

Communalism: British Creation, Indian Perpetuation

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It is an oft repeated comment in literature on India that communalism was created by the British colonial administration of the country¹. To summarize, the argument goes that before the British, the identities of “Hindu,” “Muslim,” “Buddhist” and “Jain” as well as the caste, class and ethnic divisions within and between them were relatively fluid. The communities lived in relative peace and harmony. They lived side by side, shared temples and in some cases even prayed to the same saints, leading Pandey to comment that “popular Islam in India [once] paralleled popular Hinduism in remarkable ways.”² There were divisions and tensions, but they were often localized or personalized and not mass communal cleavages. When the British came however, this all changed. With the British (and modernity's³) need to “categorize and classify”⁴ anything and everything that once was fluid was now made rigid. Populations were defined by being X because they *were not* Y – the idea of the “other” was made official and distinct. The British claimed these divisions were based on “age-long rivalries” and ‘innate’ divisions in the communities⁵. This eventually led to the polarization of identities and community demands thus creating an ‘irreconcilable’ division between the communities. This area of thought forms the basis of an explanation for current communal tensions in India today, but does not provide a full picture of the creation of communal identities in India during the nationalist movement, nor post-independence.

In more recent years, authors have begun placing a significant amount of 'blame' on the Nationalist movement, emergent politics and, in particular, elite interest in the formation of large scale communal rivalries and intense violence. The arguments of authors such as Pandey⁶, Datta⁷ and Chandra⁸ run that in early political contestations, elite politicians used minor divisions of communities, polarized them and placed themselves as the ‘most’ representative people for those groups in order to

1 Pandey, Chandra and Chatterjee all put forward arguments towards this end.

2 Pandey (1990) p.86

3 Chakrabarty (1998)

4 Pandey

5 “Official report” quoted in Gossman (1999) p76.

6 Pandey (1990)

7 Datta (1999)

8 Chandra (1984)

gain votes in a process some have called “ethnic outbidding.”⁹ It is this process of Indian elite manipulation that this paper will focus on. By looking at communal riots from 1920 onwards, particularly in North India, I will attempt to bring out the arguments of these authors as well as several others with regards to the economic, social and political divisions which have led to the continuation, expansion and exaggeration of communal identities today.

Before I get into the discussion of “communalism” in earnest however, I must define what this paper will use as the definition of ‘communal’. The difficulty with defining communalism is that, as Datta notes, “unlike fascists, no one claims to be a communalist [and thus it] cannot elaborate its ideology”¹⁰ which leads to a situation where “Communalism...gets the edge of its meaning through the parallelism with [other terms].”¹¹ In other words, the problem with defining communalism is that it is so often seen as a parallel to, or natural outgrowth of, another, more easily identified and defined, “ism” such as nationalism, colonialism, or even primordialism. Depending on the definition used and its associated ‘parallel term’, the “details”¹² of any communal action, politic or event will be seen in a different light. As such, I choose to define communalism in as broad a terminology as possible and even withdraw it from its specifically Indian context. I borrow much of my definition from those of Chandra and Chakrabarty: “Communalism”, is a term given to “contemporary ethnic intolerance”¹³ through which people “inevitably perceive [common economic, political, social and cultural interests] through the spectacles of the [ethnic] grouping”¹⁴ and forms the foundations of their basic social identity and relationships.

This definition of communalism removes both religion from a central cause and India from a central focus. The definition above rings true for many group based conflicts in the modern world from the holocaust to African conflicts, to the Ayodhya riots, and this is intentional. This allows us to widen

9 Horowitz (1985)

10 Datta (1999) p7

11 L. Dumont quoted in Pandey (1990) p1

12 Datta (1999) pp2-5 talks of the benefits of “details” over “facts” in the analysis of history.

13 Chakrabarty (1998)

14 Chandra (1984) p1

the scope of analysis and reference frame in order to more fully understand the 'details' of events. One frame of reference which cannot be removed from definitions and analyses of communalism however, is that of violence. Violence, particularly in the form of rioting, is what makes communalism an urgent area of research. As such, the remainder of this paper will look at the 'communal problem' through the frame of violence, seen through the light of the above definition. In particular I will be looking at the socio-politics of music in North India around the riots of Calcutta and the economic dislocations created by capitalism as factors of conflict.

The playing of music during Hindu processions has a long history, but it has not always been a part of the Hindu '*dharma*'¹⁵ as it became claimed in the late 19th and early 20th century. Gossman notes for example that an analysis of editorials surrounding the 1926 Calcutta riots suggests, and sometimes explicitly states that “conflict over the playing of music before mosques was not much in evidence before the late 1890s.”¹⁶ Why then, in the 1920s, did music become such a spark point for Hindu-Muslim communal violence and were those communities as unified and ‘natural’ as might be expected from a review of the reports of the time?

