Authors affiliation
Associate Professor and Head
Department of Political Science
Agra College, Dr BRA University,
Agra- 282002
Uttar Pradesh

Reprints requests
Arunoday Bajpai, 20, Huntley
House, Agra College, Agra (U.P.)
PIN-282010.
E-mail:
arunodaybajpai@gmail.com

Understanding Religious Identities and Public Sphere in India

Arunoday Bajpai

Abstract

The important role of religious identities in Indian political process is traced to the rise of nationalism through religious symbols, partition of the country and post-independence politico-religious mobilization. In the debate on religion-politics interface, the inner complexity of religious identities is largely ignored by scholars and the debate is focused on the secularism vs. communalism.

This paper departs from this tradition and proceeds on the assumptions: (a) that the articulation and expression of religious identities display marked difference among minorities and majority community, and (b) that the articulation and expression of identities is largely shaped by the perception of the socio-political crisis, and the objectives to be achieved. Hence, its political expression is not equally shared by and uniform among the members of same religious community.

These assumptions may be tested on the basis of categorization of religious identities into three ideal types: 1. Primordial Religious Identity, largely shaped by historical and cultural claims of religious primacy, irrespective of secular constitutional scheme. 2. Crisis-Generated Religious Identity, which emerges in response to a socio-political crisis and aims at certain higher national goals. The religious nationalism of 19th century and partition politics are the example of this identity. 3. Reactionary Religious Identity, which emerges as a reaction to the perceive fear of dominance of or discrimination by another community. Also, the one form of religious identity may be transformed into another form. Using this framework, this paper throws new light on the interface between religion and politics in India.

Introduction

India is the largest democracy in the world. In spite of many deviations, India has managed to sustain a democratic constitutional structure throughout the length and width of multi-cultural nation. Deviations are equally glaring. Indian constitution, framed in the wake of painful partition of the country on religious ground, abhors all forms ascribed distinctions and discriminations and implicitly recognizes every Indian as a citizen of India. Thus, constitution proceeds on the assumption that the individuals should leave behind their narrow identities and assume identity as citizens of Indian State. However, the major deviation of Indian democracy lies in the fact that it failed to evolve the identity of citizenship in public sphere. Narrow and ascribed identities of caste, religion, language or region dominate the interface between individual and public sphere. It is not to suggest that identity of individuals a citizen in not relevant in India. It is relevant, but largely confined to legal domain, when citizens are claiming rights against State or performing legal duties with respect to State. But legal domain is a small part of public sphere. Public sphere is distinct from and exclusive to private affair. It is a discursive space of social life in which individuals and groups

congregate to discuss matters of common interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment (Hauser: 86). In Indian democracy, the political process constitutes the major part of public sphere.

Besides being a functioning democracy, India is a multi-religious society. It is in this context that the question of religious identity and its role in the public sphere becomes relevant to functioning of public institutions and democracy in India. The question of religious identity is closely linked with the notion of secularism. Secularism is a European concept, which originated from the French word *'seculare'* meaning to 'keep apart' religion from politics or public sphere. It is a post-renaissance development in Europe. However, in view of an unequal size of religious communities in the multi-religious society of India, the idea of secularism was given a distinct connotation. The textbook meaning of Indian brand of secularism is 'equality of religions or *'Sarva Dharm Sambhava'*. However, in Indian public discourse and political process, the word 'secularism' has become a much abused term, with no consensus on its meaning and scope. Any action ranging from outright opposition to religious identity to active appeasement of religious communities may be justified as 'secular'. And whatever is not secular is assumed to be communal. This has crystallized as prototype debate on secularism Vs communalism in India, without due regard to the process of formation of religious identities and their complex interplay in the public sphere. The process of secularization is based on the gradual weakening of religious identities in the political process, but India presents a contrary experience. Religious identities, if anything, have become stronger over the period of time in the post-independent India.

Identity and Public Sphere

Identity refers to the self-identification of individuals and groups on the basis of certain social categories like religion, caste, language or similar other categories. According to Yamin (2008), 'Identity may be defined as one's consciousness of one's self and other's perception of one's individuality'. The identities of social groups or individuals are formed around an ensemble of certain definitional absolutes. These shared symbols may be those of religion, language, ethnicity, culture, sexual preferences, caste positions, religion, tribe, etc. According to William Conolly (2002: 64), 'An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies, themselves in need of exploration, to conceal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things. When these pressures prevail, the maintenance of one identity (or field of identities) involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates. Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.' Thus, identity, at the same time, emphasizes on the inclusive similarities within a group and the exclusive differences in relation to other groups.

