
UNIT 12 COMMUNALISM*

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit you should be able to understand:

- Describe fundamentalism
- Explain communalism with the help of relevant examples
- Identify the characteristics of communalism
- Clarify what is secularism and how it works in India.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we begin by clarifying the basic concepts of fundamentalism, communalism and secularism. We then explain each of these basic concepts and expand on them. We take up first the concept of fundamentalism and describe it. Next we turn to communalism and note down the reasons for communal riots and examine their economic and social dimensions. This is followed by an analysis of inter-community dynamics.

Finally we turn to secularism which is seen, in some ways, as a panacea to fundamentalism and communalism. We examine some different views on secularism, including Gandhiji's viewpoint.

12.2 BASIC CONCEPTS

Let us put forth the basic concepts of our unit first.

*Adapted from ESO 15, Unit: 32.

12.2.1 Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is the first of our three concepts and it stresses the infallibility of a scripture (e.g. the Bible, the Granths, the Gita or the Quran) in all matters of faith and doctrine. The believers accept it as a literal historical record. The result is that a militant stand is taken by the followers; often preceded or followed by a desire for a separate homeland. At times, this too is taken as a prophecy in the scriptures. Fundamentalism thus separates a certain community from the mainstream. However, society, by its various arms (the police, army and so on), attempts to suppress or eliminate the fundamentalists. This is especially so when they begin acting outside of the law. Communalism is associated with eruption of violence and riots, these conflagrations may not have any particular aim or goal (apart from communal ascendancy or supremacy). Fundamentalism, however, is an organized, all encompassing movement which aims at promotion of societal goals specifically in the light of religious enshrinements. Its operational strategy includes peaceful as well as war-like uses and movements.

12.2.2 Communalism

While discussing the nature of politics in the new states of Africa and Asia, Clifford Geertz, an American anthropologist (1963 : 105-157), wrote, “When we speak of communalism in India we refer to religious contrasts, when we speak of it in Malaya we are mainly concerned with racial ones, and in the Congo with tribal ones”. Here the significant link is between communal and political loyalties. Thus when we talk of India we are talking mainly of religion based oppositions. Communalism has been described as a sectarian exploitation of social traditions as a medium of political mobilization. This is done to punish the interests of the entrenched groups. Thus communalism is an ideology used to fulfill socio-eco-politico hopes of a community or social group. It requires proposals and programmes to ensure its very existence. These become active in phases of social change. Communalism arose in India during its colonial phase. Communal politics bases its strategies on religion and tradition. The interpretation of history is for purposes of mobilisation. Communal organisations have little room for democracy. Secondly they may also involve racist contrasts and perpetrate the same. They consider egalitarianism as abnormal and support patriarchy as a familial and social norm. Communalism is therefore a

- i) belief system
- ii) social phenomenon.

Communalism arises out of a belief system, and assumes great solidarity within a community which is not always true. We find that there are often intercommunity quarrels. Further, the protagonists of communalism hold a particular view of history and take care to point out that a community has been identified with common sufferings and goals as a whole, lack exclusiveness of the community is stressed vis a vis other communities, and it is therefore considered logical to fight for one's rights in a literal way.

Communalism in India has, as noted earlier, a colonial legacy wherein the rulers (Britishers) used religious contrasts, existing among the different communities to their advantage by giving them prominence.

After Independence, economic modernization of India expanded economic opportunities but not enough to curb unhealthy competitiveness. Job sharing among the different communities create smaller pool of opportunities in causing much heartburn. Independence from the colonial power unleashed a horrendous communal holocaust, caused by the partition of the country into two parts on the eve of Independence in 1947.

Characteristics of Communalism

- Communalism is an ideological concept. It is a complex phenomenon
- It has a broader base which encompasses social, economic and political aspects for its manifestation,
- It causes rivalry, violence and tension among masses,
- It is used by the higher-class people and elites as an instrument for division and exploitation of the communal identities of the poorer sections of their co-religionists
- Communalism .is simply engineered by opportunistic political and economic interest of contending groups and factions within a political party or by political parties.
- It strikes at the roots of democracy, secularism and national integration and its effects are disastrous.
- Incidents of “communal violence” cannot clearly be separated by incidents of terrorism. “Communal violence” tends to refer to mob killings, while terrorism describes concerted attacks by small groups of militants.

