



Pappu Giri

## The Communitarian Consciousness: A Concept in Interpretation to Nationalism

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, D. A. V. Postgraduate College, Azamgarh (U.P.), India

Received-02.01.2024, Revised-07.01.2024, Accepted-13.01.2024 E-mail: amitsinghsy@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The emergence of nationalism in India brought simultaneously the construction of communities on the basis of religion. It is also interesting to note that the historiography of this phase of Indian history takes extremely divergent positions on this issue deeply influenced as they are by different ideological positions or visions of India's future. We have to understand the differences in these approaches keeping in mind the importance they attached to the categories of 'community' and 'nation' as factors in the historical development of society and the form of interaction between the two visualised by them. borrowed by communal historians.*

**Key Words:** emergence of nationalism, simultaneously, construction of communities, interesting, ideological positions.

The British officials and colonial historians believed that Indian society was divided into primordial communities and were antagonistic to each other, a concept, they used for dismissing the idea of a unified nation as a myth. In their view, this peculiar character of the Indian society accordingly made the emergence of nation in the western sense of the term virtually impossible here. To them in the literary sense there was no concept of nation developed in India. Furthermore, such a conception of primordial communities did not permit any growth or development in the form and content of communities, and they continued to be visualised as static entities. These historians maintained that the community itself under modern conditions of polity assumes the character and role of a nation. They failed to interpret the concept of modernity in context to India as compared to the western concept of nationalism.

In the writings of nationalist historians and thinkers, the nation is visualized as a primary mode of assertion of anti-colonial struggle by the Indian people, and the communities are viewed as sectarian organised people of the land which should become subordinate or completely outmoded with the emergence of the nation. In the thinking of many nationalist writers, the religion-based communities and the nation are antipodal to each other. Some of these thinkers and historians did not evince a sufficient recognition of the fact that in the initial stages the formation of communities based on religious identities had also subsumed anti-colonial aspirations and needs of the Indian people. Because their understanding of religious communities as a distinct factor in India was unconsciously influenced to a considerable extent by the abstract and inadequate, understanding of Indian history propagated by Orientalist historiography, they tended to have a simplified view of the complex and contradictory role played by these new social formations which had emerged during the nineteenth century. Jawaharlal Nehru, for instance, was firmly of the view that religious communities represented only reactionary form of politics and obstructed the growth of anti-imperialist struggle. Bipan Chandra has also argued on similar lines in a more sophisticated language of a professional historian. The community consciousness, according to him, being false and illusory had to be broken and transcended. On the other hand, he argues, it was the ideology of nationalism which reflected the real interests of the Indian people in a united manner against the colonial rule.

As it has already been pointed out earlier, the religion-based communities of the nineteenth century were not primordial or immutable entities inherited from the past. Instead, these newly constructed collectivities were rooted in contemporary needs and aspirations of a distinctive sections of society which had gained buoyancy and prominence under the colonial set up. There was a potential contradiction in the very structuring of the communities which would show up at a particular juncture in the later development of community consciousness. The consciousness associated with these religion-based communities as also their role as distinctive social formations underwent some significant changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These changes can be understood by relating them among other things to the policies and strategies followed by the colonial rulers for maintaining hegemony and control the quantitative changes and qualitative transformation in the anti-colonial struggle. In the first phase of their existence the primary emphasis in the community-consciousness was on the definition of sectarian identity rooted in a desire on the part of those belonging to the new middle classes to demarcate themselves from the alien rulers and also from those sections of Indian society who shared the religious faith of the elite but did not share the aspirations of the specific types. In the second phase, the community consciousness acquired a pronounced political dimension and played a significant role in wresting concessions from the colonial state primarily for the middle-class members of the community. In this phase modern India of wresting concessions the sectarian



character of the religious community was considerably toned down to include more and more aspirants from the middle classes belonging to the same religious persuasion. This became unavoidable on account of the logic of numbers for exerting pressure on the government.

Another mutation in the communitarian consciousness occurred after the anti-imperialist struggle had grown to a new intensity and volume in the early twentieth century. The communitarian elite in different communities responded to forces of Indian nationalism in two divergent ways. A section of the elite for whom wresting concessions was more important than anti-colonial resistance started moving towards a position of collaboration with the colonial state. But the other section of the elite which inspired by a long-term vision of Independent India took part in the national struggle without completely giving up the perspective of short-term gains in the civil society. These latter sections of elite evolved a consciousness of communitarian nationalism positing active cooperation among different communities in their common struggle against the colonial rule, and emphasizing the need for building up a unified nation as a collaborative formation among the distinctive religious communities. This perception was fully developed by Mahatma Gandhi as he actively tried to achieve effective linkage between communitarian loyalties and the commitment to a larger collectivity of nation. The communitarian-nationalism arising out of communitarian-consciousness at this juncture actually held a dominant position in the nationalist discourse since Mahatma Gandhi firmly believed that it alone could sustain and strengthen the roots of anti-imperialist struggle in India. He strongly felt that this perspective being close to the thinking of common people would be quite successful in mobilising the Hindus and Muslims against the British rule. Communitarian-nationalist perspective, in fact, drew strength from the rich syncretic traditions which the people in their day-to-day experience had evolved over the centuries from local ties of amity, collaboration, cooperation and friendship which they developed as members of localized communities confronting common problems, difficulties and challenges including resistance against the forces of oppression. Communitarian-nationalism, however, did not mean 'federation of communities' with different communities as political constituents; instead it meant confluence of different communities in the nation as number of streams.