Religious identities are formed around religious faith, symbols and practices, which are exclusive to certain groups or individuals. Recognition of such symbols and practices and their appropriation are the preconditions for the formation of religious identities. According to Anthony (2012: 01), 'religious identity refers to a religion's self-interpretation as recognized by a supportive audience'. Thus, we speak of a person's religious identity or a religious community's identity because of one's recognition and appropriation of religious concern. Certain beliefs and practices are deemed significant to the extent that one labels oneself as religious individual or community. The identification may be total but generally, identity is partial, contingent, temporary, relative or vague. The notion of recognition and appropriation reflects a dynamic process in which religious data in the form of rituals, values, norms, symbols and like are evaluated and related to concerns of everyday life. There they are 'believed' and 'practiced' as significant and insignificant ways of self-referral. Distinctions may depend upon the agent or the issue at stake. The agent may be a person, a group or an institution. Since religious faith and practices are primordial social categories, found in all societies, evolution and articulation of religious identities has been a pervasive phenomenon for ages. National or sub-national or group interests have been articulated and asserted the fulcrum of religious identities.

The role of identities in public sphere, whether based on religion or other social categories, takes the form of identity politics, which has emerged as the dominant feature of democratic process in India. Scholarly discourse on identity politics is relatively new development, which began to take shape in 1970s in the light of the emergence of large-scale political movements–second wave feminism, Black

Civil Rights in the U.S., gay and lesbian liberation, and the American Indian movements in USA. These social movements encouraged the emergence of a body of literature, which was mainly concerned with the nature, origin and futures of the identities being defended. Later the same analysis was deployed to capture the similar experience in other parts of the world. The identity politics is more pronounced in the liberal democratic process. However, Marxists abhor the notion of identity politics as it obscures the nature of capitalist exploitation in a society.

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2002), 'identity politics has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination'.

Thus, identity politics refers to *a wide range of political activities and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups.* Thus, politics of identity involves two components:

1. Its articulation in the form of distinct social formulation on the basis of shared symbols in the form of common culture, religion, language, ethnic background etc. and;

2. Its political expression takes various forms to make certain claims. Both the articulation and expression of identity is contingent on the specific socio-economic and political configuration of a given society.

The expression of identity politics signifies a body of political projects that attempts a recovery from perceived exclusion and denigration of groups hitherto marginalized on the basis of differences based on their shared symbols. In the process, identity politics attempts to attain recognition of social groups as well as their empowerment and representation. This is done by asserting the very same symbols that distinguished and differentiated them from the others and imparted a distinct identity to the concerned group. Thus identity politics may be viewed as an assertion of selfhood and identity based on *difference* rather than *equality*. Iris M. Young (1990) has described the process of identity formation and expression of identity politics as he suggests that identity politics as a mode of organizing is intimately

connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed; that is, that one's identity as a member of religious group, or as a woman, for example, makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism, violence, exploitation, marginalization, or powerlessness. Identity politics starts from analyses of oppression to recommend, variously, the reclaiming, re-description, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership. Rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one's own inferiority, one transforms one's own sense of self and community, often through consciousness-raising A related question is how identity politics should be viewed with respect to democracy as reactions to identity politics are articulated on the basis of perceptions formed about the relationship between the democracy and identity politics. A noted scholar K. N. Panikkar (2011) has discussed the rise of identity politics in South Asian nations and has concluded that identity politics is anti-democratic as it does not address the interests of collective, which goes by the name of community of caste or religion. This conclusion appears to be based on the very nature of identity formulation, which emphasizes on difference and selfhood rather than equality with others. However, this conclusion is one sided. In the long term perspective, the resort to identity politics is the natural outcome of multi-cultural society. In such societies, in the long run, the articulation and subsequent accommodation of the interests of various identity based groups is the precondition for the success and maturity of democracy.

Religious Communities of India

India is a multi religious society. As per the 2001 Census data, Hindus constitute 80.4 percent, Muslims 13.4 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, Buddhists 1.8 percent, Sikhs 0.77 percent, Jain 0.41 percent and others and animists constitute 0.72 percent of the total population. There is a noticeable variation in the proportion of different religious communities during the period 1961-2001. While the total percentage of Hindus and Christians have come down from 83.4 percent to 80.4 percent and from 2.4 to 2.3 percent respectively, the percentage of Muslims have gone up from 10.6 to 13.4 percent during the same period. Certain broad observations about India's religious communities are required to understand the process of identity formation.