12.2.3 Secularism

The conceptual construct of secularism is adopted in India by way of a solution to the problems, posed by fundamentalism and communalism. Ideally speaking, it denotes a situation where there is a clear distinction of religion from such spheres of life as the political and economic. Each religion is to be respected and practised in private. In ideological terms it is not a system of beliefs and practices that is to be mixed with political ideology, with a view to wooing any particular community into the voting booth. By and large, secularism separates religion and polity. It endorses the view that there should be provided equal opportunities by the state to all the communities. Further, for secularists all religious beliefs are to be approached rationally and finally social life is to be approached in an equalitarian manner.

Further the term secularism refers to the ideas opposed to religious education. It has been linked to the process of secularization. This is the process by which various sectors of society are removed from the domination of religious symbols -and also the domination of religious institutions. Finally the idea of secularism has been transferred from ‘the dialectic of modern science and protestantism’ in the west to South Asian societies. This transference is full of problems and cannot be conceived in terms of a smooth process.

India cannot cease to be one nation, because people belonging to the different religions live in it ... If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland. The Hindus, the Mohammedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow-countrymen, and they will have to live in it only for their own interests. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India. — M.K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj (1908)

12.3 ASPECTS OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism as a concept was first used in 1910-1915 when anonymous authors published 12 volumes of literature and called them 'The Fundamentals'. In the early 1920s the print media used this word with reference to conservative protestant groups in North America. These groups were concerned about liberal interpretations of the Bible. Alarmed by this the conservatives insisted on some "fundamentals" of faith. These included belief in the virgin birth, divinity, the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ and the infallibility of the scripture. As mentioned above these and other fundamentals were published in 12 pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* between 1910-1915. Thus began the specialised usage of the concept of "fundamentalism". Thus a fundamental movement is one which takes infallibility of a scripture as a basic issue and as a guide to life. Some fundamentalists add that there is no need to even interpret the scripture as meaning in it is self-evident. *This often amounts to intolerance of any form of disagreement or dissent. Thus there is an apprehension that fundamentalists are narrow minded, and bigoted.*

T.N. Madan (1993) has pointed out that the word Fundamentalism has gained wide currency in the contemporary world. According to him it refers to a variety of norms, values, attitudes which either judge the fundamentalists or condemn them outright. This word is sometimes erroneously used in place of communalism. In fact the word fundamentalist has become a blanket term. That is to say that various fundamental movements across the world are actually not identical but differ in various ways. But they are linked by a 'family' resemblance. Fundamentalist movements are of a collective character. They are often led by charismatic leaders who are usually men.

The fundamentalists are a practical people and try to purge the way of life of all impurities (religiously speaking). Fundamental movements are not only about religious beliefs and practices, but lifestyles generally.

Thus fundamentalist movements are reactive and a response to what the persons involved—the leaders and participants, consider a crisis. The crisis calls for urgent remedies. The basic programme is presented as a return to the original tradition. That is to say to the contemporarily redefined fundamentals, which cover the present-day needs. This usually involves a selective retrieval of tradition. It may even be an invention of tradition.

In Iran Khomeini developed an Islamic state based on the guardianship of the jurists. Again Bhindranwale gave a selective emphasis to Guru Gobind Singh's

teaching rather than those of his immediate successors. Assertion of spiritual authority and criticising the culture are two aspects of fundamentalism. A third crucial element is that of the pursuit of political power.

The pursuit of political power is very important to fundamentalism, for without it we would be presented with a case for revivalism. This covers both cultural and political aspects of nationalism. This explains why fundamentalist movements often turn violent, and the ideology of secularism is rejected. They are totalitarian and do not tolerate dissent. However these movements also perform a particular role in modern society which cannot be ignored. Thus an objective intellectual analysis should consider fundamentalism as a distinctive category. It is not theocracy or backward communalism.

