Combating Communalism in Twenty-First Century India: A Social-Psychological Perspective

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Abstract: It appears that fifty years after the first Partitioning of India, history is repeating itself. However, this time the partitioning is occurring along psychological lines and not along physical or geographical boundaries. Once again Hindus, Muslims and Christians seem to be experiencing a deep mental and emotional divide between them. Feelings of suspicion, hatred and violence seem once again common place between the three communities. Identities are questioned and definitions sought as to who is a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian or worse still, an Indian! In other words, restrictive and exclusive identities are fuelling a communalism which pits one community against another. Thus, seeds of disunity and conflict are sown within the whole country.

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A Social-Psychological Perspective*

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Introduction

It appears that fifty years after the first Partitioning of India, history is repeating itself. However, this time the partitioning is occurring along psychological lines and not along physical or geographical boundaries. Once again Hindus, Muslims and Christians seem to be experiencing a deep mental and emotional divide between them. Feelings of suspicion, hatred and violence seem once again common place between the three communities. Identities are questioned and definitions sought as to who is a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian or worse still, an Indian! In other words, restrictive and exclusive identities are fuelling a communalism which pits one community against another. Thus, seeds of disunity and conflict are sown within the whole country.

In fact, the nation as a whole seems to be in an identity crisis, gripped as it is by intermittent violence and economic and political instability. While on the one hand liberalization and modernization are the new slogans given to us by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), on the other hand, many political parties have discovered the powerful lure of traditional religious myths and symbols to captivate the imagination of the voting masses.

Hence, scenes like the ones witnessed at the destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, though reminiscent of medieval religious wars, still find a positive echo in the hearts of many millions of Indians. The new found euphoria and pride in one's Hindu identity, as propagated by the Shiv Sena or the RSS, is also indicative of a felt-need to assert and define clearly one's "Hinduness"; this identity is perceived by some Hindus as being under attack from encroaching modernization.

It is, therefore, not surprising that traditional, religion-based ideologies like *Hindutva* seem to fulfil some latent psychological needs of the masses.[1] In fact, modernization, with its bias toward a rational, scientific temper, leaves a value-vacuum in the lives and identities of many; for example, modernization tends to alienate people from their traditional lifestyles, customs or even belief patterns. Such psychological alienation and dislocation of life invariably leads to self-doubt, insecurity and eventually to an identity crisis.

Interestingly, two well-known European social psychologists, Tajfel and Turner,[2] highlight in their research on social identity that individuals are motivated to maintain or achieve a posi-

tive self-identity. In the Indian situation, where competing group identities abound, such motivation is likely to lead to conflict. The point at issue is which group identity would an Indian opt for in order to achieve a better positive self-identity?

Now, religion-based ideologies, which claim to be guardians of tradition, are well suited to respond to such identity needs. Unfortunately, needs such as these are then cleverly exploited by demagogic political leaders. They often woo their insecure followers with ideologies of extreme religious fundamentalism. These ideologies generally tend to provide followers with a definite and clear identity and a sense of belonging to a specific group or community.

The struggle to resolve the identity needs brought about ultimately by some form of alienation also have specific consequences for intergroup relations. In India intergroup prejudices based on religious affiliation are not totally unconnected with identity struggles.[3] No doubt, many other factors, such as historical, economical, political, religious and even archaeological contribute to intergroup violence and disharmony.[4] However, the focus of this paper is on the psychological aspects of group-conflicts. This touches largely on the social psychology of prejudice and discrimination between groups.

The paper is divided into three parts and a conclusion. The first part presents at greater length an analysis of identity-needs and its implications for intergroup tensions and rivalries, known generally in India as the problem of "communalism;" the second part evaluates critically the concept of secularism, and the pursuit of a secular identity as an antidote to communalism; the third part proposes rather briefly, cultural pluralism and a multireligious identity as a more appropriate response to communalism. The paper ends with some concluding comments.

I.   Identity Needs and Communalism

In India the word "communalism" traditionally refers to the prejudiced and often hostile relationships that exist sometimes between the Hindu and Muslim communities. In more recent times, however, the term has been extended to include hostilities occurring between any religion-based communities in India, e.g., Sikhs versus Hindus, or Christians versus Hindus etc. The meaning is always pejorative; it indicates a situation where relationships between communities are tense and full of suspicion at the best of times and dotted by sporadic violence at other times. Hence, a related term, namely, "communal riots," is used frequently to characterize such violence. Even if religion (as a doctrine or teaching) is not the direct cause of riots and violence, as a sociopsyohological phenomenon, that is, as an identity provider, religion is a major contributing factor to the problem of communalism in India.