1. The religious diversity of India is the result of mingling, evolution, incorporation of various

religious faiths and sects for thousands of years. The religions of India fall into two categories: indigenous and exogenous. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and various forms of animism and their sub-sects are indigenous religions, which originated in India. While Buddhism and Jainism originated as protest movements against classical Hinduism in 6th century BC, Sikhism originated from the teachings of Saint Guru Nanak in 15th century in the state of Punjab. Buddhism is a pan Asian religion as it is equally popular in East Asian societies Myanmar, Thailand, South Korea, Japan and others. It is the majority religion in Sri Lanka, which is a southern neighbor of India.

Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism are exogenous as they originated outside India and were subsequently brought in India. Islam and Christianity were brought in India from outside. In the process of identity formation, the exogenous religious communities have the option of identifying with their larger religious communities outside the country. Islam was introduced in India in 7th century by the Arab traders and subsequently spread to other parts of India with the establishment of Muslim rule. The time of introduction of Christianity is not clear, though majority of scholars believe that it was introduced in the 6th century AD. However, it was largely propagated in India during the early phase of British rule.

2. The demographic distribution of religious groups is not even in India. While Hindus, the majority community is nearly distributed throughout the country, Muslims, the largest minority is more concentrated in certain central and eastern regions of country like Uttar Pradesh (18.5%), Bihar (16.5%), West Bengal (25.2%), Assam (30.9%) and southern state of Kerala (24.7%). Muslim population is more concentrated in urban areas in comparison to rural areas. Muslims are in majority (60 percent) in the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir and the Union Territory of Lakshadweep in west coast of India. Christians are largely concentrated in the urban areas of western, southern and north-eastern parts of India. Christianity has emerged as the major religion in three North-eastern states, namely, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Among other States/UTs, Manipur (34.0%), Goa (26.7%), Andaman & Nicobar Islands (21.7%), Kerala (19.0%), and Arunachal Pradesh

(18.7%) have considerable percentage of Christian population to the total population of the State/UT (Census of India: 2001). Sikhs are concentrated in the state of Punjab in the north-west of India. Tribal communities, with their distinct religious practices are largely concentrated in some pockets of central and eastern India and largely in north-eastern parts of the country. This demographic distribution of India's religious communities has close bearing in their identity formation and its expression in public sphere.

3. Hinduism, the majority religion, is not merely a way of worship and beliefs but it is a social code of conduct for individuals and groups in society. The English word '*Religion*' is usually translated for Indian word '*Dharma*', but it does not convey the real essence of *Dharma*. The notion of *Dharma* (A Sanskrit word meaning '*to hold on*') refers to a moral code of conduct, which is to be adhered to by all individuals in society at every phase of their life. Among Hindus, the religious beliefs are deeply entrenched and religious code has been a guiding principle in all forms of social interaction of a person since his birth till his death and even after. Also, Hinduism, instead of being a centralized religion is a way of life. It is eclectic, diversified and accommodative in nature. Perhaps, it is the only religion, which does not have any prescribed mechanism to convert people of other religious faiths into Hinduism. It is also observed that the hold of *Dharma* is also weakening in the modern society.

One of the main characteristics of Hindu society is that it is stratified into hierarchically organizes Caste groups and sub-Castes, with distinct privileges and disadvantages attached to them and sanctioned by *Dharma*. In modern society, this religious aspect of caste system is on decline, but the caste identities are dominant in the political sphere. Caste identities are so strong in the democratic process of India that they override the formation and expression of religious identities. This fact is very significant in understanding the religious identities of Hindus in the public sphere of India. Dipankar Gupta (2000:108-114) observes that the caste system is slowly dying, but caste identities are still strong. Democracy and urbanization have destroyed caste system and let loose political mobilization and social competition based on caste identities. Thus eclectic and diversified nature of

Table 1: Religious Communities of India (Percentage in total Population) [1]

Religious Community	1961 Census	2001 Census
Hindu	83.45	80.46
Muslim	10.69	13.43
Christian	2.44	2.34
Buddhist	1.79	1.87
Sikhs	0.74	0.77
Animists/others	0.43	0.72
Jain	0.46	0.41

Hinduism, its confidence as majority community, and predominance of Caste identities in Hindu society act as barrier against aggressive religious identity and mass mobilization on sustained basis in non-crisis situations.