12.4 THE COMMUNAL DIVIDE

The misconceived ideology of communalism in India was, and still is, that the different communities in India cannot co-exist to their mutual benefit, that the minorities will become victims of Hindu subjugation and that neither the historically created situation nor culture will allow cooperation.

Communalism took deep roots in Indian polity during the later phase of the national movement and this was encouraged by the colonial rulers. This process was a continuation of the weakness and inadequacy of secularism as conceived and practised during the anti colonial struggle.

Implicit in all the theories has been the assumption that the growth of Hindu-Muslim tension was not the natural and inevitable outcome of changes taking place in the Indian society. Partition was the culmination of the conflict which could and should have been avoided. Further this line of reasoning states that nation building essentially means obliteration of communal moulds and creation of a common identity which decries the existence of differentiated groups based on religion, caste or language. Communal forces are therefore viewed as division and a sign of political underdevelopment. Communalism arises when one or two characteristics of an ethnic identity e.g. religious beliefs are taken and become emotionally surcharged. Communal movements are often brief and exist in a dyad, comprising an opposing force or ideology which has to be countered. Unlike fundamentalism, communalism can only exist dyadically.

Hindu-Muslim riots reflected the religious fears and socio-economic aspirations of the Hindus and Muslims. Sometimes these riots occur for very minor reasons such as quarrels between Muslim and Hindu shopkeepers (Ghosh, 1981: 93-94).

The important point is that these are not isolated acts but often deliberate mechanizations of various socio-religious organisations. Recurrent collisions were engineered on festivals by stopping them and various religious occasions by interfering in their process. This was done to inflame communal passions and bitterness. According to Ghosh (1981) the acme of communal rioting was reached in August 1946 in Calcutta when the Muslim League observed a 'Direct Action Day'. Bombay did the same in the following month. Thus Independence was erected on the corpses of many thousands of people. With Mahatma Gandhi's assassination the riots abated awhile, and this situation was basically sustained by Nehru. Again the passing away of Nehru in 1964 and the deteriorating socio-economic circumstances led to the resurrection of communal violence.

12.4.1 Recent Communal Riots

During the late 60s and 1970s there was large scale communal rioting in Ahmedabad, Baroda, Ranchi, Jamshedpur etc. Communal configurations in towns such as Ranchi cast a shadow over predictions and beliefs in the future of workers unity. Again in Bhiwandi where there was a carnage in 1969, it was a shock for the leftists. The grassroots movement among the handloom workers fostered by committed communists was unable to stem the on rush of communal violence.

In 1969 itself a communal riot occurred in Ahmedabad. The inflammatory factors were insults to holy scriptures and sacred cows. It was suspected however, that these riots were politically motivated.

These riots indicated clearly that there were various political factors behind the surface level factors of religion based tensions and confrontations. The first six years of the eighties once more created an upward incline in the) riot-graph. Patel (1990) feels that Communal violence is backed by religious arguments and backing. He feels that those resorting to it are neither true Hindus nor true Muslims. Religion does not preach enmity. However the causes which are often given for Communal violence are hurt religious sentiments. India has also witnessed the anti-sikh riots in Delhi in, 1984, Gujarat Riot 2002, Muzaffarnagar riot 2013, Delhi riot 2020. These are only a few to name.

12.4.2 Reasons for Communal Riots

In the context of our section on recent-communal riots we turn now to some further reasons for the same. As Ghosh (1981) points out, several arguments have been forwarded for the existence and continuation of communal riots. These are:

- i) riots are part of progress in an under developed country. The class struggle is converted into a communal struggle weakening the solidarity of the proletariat class. Further the middle and backward classes have acquired greater political and economic strength and influence and these often assert themselves. Economic conflicts lead to riots as in Bihar Sharif and Bhiwandi.
- ii) Electoral politics determine the objectives and direction of communal violence e.g. Delhi 1986.

These explanations cannot be binding—they cannot be held to be necessary and sufficient. Often economic reasons emerge after (not before) the rioting has begun. Again in a developing society economic factors where competition or one lagging behind the other can lead to a riot. The same applies to reductionist political causes. The idea of behind-the-scene political manipulation may not be valid.

