



Ideological Foundation of Hindu Communalism in India

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India has witnessed a steady rise of the ultra-right-wing Hindu communal forces, from the last decade of the 20th century. The Hindu majoritarian agenda of communal polarization in India has been gaining ground, as many would suggest, ever since the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, a notorious incident that all of a sudden brought the communal discourse in the public sphere. But it would be fraudulent to suggest/identify late 20th century as the beginning point of communal politics in India. The emergence of majoritarian communal politics dates back to the colonial past of India, as is well known to the student of Indian history. But there is no denying that the assault on the core ideas of secularism, as enshrined in the Constitution, has become imminent only in recent times. The old-style secular form of nationalism is being replaced by a fanatic brand of Hindu nationalism. The kernel of rationality has come in sharp contradiction with the rising rhetoric of populist politics. The culture of intolerance, perhaps as an indication of assault on reason, is unmistakable in different spheres of life. In many cases, majoritarian agenda of communal polarization and the direct involvement of the state machinery have yielded in communal violence and riots, physical and ideological attacks on minorities, Dalits and rationalist etc. At the root of the immediate violent assertion of communal politics, as India has witnessed at the turn of the century, rests a philosophical and ideological foundation. The paper here seeks to unveil, in broad strokes, the ideological basis for the growth of Hindu communal politics across the country.

Communalism as Ideology

There is no denying the fact that the communal violence has been growing across the country at an alarming rate. Commenting upon the communal and ethnic violence in India, the Amnesty International noted:

“Scores of hate crimes against Muslims and other religious groups, ethnic groups, including Dalits and Adivasi (an indigenous tribal people), as well as caste and gender-based crimes, took place across the country. Many were carried out by vigilante groups



and mobs. Violent attacks included mob “lynching.” (Everything you need to know about human rights in India, 2020)

What has been the sharpest weapon in the hands of the majoritarian communal forces to launch an offensive of this magnitude that claims lives of many individuals, bringing an utter sense of chaos and fear? In order to comprehend the secular rise of communal politics in the political and social discourse of the country, one needs to capture its ideological essence. It is in this context; one has to understand communalism as an ideology. Historian Bipan Chandra has noted that “society is communalized through ideas and not through the police or the bureaucracy.” (Chandra, 2008) The ideology of communalism, often penetrated through different forms, ranging from conventional educational curriculum to colloquial obscurantist discourse of everyday life, is deep and leaves a permanent wound in the mass psyche. The paper here seeks to discuss two such instruments that have provided the communal forces with a strong ideological foundation to carry out the agenda of communal polarization.

Writing History as Ideological Instrument: Case of Medieval Indian Historiography

Education is a crucial area to propagate the communal ideas, since communalism must be seen as an ideology. Communalism is spread on a mass scale through school curriculum, colleges etc. Fabrication of historical incidents is a good case in point. With reference to the growth of communalism and Hindu nationalism in recent times, one must look at the communal effort to tinker with history textbook at all levels of the curriculum and to promote an obscurantist, backward looking, dogmatic historiography, which turns out to be a helpful instrument in disseminating the ideology of communalism. A biased and non-scientific interpretation of past events and society is relayed to the common people in order to capture their imagination.

This section deals with the way a dogmatic and communal interpretation of Indian history help the demagogues of Hindu nationalism to promote the ideology of communalism across the society. A full-scale discussion on the communal interpretation of Indian history is beyond the scope of this paper. However, to drive the point home, I attempt to present the example of guileful manipulation of medieval Indian history by the Hindu communal forces to construct a fearful image of the



Muslim population of our own time. The obscurantist, dogmatic, fabricated and anti-scientific historiography of medieval India, in fact, has provided the philosophical foundation of spreading hatred against the Muslim population in present day India.

Construction of 'the inferior other' and instilling fear about this 'other', on the basis of a communal interpretation of history, are prerequisites for the majoritarian communal political ideologues to spread the politics of polarization. This was most tellingly illustrated in Hitler's Germany where National Socialist German Workers' Party could impregnate the common German minds with blatant communal ideology that included an ideological construction of 'the inferior other' as opposed to the 'superior' Christian German identity, a deep-rooted suspicion and a complete aversion towards 'the other', entailing an absolute demonization of the Jews race. (Basu, 2020) The ceaseless feeding of such an ideology, filled with hatred against the minorities, could also be witnessed in India. In the Indian context, the dominant discourse has been fairly successful in demonizing the Muslim community, perceived as an imagined threat to the future of Hindu existence. The image of Hindu victimhood vis-a-vis Muslim atrocities has been able to gain some formidable currency at least in the last few years. While the process of demonizing Muslim community has aggravated in recent years, but the objective condition behind creating a culture of Islamophobia was already present in the domain of popular culture, Bollywood film etc. The vilification of Muslims as traitors, terrorists etc. in the Indian popular cinema, as opposed to the image of righteous Hindu population, has yielded in constructing the image of a 'Muslim other'. (Pranav and Dhawan, 2020) There is no doubt that fundamentalist Hindu outfits have built upon this type of images to demonize Muslim identity. Thus, for instance, by efficaciously using different social media platforms, the majoritarian communal forces, especially after 2011 census, have been able to instill a fear about "growing Muslim population soon overtaking the further declining Hindu Population." Flooding of such content in the public domain turns out to be instrumental in furthering a sense of insecurity among the common Hindus. However, this communal narrative was challenged by many as to bring out the fact about the relative slowdown in Muslim growth rate. (Soz, 2016) In order to understand the core of Hindu communal politics, one has to ask the following question: How could Hindus, constituted over 80% of the population, be made to feel the fear of being dominated by Muslims? To understand this, one has to