The battle for control of public-space and power claims by and over blocs of people led interested parties, particularly in the 1920s and 30s, to re-negotiate historical traditions. That is to say that elites and small groups of people chose issues drawn from a ‘traditional’ past around which masses could be rallied and exaggerated claims about their importance. This was particularly evident in the politics of symbolism which surrounded the Cow-Protection movement, the *Swadeshi* movement and numerous smaller and often more violent outbreaks. Both Pandey and Gossman claim that the British, as the source of legitimizing power, provided an impetus to this movement towards a “reinvention of tradition”¹⁷: As the British attempted to record the “traditional” relationship between groups in a given

15 Vidyarthi, noted in Pandey (1990) p 256

16 Gossman (1999) p74

17 Ibid. p74

area in order to set precedents and customary law by which to govern, groups who may have had little, or wanted more power in relation to others, found it convenient to rewrite history in their own interests.

The re-invention of tradition to suit a group's interests meant that it necessarily came at the cost of another group or groups. Political leaders began to exploit and drive this scramble to be given official sanction by mobilizing large, multi-issue, groups around single issue politics. By creating an artificial fervor around a single issue, political leaders were able to unite otherwise antagonistic classes, politics and individuals into violence against those who were their neighbors.

The 1926 Calcutta riots give us a perfect example of this type of mobilization around a single issue, created to forward political interests of an elite and lay claim to public space through the re-invention of tradition. The issue of Hindu procession music being played in front of Mosques, as has previously been noted, was made a contentious issue only in the late 1800s and only became a *major* source of contention in the early 1900s. The British, in their attempt to keep the peace, had attempted to ban or regulate the playing of music, leading to Vidyathi's claim that the "right to play music had now become a matter of *dharma*"¹⁸, at the same time, it had become "an additional target of protest"¹⁹ against British control, setting off a polarization around the issue. Hindu leaders exerted an effort to reclaim their "lost" public space whilst Muslim leaders mobilized to defend their "new" public space – it became seen as a zero-sum game.

The fact that the 1926 riots took place only months before the general election cannot be seen as a coincidence. General opinion surrounding these riots is that they "represented planned attacks designed to polarize the Hindu and Muslim populations" as unified blocs set in opposition to each other, each with their representative defender leaders. The key point here is that the attacks were planned; they were not spontaneous eruptions of a general feeling of hatred between two homogeneous groups, as communal leaders would have us believe. It took paid *goondas*, inflammatory literature and a created "other" for violence to be sparked off. In this particular case, it seems that it was the

18 Pandey (1990) p256

19 Gossman (1999) p74

intentions of the Arya Samajist leaders on the Hindu side and Sir Abdur Rahim and H. Suhrawardy on the Muslim side who provided the funds, speeches and polarizing spark to ignite a communal conflict.²⁰

The leadership of these groups cannot, however be seen to be the sole impetus for the hardening of communal lines. Many of the claims made also involve an economic dimension which plays on fears of one economically dominant community taking jobs and livelihood from another. This argument has been most forcefully made by various Marxist authors as a counter point to the religious polarization most commonly put forward as an argument for communal conflict. The Calcutta riots, for example, are most often portrayed as a religious conflict whilst more recent conflicts in Mumbai and other urban centers are more commonly portrayed as having economic dislocations as a major mobilizing factor. If one looks closely at almost any communal conflict, however, there are distinct economic interests involved at least at the level of the elites. The reason economic and religious causes often get conflated is that in many cases membership in economic communities and religious communities overlap. It is simply a matter of the reading of the ‘facts’ or, as Datta puts it, the ‘details’ of the rioting. For example, looking at the language of British accounts of events vis-à-vis events related in the *Waqeat-o-Hadesat*, we can see distinct differences in the readings of the details of the same events: When the British read “Religious fanaticism. Breakdown of Law and Order”, the *Waqeat-o-Hadesat* reads “Clash between [rival] Muslim and Hindu moneylenders.”²¹ Similarly, for example, the mobilizers (financiers and planners) of the 1926 Calcutta riots can be seen as “rich *Marwari* traders...defending their property”²² or as Hindus participating defending their *dharma*.²³ In modern examples, Mumbai's urban slums, tenuous economic situation and low levels of education, have made it “easy for communalist organizations and politicians to pose as champions of the minorities.”²⁴ This situation has brought not only inter-religious communal conflict, as is the traditional view of it, but also intra-

20 Ibid p78

21 Pandey (1990) p120 Table 4.1

22 Hassan p. 215 (emphasis added)

23 Pandey (1990) p256

24 Bagchi, In Gopal (1993) p212

religious, caste and economically based communal conflicts as various leaders mobilize these (sub-altern) groups against each other.

So by posing as defenders of the interests (either religious, economic, caste or sub-group) of an artificially defined community, politicians, elites or interested parties are able to create and mobilize single-issue masses against a created “other.” This process was set in motion by the British in their need to classify and categorize people during the creation of a modern state, but was carried on, expanded and fixed in Indian life by emerging Indian politicians. Single-issue groups do not form by themselves, it has taken exerted effort, planning and funding by these leaders who portray themselves as defenders of the group in order to gain political power, damage economic or political rivals or to make claims against the British or governmental administration. Communalism is a multi-faceted beast. It comes from many different angles and many different proponents. The claim that it is simply religious antagonism created by the British as a part of a colonial divide and rule policy is limited at best. It must be seen as a more all encompassing, and non-India-specific entity which can and must be tackled in modern politics from multiple angles. The Modern State apparatus has caused the categorization of peoples, but it did not create the polarization of peoples.

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