

Communalism: An Offshoot of British Raj

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Publishing Date: July 21, 2015

Abstract

Communalism is identified by narrow interests and use of faith to instigate people resulting into chaotic societal relationships. It is a termite that slowly eats into the social cohesiveness and feeling of solidarity existing between the members of a multicultural society. The British rule brought with itself the seeds of communalism which it sowed in the form of policy of divide and rule and reaped the fruits of growing ridge between Hindus and Muslims.

Keywords: *Communalism, British Raj, Divide and Rule.*

social reformer who championed the cause of education for Muslims laid the foundations of Aligarh Muslim University where English was the medium of instruction alongside Urdu.² The main aim of introducing western education for the Muslims was their amelioration from the clutches of poverty and winning the favour of British officials. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan even persuaded Muslims to maintain distance from the Congress as Congress was seen more as a Hindu dominated political institution.³

Introduction

In Colonial era, it meant the transformation of shared religious beliefs of group of people into shared political interests. The mistrust that it created among people of different faiths during British rule lead to the demise of feeling of nationalism. Consequently, the struggle for independence of India from foreign rule became a tussle of interests between Hindus and Muslims. Muslims had started demanding a separate state for themselves anticipating difficulties for themselves in the newly independent Hindu majority state of India. We will analyze the role of British Raj in the growth of communalism in India and how it infested the feeling of Nationalism.¹

The communal safeguards introduced by the British only flared up the feeling of insecurity and communalism among the Muslims and exacerbated the mistrust that had occurred between the Hindus and the Muslims. To some Indian Muslims, political change was a harbinger of social change which could ameliorate the Muslim population living a deprived life. The most prominent of all the Muslim leaders, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a

Policy of Divide and Rule

The British government used communalism as a tool to suppress the growing discontent among masses against itself and the rising spirit of Nationalism appeared to pose a threat to its power. The presence of heterogeneity in the Indian society seemed a promising option for the British to play different religions and castes against one another, keeping its position strong in case of any resistance to its rule. The policy of divide and rule was first implemented in the Bengal army after the mutiny of 1857 to subvert the recurrence of any similar situation that challenged the authority of British and almost thwarted its establishment of over 200 years.⁴ The policy was later carried out in the armies of Bombay and Madras. "Lord Ellenborough said- The fewer elements of combination there are in the native army the better, and therefore the more nationalities and castes and religions, the more secure we shall be. Discipline alone should bind the army together." The British government found that dividing people on religious and caste lines would be a formidable defense against any future resistance to its rule. People from same

community or similar beliefs tend to be more united and can act as a strong defence against any oppression whereas people from different communities lacks cohesion.⁵ And this is how a careful and well thought out strategy of divide and rule was born out of the mind of John Lawrence, which he implemented in the army in Punjab to counter any resistance from the sepoys.

‘Lord Elphinstone wrote: But suppose the whole native army to be formed into one grand army, the component parts of each regiment being as heterogeneous as possible, and suppose some cause of discontent to arise which affects all castes alike, the danger would be undoubtedly far greater than that which overtook us last year. I have long considered this subject, and I am convinced that the exact converse of this policy of assimilation is our only safe military policy in India. Divide et impera was the old Roman motto, and it should be ours.’ Lord Dalhousie inducted few Sikhs into the Bengal regiment so that the assimilation could be reversed.⁶

According to Bipan Chandra, “Communalism was, of course, not the only constituent of the policy of Divide and Rule. Every existing division of Indian society was encouraged to prevent the emerging unity of the Indian people. An effort was made to set region against region, province against province, caste against caste, language against language, reformers against the orthodox, the moderate against the militant, leftist against rightist, and even class against class. It was, of course, the communal division which survived to the end and proved the most serviceable. In fact, near the end, it was to become the main prop of colonialism, and colonial authorities were to stake their all on it. On the other hand, communalism could not have developed to such an extent as to divide the country, if it did not have the powerful support of the colonial state. In this sense, communalism may be described as the channel through which the politics of the middle classes were placed at the service of colonialism and the jagirdari classes. In fact, communalism was the route through which colonialism could extend its narrow social base to sections of workers, peasants, the middle classes and the bourgeoisie whose interests were otherwise in contradiction with colonialism.”⁷