During this phase when anti-imperialist struggle gained strength and nationalism became a cultural dominant community consciousness in respect of different religions, developed into communitarian nationalism on the one hand, and on the other took a turn and assumed a disturbing form in which political phenomenon of communalism both as an ideology and, practice took its birth. Bipan Chandra has discussed communalism as an ideology which according to him emerged in the late nineteenth century as a counter-polarity to nationalism." In this context, as pointed out earlier, he maintains that while nationalism truly reflected the urges and aspirations of the Indian people belonging to different regions, classes and groups, communalism being a false consciousness instead of furthering the real interests and concerns of the groups which defined themselves as religious communities merely gave them an illusory sense of fulfilment. This characterisation of communalism brings out a basic aspect of the phenomenon in the pre-independence period particularly its character as an instrument in the hands of colonial rulers to weaken the challenge of the national liberation movement and a potent weapon used by the economically dominant classes to dupe and exploit the common masses in the pursuit of their own reactionary policies. This conceptual framework, however, can give us only a partial understanding of the phenomenon of communalism in India. Communalism is definitely an ideology but it also covers at the same time specific practices on the ground which do not have a set form and considerably vary from time to time at different places. Actually, the meaning of communalism includes not only violent hatred and mistrust against the believers of other faith but also visualisation of a religious community as a 'nation'. On account of the latter feature communalism even though like communitarian nationalism grows out of the communitarian consciousness of the religious communities which emerged in the nineteenth century remains essentially opposed to communitarian nationalism in its overall character. Admittedly, a section of believers of communitarian nationalism could slide into a communalistic perspective in the slackened phase of anti-imperialist struggle. In the case of Hindus, there are number of instances both in Punjab and other provinces where persons having communitarian nationalist framework and the communal chauvinists joined against the Muslims fearing their domination at social and political levels. This tendency of close collaboration and unity between the two against the Muslims became quite strong when the demand of separate state was raised by the Muslim League in 1940.

The Radcliff Award brought innumerable sufferings to the people of Punjab and Bengal. To the people of Punjab and Bengal through the maligned colonial motif bringing unimaginable human sufferings and large-scale migration could only bring separate territorial identities. There was nothing to be described as Muslim nationalism as there was no impact on homogeneous community on 35 millions of them preferred to stay back in India. The accentuation of communal divide emerged under a colonial setup in all communities- Muslim, Hindu and Sikh, shaped by the pressure of economic interest on



well as short term religious objection and social aspirations.

The nationalism which emerged in India as an ideology of anti- imperialist struggle against the colonial rule acquired a revivalist dimension because of the need to contest the hegemony of the colonial rulers at the level of culture. A number of Indian historians convincingly shown that the formation of distinct communities based on religion was a recent historical phenomenon and such communities were actually constructed in India during the nineteenth century. Benedict Anderson in his study of origin and spread of nationalism has observed all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even line) are imagined.

The process of constructing trans-territorial communities on the basis of religious identity began under the new conditions created by the colonial rule. The primary factor behind the emergence of idea of a nation and the ideology of nationalism in India is resistance to and struggle against the colonial rule in the country. Bipin Chandra rightly hold that nationalism in India was basically the product of the central or primary contradiction of colonial India. The contradiction between colonialism and the interests of the Indian people. The Swadeshi movement was Swadeshi to all the communities and creeds irrespective of sectarian groups, caste and religion of Indian people.