As indicated in the introduction, at least part of the reason for today's communalism lies in the identity needs of individuals and groups. The process of modernization is unstoppable if we are to be part of the global economy and the global political order. The nation has

little choice but to give in to the pressures of a free and open market dictated principally by the modernized West. At the same time the appeal of tradition and religion to many millions of Indians is not to be overlooked. Their security and a sense of who they are, are deeply rooted in centuries of religious tradition. Given that the ideologies of modernity and traditionalism often subscribe to contradictory sets of values, it is not unusual for people to experience within themselves a sense of loss and confusion as to who they are or what they stand for. They struggle to define themselves anew, to evolve a new identity.

Not infrequently, an identity struggle has a spillover into the communal sphere because religion also contributes to identity formation. For instance, in Ayodhya and its aftermath, for many people, targeting Muslim lives and property for destruction meant contributing toward the establishment of a Hindu raj, ultimately a Hindu identity. Similarly, in Ayodhya challenging and eventually bypassing the judicial apparatus of the modern State, were seen as a sign of asserting one's traditional religious identity; ultimately, the destruction of the mosque was a supreme sign of a fanatical mob proclaiming this new found religious identity.

Since religions tend to be the carriers and protectors of tradition, it is not surprising that sometimes one's religious identity tends to come most to the fore in conflict situations. The great majority of the people in India are born into a religion and are subsequently nurtured and socialized to believe in the traditions, customs and teachings of that religion. In other words, the religious identity becomes the dominant identity. It defines for Indians who they are, how they should behave, what they should believe in and which group they belong to.

In India, this process of socialization via religion is crucial for followers of all religions. Both Hinduism as well as Islam claim that besides being "religions" they are also ways of life. In other words, these religions legislate for and encompass most aspects of the lives of their followers. Thus, they negate the modern distinction between the sacred and the secular,[5] between the private and the public, between politics and religion. In doing so, the emphasis is placed heavily on an identity that is provided by religion. Religious affiliation becomes the primordial identity around which all subidentities of the individual revolve.

What then is the nature of this religion-based identity? Given that religion is a group-based ideology, the nature of religious identity is a group identity. In other words, this identity provides individuals with a sense of group-belonging based on religious categorization. It does not necessarily follow that such persons are either particularly religious or even token believers in the teachings of the religion they supposedly belong to. Rather, the religion-based group provides them primarily with a sense of social belonging, a group identity. As the experiments of Tajfel and his associates repeatedly demonstrate, social categorization is essential in order to deal with a pluralistic environment.[6] Moreover,

as Taylor and Moghaddam point out, categorization "provides a locus of identification for the self."[7] Thus, it is possible for a very secular person like Jinnah to claim to be a Muslim as it is for an avowedly agnostic Advani to claim that he is a Hindu!

Now, given the kind of alienation that modernization tends to bring about in society, the natural tendency for individuals is to seek to rediscover their identity. In practice, this means to reaffirm one's roots, one's belongingness to that group which has from times past defined who one is.[8] Since the primordial identity is religion-based in India, religion or at least religion-based categories are employed to make the alienated feel that they belong to such a group of people who espouse similar categories.

In this manner religion enters into the identity fray – not so such as faith or doctrine but as a social phenomenon, providing identity to the psychologically alienated. But unfortunately the fears and insecurities of the alienated are not always put to rest by merely identifying with their own religious group. With increasing frequency in the recent years, a more commonly used method of shoring up one's identity is through violent conflict against a group that is perceived as a threat.[9] Such a group is generally called an "outgroup," in contrast to one's own group which is called the "ingroup". Tajfel's research repeatedly indicates that there is almost a natural positive bias towards one's ingroup and a negative bias towards the outgroup. Thus, discrimination enters into intergroup relations.