look at the ideological foundation of such communal narratives. In this particular case of building a 'fearful' and 'inferior other' image of the contemporary Muslim population, the exponents of Hindu communal politics have increasingly resorted to an a-historical interpretation of the medieval Indian history.

Taking thread of the instances of vilification of the Muslim 'other', as mentioned above, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that the colloquial narrative has drawn on exclusively from an obscurantist and communal historiography of medieval India, usually taught at the school level curriculum. In other words, more than popular culture, writing history became a terrain through which the Hindu communal forces have been able to construct a general atmosphere of Islamophobia in the country. For a basic understanding, we look at the central point that this fundamentalist historiography attempts to preach about medieval India. Following the historiography of colonial historians, the religion of the rulers became the basis for periodization of Indian history for the communal ideologues. In fact, James Mill first divided the history of India into Hindu period, Muslim period and British period. Based on a sheer misrepresentation of historical evidence, nullifying the objective social and economic conditions, the communal demagogues identified medieval India as 'Muslim India'. In this interpretation, the medieval period, also called as 'dark age' (marked by the "decline of glorious Hindu culture"), was characterized as one long story of Hindu-Muslim conflict where Muslims were perceived as tyrant foreign invaders and Hindus were, by and large, seen at the receiving end of the Muslim oppression. I do not see the need to get into the details of these arguments, as many historians have already, in recent past, exposed the hollowness of these claims. It is interesting to note that all these claims have drawn from some obscure and most of the time fabricated 'evidence', thus, abandoning the rigour and the scientific approach of the discipline itself. However, the objective behind presenting such myths in the name of history is to build a perpetually tyrannical, inferior image of the invading Muslim population and consequently to capture the imagination of the majority to revive a glorious Hindu past. In other words, to create a Muslim 'other', to assert Hindu supremacy over other religions and to construct a fear psychosis about Muslim culture among the common Hindus in contemporary Indian society, the Hindu communalists have turned their attention to present a distorted and a dogmatic version medieval Indian history.



The communal forces in the country choose to impregnate the tender minds with hatred about non-Hindu communities, the ideological foundation of which resides in a fabricated representation of Indian historical events. It is in this context that one should view the fictionalization of history textbooks at the school level curriculum. A study in the post-Gujarat genocide has pointed out that it was the poisoning of the minds of the school children, which had been going on for more than two decades, made it possible for the communal forces to launch one of the largest offensives against the Muslims (Mukherjee, Mukherjee and Mahajan, 2008). In short, it could be argued that the construction of such curriculum at the school level creates a premise for the Hindu communal forces to build an anti-Muslim consensus. This is where writing history becomes an important area of struggle to combat communalism as an ideology, as propagated by the ideologues of ultra-right-wing Hindu communal forces.

Anti-modern Ideology: Assault on Science

Apart from the fabrication of history, assault on science and scientific values constitutes yet another ideological instrument in the hands of the communal forces. The relentless promotion of obscurantist communal ideas, in any society, is always accompanied by an absolute rejection of modernist ethos such as scientific values, rationality and reason. It is a fact that the space for scientific ideals, spirit of inquiry and scientific temper has been shrinking in India. It is of no surprise that people in public positions have made absurd a-historical claims relating to modern science. The proponents of Hindu communalism have taken conscious effort to pose an alternative view of modernity. It is being done by embracing modern technology on one hand, and by rejecting reason, the idea of progress and the very ethos of modern enlightenment, on the other. In this context, one could note the idea of reactionary modernism, a concept developed by Jeffrey Herf. He pointed out the paradoxical nature of modernity in Nazi Germany, which was characterized by a curious mixture between the enormous development of modern science and technology, on one hand and shrinking of all progressive, modern, logical values, on the other. (Herf, 1985). Such a reactionary view of modernism has found its resonance in contemporary Indian society. The contradiction between technological progress (however little advancement that we have made) and whole-scale negation of reason, logic, scientific values, spirit



of inquiry, rationality etc. is obviously apparent in present-day India (we will return to this point later).