Formation of Religious Identities

The political process revolving around religious identities is a common feature of all South Asian nations due to their diverse demographic composition. Every country presents a mosaic of social and cultural diversities. India is a home of many religions big and small, further divided into sects and sub-sects. In fact, India is a great laboratory for experimenting in the formation of religious identities. The formation of religious identities is contingent on two set of factors:

First, the formation of religious identities is not uniform across different religious communities and also across different period of time within a single religious community. This is because identity formation does not take place in vacuum but it operates within a given set of social, political and economic conditions. The perceived or real change in these conditions by a religious group may affect the nature of religious identity of that group. For example, after the partition of India and formation of Pakistan and India as two separate states and Hindus and Muslims respectively became minorities over night, this led to the hardening of their religious identities.

Second, the available space for expression of identity or the opportunity of mass mobilization or lack of it has decisive impact on the formation and expression of religious identities. For example during heyday of Mughal rule in India in 15th and 16th century, Hindu community found herself divided and suppressed and there was no scope for mass mobilization. This suffocating environment led to the emergence of *Bhakti* Movement (Devotional sect of India) formed around secular and reformatory credentials of Hindu religious traditions. This was a subdued expression of liberal religious identity in a non-democratic environment. On the contrary, in the modern India, democratic process provides ample scope for the mass mobilization, which facilitates the formation and expression of religious identities.

On the basis of genesis of identity formation or the rationale imbibed in the expression of religious identity, we find three ideal types of religious identities: Primordial religious identity; Crisis-generated religious identity; and reactionary religious identity. These three identities are ideal types and may overlap with each other in actual practice. In mixed form, it has to be characterized as per the dominant element. One form of identity may assume another form with change in the context of its formation and expression.

Primordial Religious Identity

The primordial religious identity is formed around the faith in and commitment to religious beliefs and practices. It is a pure form of religious identity and shuns non-religious objectives. The propagation of religion, religious charity work, missionaries activities, spiritual attainment through religious practices and saintly behavior etc are the forms of expression of primordial religious identity. In India, the rise of Jainism and Buddhism in 6th century BC as a protest against Hindu superstition and rigidity of religious customs was, in fact, expression of another primordial religious identity with emphasis on religious reforms. However, in its extreme forms, this identity may take the form of fundamentalism and fanaticism. The demolition of Hindu temples an imposition of Jazia (A form of religious tax imposed on Hindus during Muslim ruler Aurangzeb's rule in India in 17th century). Expression may take different forms but promotion of one's religious primacy is the real objective behind such identity. There is a fundamental difference between fundamentalism and communalism as former aims at religious objectives, whereas latter aims at non-religious objectives through religious mobilization. In Modern times many fanatic religious groups in different parts of the world espouse primordial religious identity. The aggressive and violent expression of primordial religious identity is dangerous for a multi-religious and multi-cultural society. Huntington's formulation of 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis is based on the assumption of aggressive expression of such primordial identities.

Crisis-Generated Religious Identity

This type of identity formation is the product of given socio-economic or political crisis and perception of the religious community that it is victim of such crisis and/or it may form the part of solution to such crisis. The establishment of British rule in India and the subsequent perception of natives about their exploitation and racial inferiority gave rise to national awakening and social and religious reforms movements across country. The glorious past of Indian civilization was summoned to strengthen the emerging national identity. Outdated and non-modern religious and social practices were

challenged and reformed. The message was that the ancient Indian cultural tradition was pure and got corrupted during alien rule of medieval period. This new found religio-cultural identity forms the bedrock of emerging Indian nationalism in 19th century. Political unity and the development of modern means of communication, brought about by the British government, provided a nationwide audience to this identity. This was the first expression of religious and cultural identity in the modern sense of the term. Panikkar (2011) observes that the identity politics has a long history in India, which goes back to the early phase of colonialism. The search for cultural sources for national awakening in the context of colonial hegemonization or oppression invariably reaches out to religious traditions, among both Hindus and Muslims. While cultural and historical symbols provided a base for identity formation, it was institutionalized in the form of Muslim League or Hindu Mahasabha.