The mere perception of a threat, even if the threat were untrue, is sufficient motivation for the ingroup to aggress against the outgroup. When applied to the Hindu-Muslim communal situation in the country, presently we see that although the Hindu ingroup is the majority group, it perceives itself under threat from the Muslim outgroup, though it is numerically a minority. Similarly, the Christian minority (2.5%) is perceived as a threat by some in the Hindu majority group; they seem convinced that Christians are committed to augmenting their numbers through conversions, in spite of recent census data indicating the contrary. Moreover, such perceived threats are fanned and kept alive by the frequent use of negative stereotypes about the outgroup. Never mind that these stereotypes are inaccurate; they serve the primary purpose of creating and maintaining a hostile and prejudiced attitude toward the outgroup.

Finally, a substantial section of the middle-class in India which is experiencing rapid modernization feels a greater threat of alienation from its traditions than the economically less successful citizens. Hence, the pressures and frustrations of competition make them much more prone to insecurity; consequently, they seem to have a greater need to reaffirm their religious identity.

To summarize, our analysis indicates how through a process of alienation brought about by the forces of modernization in our country, identity-needs are created.; the analysis also highlights the role religion and tradition play in reaffirming one's identity; further, since

religion-based identities are community related, they are likely to contribute to communal conflicts whenever these occur in India. Hence, from a psychological perspective, identity-needs seem to be an important contributing factor to communalism.

II. Secularism an Answer to Communalism?

Having presented a possible psychological explanation to understand some aspects of communalism in our country, we are now poised to ask the following question: how has India usually responded to such situations?

Particularly after the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya one hears a lot of talk these days about *SECULARISM*; it seems to be the panacea for all the ills that the country is facing now. Secularism is always touted as the antidote to communalism in India. Lengthy harangues from politicians, the Government controlled media and other such agencies keep reminding the people that the only response to the communal virus is secularism.

The term secularism originated in the West, an outcome of the religious wars of seventeenth century Europe. It involves, in its simplest form, a strict separation of Church and State or religion and politics. Or as Ashis Nandy says: "This secularism chalks out an area in public life where religion is not admitted."[10]

Several other characteristics of the western concept of secularism need to be borne in mind.[11] First, the concept arose in the Enlightenment period in Europe, when rationalism and a scientific temper were rapidly replacing medieval religious thinking. Second, the modern State was establishing itself and redefining its autonomous relationship to Church and religion. Henceforth, the State would legislate for its citizens without interference from the Church and vice versa. Some authors refer to this as a noninterventionist model of secularism.[12] Third, the concept of secularism connotes a certain indifference on the part of the State vis-a-vis religion. Implied is also a kind of "passive" tolerance of religion.

Now, although India adopted the concept of secularism through the 42nd constitutional amendment, in 1976, it was given quite a different meaning. In India secularism meant *sarva dharma samabhava* or "equal respect for all religions." Whereas the Western concept seeks to distance itself from religion, the Indian concept tends to make room for religion. Whereas the Western concept is noninterventionist, the Indian concept would be called "accommodative" by scholars like Nandy.

Mahatma Gandhi was the best example of the Indian concept of secularism. In fact, he claimed that those who thought that religion and politics could be kept apart understood neither politics nor religion. Moreover, Gandhi practised as well as preached this doctrine.

It appears that the Western definition of secularism would have suited India better given its history of communal violence. However, because of our religious traditions and philosophies as well as the fact that most of the rural

population of India lives in the pre-Enlightenment, or prerationalistic world, it is not yet possible to have a complete separation of religion and politics.

Hence the country has adopted the "accomodative" definition of *sarva dharma samabhava* (equal respect for all religions). However, it has not lessened the communal conflicts since Independence. If anything the conflicts have increased and have become more vicious and brutal. In spite of this kind of secularism, various Governments have not hesitated to play politics with such volatile issues as the Shah Bano case, the Babri Masjid dispute in Ayodhya or the more recent attacks by the VHP/RSS against the Christians. All in the country are aware of the terrible consequences of such manipulation of religious issues to get short-term political gains. Therefore, evidence seems to indicate that this brand of secularism has not worked for India.

The following may be some of the reasons for such a failure. First, it seems that the kind of tolerance proposed in the formula of "equal respect for all religions" is a sort of graveyard tolerance. Religions merely co-exist side by side; no effort is made for one tradition to enrich or interact with the other. In fact, boundaries between different religions are clearly delineated and followers are generally not encouraged to cross them.

