muslim and Hindu communalists put forward the theory that Muslims and Hindus constituted separate nations whose mutual antagonism was permanent and irresolvable. The Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha after 1937 and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) increasingly veered towards extreme or fascistic communalism.

Though the three stages of communalism were different from one another, they also interacted and provided a certain continuum. Its first element or stage fed liberal and extreme communalism and made it difficult to carry on a struggle against them. Similarly, the liberal communalist found it difficult to prevent the ideological transition to extreme communalism.

We may take note of several other connected aspects. While a communalist talked of, or believed in, defending his 'community's' interests, in real life no such interests existed

outside the field of religion. The economic and political interests of Hindus, Muslims, and others were the same. In that sense they did not even constitute separate communities. As Hindus or Muslims they did not have a separate political-economic life or interests on an all-India or even regional basis. They were divided from fellow Hindus or Muslims by region, language, culture, class, caste, social status, social practices, food and dress habits, etc., and united on these aspects with followers of other religions. An upper class Muslim had far more in common, even culturally, with an upper class Hindu than with a lower class Muslim. Similarly, a Punjabi Hindu stood closer culturally to a Punjabi Muslim than to a Bengali Hindu; and, of course, the same was true of a Bengali Muslim in relation to a Bengali Hindu and a Punjabi Muslim. The unreal communal division, thus, obscured the real division of the Indian people into linguistic-cultural regions and social classes as well as their real, emerging and growing unity into a nation. If communal interests did not exist, then communalism was not a partial or one-sided or sectional view of the social reality; it was its wrong or unscientific view. It has been suggested, on occasions, that a communalist, being narrow-minded, looks after his own community's

interests. But if no such interests existed, then he could not be serving his 'community's' or co-religionists' interests either. He could not be the 'representative' of his 'community'. In the name of serving his communal answers were wrong. What the communalist projected as problems were not the real problems, and what the communalist said was the answer was not the real answer.

Sometimes, communalism is seen as something that has survived from the past, as something that the medieval period has bequeathed to the present or at least as having roots in the medieval period. But while communalism uses, and is based on, many elements of ancient and medieval ideologies, basically it is a modern ideology and political trend that expresses the social urges and serves the political needs of modern social groups, classes and forces. Its social roots as also its social, political and economic objectives lie very much in the modern period of Indian history. It was brought into existence and sustained by contemporary socio-economic structure.

Communalism emerged as a consequence of the emergence of modern politics which marked a sharp break with the politics of the ancient or medieval or pre-1857 periods. Communalism, as also other modern views such as nationalism and socialism, could emerge as politics and as ideology only after politics based on the people, politics of popular participation and mobilization, politics based on the creation and mobilization of public opinion had come into existence. In pre-modern politics, people were either ignored in upper-class based politics or were compelled to rebel outside the political system and, in case of success, their leaders incorporated into the old ruling classes. This was recognized by many perceptive Indians. Jawaharlal Nehru, for example, noted in 1936: 'One must never forget that communalism in India is a latter-day phenomenon which has grown up before our eyes. Nor was there anything unique about communalism in the Indian context. It was not an inevitable or inherent product of India's peculiar historical and social development. It was the result of conditions which have in other societies produced similar phenomena and ideologies such as Fascism, anti-Semitism, racism, Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland, or Christian-Muslim conflict in Lebanon.'

The communal consciousness arose as a result of the transformation of Indian society under the impact of colonialism and the need to struggle against it. The growing economic, political and administrative unification of regions and the country, the process of making India into a nation, the developing contradiction between colonialism and the Indian people and the formation of modern social classes and strata called for new ways of seeing one's common interests.

They made it necessary to have wider links and loyalties among the people and to form new identities. This also followed from the birth of new politics during the last half of the 19th century. The new politics was based on the politicization and mobilization of an ever increasing number of the Indian people.

The process of grasping the new, emerging political reality and social relations and the adoption of new uniting principles, new social and political identities with the aid of new ideas and concepts was bound to be a difficult and gradual process. The process required the spread of modern ideas of nationalism, cultural-linguistic development and class struggle. But wherever their growth was slow and partial, people inevitably used the old; familiar pre-modern categories of self-identity such as caste, locality, region, race, religion, sect and occupation to grasp the new reality, to make wider connections and to evolve new identities and ideologies. Similar developments have occurred all over the world in similar circumstances. But often such old inadequate and false ideas and identities gradually give way to the new, historically necessary ideas and identities of nation, nationality and class. This also occurred on a large scale in India but not uniformly among all the Indian people. In particular, religious consciousness was transformed into communal consciousness in some parts of the country and among some sections of the people. This was because there were some factors in the Indian situation which favoured its growth; it served the needs of certain sections of society and certain social and political forces. The question is why did communalism succeed in growing during the 20th century? What aspects of the Indian situation favoured this process? Which social classes and political forces did it serve? Why did it become such a pervasive part of Indian reality? Though it was not inherent or inevitable in the situation, it was not a mere conspiracy of power-hungry politicians and crafty administrators either. It had socio-economic and political roots. There was a social situation which was nurturing it and without which it could not have survived for long. Above all, communalism was one of the by-products of the colonial character of Indian economy, of colonial underdevelopment, of the incapacity of colonialism to develop the Indian economy. The resulting economic stagnation and its impact on the lives of the Indian people, especially the middle classes, produced conditions which were conducive to division and antagonism within Indian society as also to its radical transformation.