What are the factors which can remedy the communal divide in India. Some suggestions have been given (Verma, 1990, 63-65). They include suggestions such as, religion should be separated from politics and communal bodies should be banned. Further the freedom of press should not extend to spreading communal ideas.

Communalism needs to be denounced by political leaders and all leading citizens. Measures should be taken for raising the economic lot of the minority community. Above all overall ethos should be created which leads to peace between communities and an end to communal violence. Community leaders should explain the situation to the community and defuse tensions. Let us now turn to secularism.

Thus communalism has an ugly aspect and goes against national integration. Religion should not become the whipping boy of political ambitions.

Check Your Progress 1

j) Give three reasons for communal rioting.

- a)
- b)
- c)

2) Fill in the blanks:

Hindu riots have in recent times been confined to towns.

12.5 ASPECTS OF SECULARISM

While fundamentalism and communalism are widely held to be problematic and disintegrative, the ideology of secularism is held to be a palliative solution to the above. Although there is no single definition of secularism which could be applied world-wide, yet it was first applied to separate the Church from the King. This was the political dimension. In the social sphere, 'secular' meant separating the stranglehold of religion over the individual's life. In the Indian context it proclaims the existence of spiritual values which can be stressed in a variety of ways. 'Secularism and Secularization' deals with this. Thus the word secularism has a variety of connotations in India. As Madan (ed. 1991 : 394-412) notes these dimensions are:

- i) the separation of state from religion.
- ii) equal and impartial treatment of all communities by the state.
- iii) approaching religious beliefs in a spirit of objective rationality.
- iv) ensuring a just standard of living for all people irrespective of community.

12.5.1 Secular Views

Through the judicious use of the philosophy of secularism, fundamentalism and communalism can be curbed. On combating fundamentalism and communalism through secularism there are three views that can be presented. These are:

- i) An ideological campaign against communalism can be waged to *decommunalize* people at all levels. The logic of this approach is that communalism will die out only if the communal ideology is removed.
- ii) Grassroots politics is another approach mooted for the eradication of communalism along with a democratic rights approach. That is to say

there has to be an awakening at the grassroots level. Secondly a new type of activity is required which is politically oriented but not the grassroots type. The problem however is that unless this grassroots approach has an All-India spread and a unity within it we do not find it likely to do well,

- iii) A major issue concerning fundamentalism, communalism and secularism is religion. How do we approach religion in a secular view ? Firstly we should not dismiss any religions or pronounce them to be false. Second we should try to locate the democratic and the secular in the social basis of religion. Thirdly the irrationalities of religion should be exposed and a rational approach taken.

As Madan (1983) explains India is defined as a secular republic in the Preamble to the Constitution. Secularism in India does not imply abolition of religion but the separation of state from religion. However the separation of politics from religion is not envisaged. The people are free to form religion based political parties. What then is secularism in a multi-religious society such as that which India represents?

That secularism can be defined in various ways has been pointed out earlier. However we can say now that secularism implies the separation of religion from state and its relegation to the sphere of personal belief and private commitment. It is important to point out at this stage that this description is not true of any society as this separation happens to be analytical rather than actual. As things stand there are some politics with an anti religious stance, others are natural towards religion. And finally there are those which follow a secularism which falls between these extremes.

How does the secular policy of India reflect in the pre and post-independent politics of India ? In the closing decades of the 19th century the “liberal-plural” theory was advanced by the moderate nationalists. *This approach believed that religion should not be mixed with politics. Its proper sphere was that of private belief.* This would preserve both religious sentiments and those towards the nation would remain intact. This theory demanded sophisticated understanding but the wider society could not grasp it. *This was replaced due to its obvious shortcomings by the “orthodox plural” theory of secular nationalism. This was forwarded by Gandhi. He picked up religion as basic to political action and national identity.*

12.5.2 Gandhiji’s Views

The ‘nation-to-be’, argued Gandhi, should draw from Hindu, Muslim, and all other communities. The idea was to draw popular symbols into the political mainstream creating a national identity. This ideology which was successful in political mobilization has certain problems so far as the post-independent 1947 era was concerned.