How do the communal ideologues view modern science? It is interesting here to note that the ideologues of Hindu communalism do not reject modern science. But their engagement with modern science is essentially defined by an attempt to explain/justify modern scientific ideas in the light of Hindu epistemology. The paradox is unmistakable in the incessant assertion that modern scientific achievements/discoveries were already foretold in different Hindu scriptures. Thus, for instance, after Pokhran in 1998, the leaders of different Hindu religious organizations proclaimed that the idea of nuclear bomb was embedded in *Gita*. In a ceaseless fashion, the propaganda machinery seems to claim that the Hindu ancient scripture continues to be the source of all knowledge about the material world (such as the knowledge of complicated plastic surgery, aircraft technology, stem cell technology and the internet etc.) and the modern science (primarily developed in the West) seems to have appropriated that without any due acknowledgment. Propaganda of this nature could be viewed purely as a political ambition of the Hindu communalists to appropriate modern science in the language of Hinduism and thereby to claim the superiority of the ancient Hindu tradition (Nanda, 2006).

The uncritical eulogizing of the scientific achievements of the past is actually a part of a larger political goal to attack science and scientific values. In this connection, it must be admitted that the ongoing assaults on rationality and on scientific temper must not be seen as isolated incidents. In reality, it is organically connected with the political ideology of communalism. Here science must be appreciated in the broadest possible way. In apparent terms, science is the study of the Natural world. However, one has to go well beyond this functional definition of science. Reading of science entails a scientific understanding of the material forces that shape our society. At the same time, the objective condition of social forces, in any particular society, shapes our scientific understanding of the material world itself. (MR Online, Marxism and philosophy of science, 2019) Thus, science and society are interconnected with each other. While the evolution of society depends on the level of its scientific



development, the growth of science reciprocally rests on the historical specificity of a particular society. Let us discuss these two points separately.

Advancement in science entails a material progress of any society, since every development of science lead to a better understanding of the material forces (and consequently our ability to alter it). Furtherance of science also results in an ideological progress since teaching of science has historically influenced people to ask questions, to accept logical ideas and to reject clichéd non-scientific opinion. These abilities to ask question, pursue inquiry and judge something on the basis of logic/rational thinking seem to infiltrate into our understanding of the social world. The logical thinking, with special reference to both the Natural and Social world, leads to the emergence of a progressive modern worldview, based on rationality and reason. It is of little surprise, therefore, that a blatant onslaught on science, as we have seen in India, in other words, entails a reactionary, anti-progressive and an anti-modern worldview, devoid of logic and spirit of inquiry, rational thinking etc., which further help the communal forces to polarize society. Thus, an onslaught on science creates an objective condition for irrationality, an ideological obligation to polarize society on the basis of religion.

Inversely, growth of science in any society also depends on the development of its social forces. A modern and progressive society creates an objective condition for science to develop at a much faster rate than that of a traditional and orthodox society (this is tellingly illustrated from the fact that modern science was developed in advanced capitalist countries and not anywhere else). Consequently, the anti-modern worldview, propagated by the ideologues of Hindu communalism, has resulted in a depressing condition of science. Surfacing of different pseudo-scientific ideas, in the recent times, is but an agonizing consequence of the retrograde direction of science itself in India. (See, for instance, Kumar, 2020) Thus, for instance, one could recall the instance when the call to clang utensils to appreciate doctors and medical stuff in the middle of a pandemic was interpreted as a ‘scientific’ method to disinfect the air by some “antiviral positive vibration”. On yet another instance, drinking of cow-urine as a ‘medicine’ against COVID 19 was reported in the early days of the pandemic. These pseudo-scientific ideas have made a complete mockery of science. The dismal condition



of science is coupled with a continuous fund cut in science research. We have seen a dip in investment in science and technology in the recent years. India's expenditure on R&D remains abysmally low (only 0.69% of GDP). One report seems to suggest that an increasing number of research proposals are being turned down by India's science funding agencies. In some cases, scientists even find it difficult to continue with the current projects. (Jayaraman and Priyadarshini, 2018) The mushrooming of pseudo-scientific ideas and a cut in the allocation of science funding are the dreadful consequences of an anti-modern, obscurantist ideology, which further entails breeding of irrationality, a prerequisite for the Hindutwa ideologues to pursue the agenda of communal polarization in the country.

Concluding Remarks

The growth of Hindu communalism in India is not a random phenomenon. Communalism must be understood as an ideology, which spreads through ideas. Drawing on the available evidence, it could be argued that communalism has a deep philosophical and ideological foundation. In order to propagate the agenda of communal polarization, the exponents of communal politics essentially rely on presenting an obscurantist past, as we have discussed in the paper. On the other hand, assaults on science and scientific values, as witnessed in recent times, have given way to a culture of irrationality. Subsequently, anti-modern worldview of communal forces discourages the spirit of inquiry, scientific temper and logical reasoning etc. In the process, science and scientific research seem to have taken a back seat. This enduring attack on science is nothing but a concentrated ideological attempt to create a communally polarized society, devoid of logic and reasoning. Thus, an assault on history and science provides the communal forces with an ideological weapon to subtly construct a setting that justifies propagation of communal ideas in India.