The Partition of Bengal

Continuing its intentions to bring the communal element in socio-political aspects, the British government gave a yet another blow to the unity of Hindu and Muslims by announcing the partition of Bengal in 1904 by segregating Muslim dominated East Bengal from Hindu majority West Bengal. Colonel Durand while discussing Bengal partition in the meeting said: “That presidency may be divided into two or three great areas, in which the people are very distinct, and in which there is a very considerable degree of that sort of jealousy and animosity which exists between conterminous peoples. It is advisable for us to take advantage of that sort of feeling.” To pacify the infuriated masses, the British government called this exercise of partition a step towards administrative efficacy.⁸

Separate Electorate

The British played the communal card in government positions and the provision of educational access as well. The seats in legislative councils were carefully allocated by way of separate electorate to enlarge the rift between the Hindus and Muslims. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 made a provision for safeguarding the interests of the minorities even though he personally preferred integration as against division. Communalism was a powerful weapon in the hands of the British to alienate the economically and politically reactionary social classes.⁹ The new Indian Councils Act, 1909 granted Muslims from two to four seats in each provincial legislative based on the principle of separate election. As far as powers were concerned, the Act of 1909 provided for the right to move resolutions and ask supplementary questions, but the reformed councils remained mere advisory bodies without administrative control.¹⁰ Savarkar while pointing to the declining unity between Hindus and Muslims said that “Two antagonistic Nations living in India side by side”. The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms introduced in 1919 in the form of the Government of India Act, 1919 accepted the principle of direct election for the first time as the norm at all levels of political

representation. However, the principle of communal electorates was extended both in the centre and the provinces and separate electorates were also provided for Sikhs, Christians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans. Thus, the Indian communalists made themselves beneficial to the British as the British rulers made concessions to national democratic demands.¹¹ 'The vested interests deliberately encouraged communalism because of its capacity to distort and divert popular struggle, to prevent the masses from understanding the real issues.'¹²

The seeds of communalism sown by the British had started bearing fruits when not only the Hindus and Muslims demanded separate electorate for themselves but there appeared differences in the Hindus between Brahmins and non-Brahmins as well. This added yet another feather in the cap of British strategy to create divisions in the society especially when the anti-imperialist sentiments were exacerbating after the first world war.¹³ 'Within the general body of non-Muslims, a minimum number of seats was reserved and allotted to the non-brahmins who, although majority communities, might otherwise have remained under-represented.' Imperialism led to the birth of the Muslim League, separate electorates in 1909, and made Jinnah the sole voice for Muslims after 1939.¹⁴ The provincial ministries resigned to protest against India's entry into the Second World War without the consent of its people and communalists used the opportunity to take power. In NWFP, the Akalis, Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League were willing to join hands in a ministry to succeed that of Dr Khan Sahib, the Congress leader who was the brother of Ghaffar Khan.¹⁵

In 1942 Savarkar asked members of the Mahasabha "to capture all centres of political power with support from Mahasabha such as legislatures, defence committees, municipalities and ministries and to perform the 'patriotic' service by enlisting in the armed forces as part of the Hindu Militarization movement."¹⁶ In no case could a Hindu be trusted who belongs to the pseudo-nationalistic Congress school... who glories in betraying Hindu rights to the Muslims"¹⁷. The vested interests deliberately encouraged communalism because of its capacity to distort

and divert popular struggle, to prevent the masses from understanding the real issues.

Conclusion

The policy of divide and rule proved to be a potent nuclear weapon that not only killed the ones that it struck but even the generations to come. The phase of heightened nationalism was marred by sectarian interests and the demise of solidarity and of a secular nation.¹⁸

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