Since early 1930s Jawaharlal Nehru and some other radicals while recognising the distinction between communitarian-nationalists and communal chauvinists intended to carry national struggle on the basis of scientific secularism and were not prepared to accord cognizance to the communities based on religion in any manner." It was in pursuance of this programme that Jawaharlal Nehru launched a Muslim mass contact programme in 1937 under the leadership of a communist leader K.M. Ashraf on the basis of a radical economic programme. But this programme failed to evoke a favourable response." In 1938, the Congress also took a major decision of not allowing the persons associated with communal organizations such as the Hindu Mahasabha or Muslim League to become its members. Despite this ban, some Hindu Mahasabhaites continued to remain associated with the Congress at the local levels. In the Muslim majority provinces of Bengal and Punjab in particular, the ideology and the programme of secular nationalism did not receive widespread response. For this, two specific reasons could be mentioned here. First, the experience of working of dyarchy and provincial autonomy in the provinces convinced a large section of urban Hindus that the continuation of Muslim majority in the Legislative Council was detrimental to their interests and there- fore needed to be resisted at any cost. Secondly, their fears of Muslim domination were further increased when the demand of separate Muslim state envisaged the inclusion of Muslim majority provinces of the Punjab and Bengal in it. This preponderant position of the Hindus was resented by Muslims who formed a majority, constituting about 54 per cent of the total population of Punjab in early twentieth century. A large number of them lived in rural areas in the north-west of Punjab. In this region, a small section of Muslims were big landlords possessing large landholdings. But majority of them were either small peasants or tenants. On account of these demographic peculiarities, the tension between peasants and moneylenders could easily be given a communal complexion wherever the peasant was a Muslim and the moneylender a Hindu." The Muslims living in the towns and cities mostly worked as artisans, and remained poor. The rate of growth in education among the Muslims was slow and only a few could afford new education. As a result, barely a small section of Muslims could find a place for themselves in government jobs or in other middle-class professions. It was this educated section of Muslims which envied the dominant position of Hindu middle classes in government jobs and educational institutions. Competition for jobs often caused antagonism between the Hindus and Muslims. When the Hunter Commission was appointed in 1881 to recommend the language for public services and secondary education, the educated Middle-class Hindus, including Arya Samajists, Brahma Samajists and Sanatan Dharmis, pleaded that Hindi in Devnagari script should replace Urdu as the official vernacular language in Punjab. The educated middle-class elements among the Muslims on the other hand formed Anjuman-i Himayat-i-Urdu to campaign for the defence of Urdu. They argued that a shift to Hindi would give an additional advantage to the Hindus in jobs. In other words, the issue of vernacular language was perceived in communal terms as the Muslims were identifying themselves with Urdu, and Hindus with Hindi. Again, when the Aitchison Commission came to Punjab in 1886 to enquire into the issue of employment of Indians in provincial services, the educated Muslims spoke against the preponderance of Hindu middle classes in services, while the latter strongly countered the move through meetings, tracts and petitions. At the same time, the Muslim organizations made representations to the government seeking reservation of certain higher posts for the Muslims on the plea that the Hindus controlled all avenues of advancement and deliberately kept the Muslim candidates out. James Lyall, the Lt. Governor of Punjab (1887-1892), finally accepted this demand and decided to follow a policy of favouring the qualified Muslim candidates until their ratio in government services bore some relations to their numerical proportions among the upper and middle classes of the population." Initially, the government kept its decision secret but in 1904 the new policy was made public which certainly caused resentment among the educated Hindu



middle classes in the Punjab. The advancement of sections with its demand, meant for the colonialist, an opportunity to divide and rule, unknowingly creating even a stronger bond between the sections of the people of the land. The phases of the Quit India movement are all evident in the chapters of history.

#### REFERENCES

1. Bipan Chandra, Communalism in Modern India, New Delhi, 1984.
2. Ravindra Kumar contends that Gandhi clearly understood that the Indian society was a 'loose constellation of classes and communities and regular groups' and on the basis of this understanding, he was able to 'superimpose over existing loyalties in India loyalty to the concept of nation'. Gandhi was successful in his objective because, according to Ravindra Kumar, the 'privileged communitarian at the cost of class identities leading to a situation wherein a heightened consciousness of distinctive religious identities became an integral part of the political scene'.
3. Barrier, 'The Punjab Politics and the Disturbance of 1907' Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 1966, (Microfilm at Nehru Museum Library, New Delhi),
4. Gopal Krishna, 'The Development of Indian National Congress as a Mass Organisation' Journal of Asian Studies, XXV, 3, May, 1966.
5. Mushirul Hasan (1994): Francis Robinson, Separatism Among Indian Muslims, Cambridge, 1975.
6. K. L. Tuteja, 'Hindu Consciousness, Communalism And the Congress In Pre-Partition Punjab', Sectional President's Address, Proceeding of Indian History Congress, 58 Session, 1997,
7. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1870, Cambridge, 1990.
8. Bipan Chandra, 'The Long - Term Dynamics of Indian National Movement' General Presidential Address, Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Amritsar Session, 1985.
9. Barrier, 'Punjab Politics and the Disturbances of 1907'; Peter Hardy, The Muslims in British India, Cambridge, 1972.
10. Paul Brass, Language, Religion and Politics in India, Pakistan and Burma, London, 1954.
11. In the lecture on 'Hindu Nationalism', Lajpat Rai said: 'In the present struggle between Indian communities, I will be Hindu first and Indian afterwards, but outside India or even in India as against the non-Indians, I am and shall be an Indian first and Hindu afterwards', Home Political B, November 1909, File No. 32-41, NAI.
12. Asim Roy, The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal, Princeton, 1983.

\*\*\*\*\*