- i) Gandhi’s idea that religious cleavages which could be handled by using religious loyalties and thus lead to nationhood proved wrong. The idea of orthodox pluralism heightened rather than reduced the rift between different religious communities.

- ii) The ideologies drew the rich and powerful into the national struggle and ensured that they dominated post-independence India.
- iii) Another theory (the radical socialist) which gained some ground had the dream of a secular polity which reflected the dream of the poor masses, both in rural and urban areas. Religious loyalties were relegated away from national identity. National identity it was felt could only be based upon politics, which linked socio-economic facts with the reality of nationhood. Religion was to be a private thing and not to trade upon the domain of politics. This stance resembles the liberal plural theory of religion. However the radical socialists addressed themselves to the poor and attempted to bring about social redistribution of wealth.

This theory of radical socialist secular nationalism took the stage during the second quarter of the 20th century, but could not last much longer. Despite its poverty orientation and orientation toward equal redistribution of wealth, this theory failed in the light of Gandhian ideas.

Gandhi's orthodox plural theory of secular nationalism was popular due to various reasons:

- I) The strong religious feeling among different classes and communities. This Gandhi mobilized for creating a popular base to nationalism.
- II) Again while desiring to uplift the downtrodden, it did not deprive the rich, industrial, commercial classes of the control over social and economic power.

Box 12.2

Nehru wrote in 1961 that being Secular did not mean being opposed to religion. This he stated was not correct. What was true was the existence of a state which held all faiths in equal esteem and provided for them equal opportunities. He also added that this was not fully reflected in mass living and thinking (Gopal, 1980 p. 330).

This theory killed two birds with one stone: it mobilized mass support for nationhood; it also left alone the theory issue of capital and property. The rich felt that the theory did not nail them. At the same time Gandhi never stated that he wanted to sacrifice the interests of the poor to the greed of the rich. Thus we can say that in India the orthodox plural theory of secular nationalism on the one hand and communal tension on the other can provide us some insights into national integration. Thus theories of secular nationalism which are religion or community based cannot be healthy for the polity. However, the theories of secularism which distinguish between religion and politics are best for the field of politics. Such secular politics can use either the rich or the poor as a base for their activities.

Thus we see that education of the masses is the way to secularism. Being educated they would eschew all fundamental and communal paths and seek to achieve a truly democratic republic.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Mention two connotations of the word 'secular' in the Indian context.
 - a)
 - b)

2) What were Gandhiji’s views on secularism? Use 7-10 lines for your answer.

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12.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we began by explaining the basic concepts of fundamentalism, communalism and secularism. We then turned to an examination of communalism and secularism. The reason for communal riots and some of the inter-community dynamics were then laid bare. Finally we turned to secularism, examined its various Views, and also presented Gandhiji’s views on secularism. It was felt that secularism, in its true sense could counter fundamentalists and communalistic tendencies.

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12.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) Economic reasons
b) Political reasons
c) Sociological reasons.
- 2) *Muslim, Medium ,Sized.*

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) a) separation of state from religion.
b) equal and impartial treatment of all communities by the state.
- 2) Gandhiji felt that the nation-to-be should take ideas from all communities, not only from Hindus and Muslims. This idea was to draw symbols of religion into the political mainstream. This ideology however failed in post independent India and increased the rift between communities. Also the rich and powerful came into the national struggle and dominated post Independent-India.

GLOSSARY

Communalism: This is a situation wherein religion and religious communities view each other with hostility and antagonism. They may often come out in open conflict such as in communal riots.

Fundamentalism: This word stresses the infallibility of a scripture in matters of faith and doctrine. Certain groups take this to espouse a militant stance and claim sovereignty of a territory based on the same principles.

Secularism : This is the principle which believes that all matters of religious faith be separated from other fields of interaction economic, political, administrative and so on. In doing this it hopes to create a harmonious and integrated nation state.

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