Second, underlying the concept of Indian secularism is the hidden assumption that all religions are one, and, therefore, they deserve "equal respect." The stress here seems to be on a certain sense of uniformity among religions. The reality is that not only are religions radically different from each other but the followers are strongly committed to maintaining such differences.

Third, the term "equal respect" is deceptive since a "majority religion," like Hinduism in India, is bound to feel "more equal" than the "minority religions". The sheer numbers of the followers of a majority religion give them a psychological feeling of dominance over other religions. In such an unequal demographic environment to speak of "equal respect" is rather utopian. Typically, the majority will decide how much is "equal" and in what circumstances this "equality" is to be manifested.

Given these constraints about Indian secularism, it is not surprising that communal peace has proved elusive in spite of the constant reminders that the Constitution respects all religions equally. Indian secularism, the usually proposed antidote to communalism, seems to have failed to check the growth of communalism.[13]

III. A Multireligious Identity for India

What might be an alternate response to communalism? Given the intertwining of different religious traditions in one's social life and the importance Indians attach to religious identities, a commitment to a multireligious identity rather than to secularism seems a preferable antidote to communalism.

Religious pluralism is a living reality in India. For centuries now the people have evolved strategies and skills to cope with and appreciate the

religious and cultural differences among fellow Indians. By religious pluralism is meant a basic openness and an appreciation that religious traditions other than one's own go into the make-up of a multicultural Indian identity; also, a willingness not only to teach but to learn from others because in pluralism it is assumed that "there is no one and only way"[14] to the Ultimate.

Though the history of India is also dotted with wars of religious intolerance, one cannot deny that the Indian civilization has by and large been open to new peoples, cultures and religions. We have a tradition of active tolerance. In fact, the majority Hindu religion has frequently adopted customs, festivals, language, etc., of some minority religions and vice versa; this confirms empirically the history of mutual enrichment and cultural assimilation, in other words, the experience of pluralism.

It would, therefore, seem logical and eminently practical to strengthen and build a multi-religious identity, based on this tradition of pluralism and active tolerance. Such an identity, with its indigenous roots, would serve as a more fitting antidote to the fundamentalistic identities nurtured by communalism

From among the many steps one could take in building such a multi-religious identity, I will focus on three. First, to acknowledge in the Constitution that India is a multi-religious nation. As such, the cultural and psychic make-up of an Indian is to be built on the ground reality of diversity and religious pluralism. Second, one has to affirm and cherish this religiocultural

pluralism and discover in it the richness and heterogeneity of one's traditions. Third, to accept that all religious traditions are interdependent; every tradition needs the other tradition in order to proclaim its uniqueness from as well as its similarity to contemporary traditions. In other words, every tradition is dependent on the other and has something to learn from it.

Concluding Remarks

This analysis indicates that for India the concept of a multireligious national identity has more to offer than the concept of a secular identity; that perhaps designating India as a multireligious nation is more appropriate than calling it a "secular" nation. Further, while the concept of secularism is alien to Indians, the experience of religious pluralism and multicultural tolerance has had a long standing tradition of several centuries. In this sense, comparatively, the concept of secularism is rather spiritless.

An attitude of religious pluralism will also influence the formation of communal identity; such an idenity will no longer be exclusive but will acknowledge and appreciate other communal identities as well. In other words, communal identity takes on a pluralistic flavour; one's communal identity shapes itself in an interactive context with other communal identities. Thus, the religious pluralism of the nation should be as much treasured as its ethnic diversity.

An affirmation of pluralism encourages a kind of "active tolerance,"

whereby religions actively seek out what is common as well as accept that which is different. Differences are to be celebrated and not glossed over or sought to be homogenized. Further, the acceptance of differences leads to a psychologically less defensive posture vis-a-vis other religious traditions. It also tends to permit timely correction and a more empathic reinterpretation of negative stereotypes and prejudices against outgroups, as discussed earlier. Such a psychological process is bound to reduce communal tensions between groups.

Finally, a pluralistic communal-identity also contributes to a healthier national identity. When one's communal identity is secure and not threatened one becomes more tolerant. A secure identity does not feel threatened by diversity. In fact, in this context, diversity and pluralism could become the sources of unity and communal harmony in a multi-religious India.

Notes

* Portions of this article were presented by the author as the "Menezes Bragança Memorial Lecture" in Goa.

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