Muslims, the former ruling classes of India, were deeply hurt due to loss of political power. They did not appreciate the Indian brand of nationalism as espoused by the leaders of the Congress. AR Desai (1946: 396) observes that the Hindu ideology in which Pal, Ghosh and other leaders clothed in the new phase could not appeal to the politically conscious Muslim middle classes. Encouraged by the British, they gradually went for articulating their separate identity as a nation. A section of Hindus and Muslims both went presenting a communal and selective interpretation of Indian history, which also fueled the distinct religious identities among two communities. T K Oommen (2000:06) remarks, that 'For both Jinnah and Golwalkar national reconstruction meant re-appropriation of an appropriate past. For the Hindus this meant ancient Indian culture and civilization, with the Gupta age has been regarded as the golden age of India..... For the Muslims, the golden age was the medieval period, when they had been the rulers of India.' Even today, his perception prevails among the communalist elements of the two communities. Reetz (1993) terms Indian nationalism as 'religious nationalism', which emerged as an efficient tool for mass mobilization in entire South Asia.

Though national secular leadership was hard pressed to claim secular moorings of Indian nationalism, it could not be retrieved from its religio-cultural foundations. This nationalism formed the basis of national liberation movement and the goal of national freedom justified the expression of new identity. Mahatma Gandhi tried his best to salvage mass mobilization from religious tracks with secular symbols like *Khadi* (Indian cotton cloth), *Charakha* (spinning wheel) and salt civil disobedience, but he could not prevent Muslim community's contrary perception of the nature of Congress led national movement. Also, nomenclature of Gandhi's future polity as *Ramrajya* (Reign Lord Rama, the popular Hindu God King) evoked mixed reactions among secular minds. Thus, Muslim community could not be convinced about the secular credentials of Indian nationalism. Here lies the genesis of two-nation theory of Jinnah based on the distinct religious identities of Hindus and Muslims. The hardening of religious identity with political goals led to the partition of the country in 1947. British rule may be blamed for the partition of the country, but the roots of religious identities of both Hindus and Muslim lie deep in the history and society of India. Crisis-generated religious identity is transient in nature, as it lasts till the crisis lasts and changes its forms and mode of expression thereafter.

Reactionary Religious Identity

The reactionary religious identity is the result of reaction against perceived or real marginalization or victimization by a religious community due to the actions or dominance of another religious community. Such religious community perceives its marginalization in the religious terms. Minorities in India are prone to reactionary identity formation. The rise of Sikh identity and militant agitation for separate homeland (*Khalistan)* in early 1980s was the result of perceived not real marginalization of Sikh community. The Union government, led by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took military action (Operation Blue Star) against Sikh militants holed in the Golden Temple, Amritsar (the sacred most religious place of Sikhs), which hurt the religious feelings of Sikhs. As a matter of revenge, her Sikh body guards killed Indira Gandhi on 31 Oct 1984, which as a counter reaction resulted in large scale anti-Sikhs riots by Hindus in Delhi and other places. It took many years to heal the wounds of hatred and suspicion between Sikhs and Hindus. The identity formation among Muslim minority community in post-independent India also falls into this category, which is discussed in detail in latter part.

The independence and partition of India in 1947 brought two fundamental changes in the context of identity formation in India, which continue to define the contour of religious identities and their expression.

1. The partition of country on religious basis converted Muslims in India and Hindus in Pakistan as minority communities. The communal holocaust,

violence and mental trauma of partition still linger on the psyche of two communities. The minority status gives a natural sense of insecurity and fear among Muslims. Such fear and insecurity is not prevalent among other minorities like Buddhists, Jains or Sikhs as these groups have some ethical affinity with majority religion and are indigenous in origin. This is a cultural and psychological factor and nothing to do with legal status of minorities in India. Muslims, as minority community are additionally handicapped as their notional link with Pakistan, which has been in competitive and tense relationship with India since her birth in 1947.

2. The new constitution of free India based on the principles of secularism, welfare state, and competitive democratic polity with universal adult franchise, freedom of press, independent judiciary etc has provided new context for the formation and expression of religious identities. The democratic process has thrown open the opportunities for mass mobilization and effective expression of religious identities. The Indian brand of secularism as enshrined in the constitution is characterized by religious freedom; equality of religions; no state religion; and special constitutional provisions for the protection of cultural and educational interests of religious and linguistic minorities. The special provision for minorities is a form of policy of positive discrimination, but it has given rise to two contradictory outcomes: as a policy of accommodation, adjustment and integration of minority identity interests in the domain of public policy; and as an undeclared tactics of minority appeasement and symbolic politics in the larger domain of democratic politics.

Indian public policy towards the claims of religious identities has been one of accommodation and protection of valid interests of concerned ethnic and religious groups. The various mechanisms used are: special constitutional measures to protect the interest of minorities, recognition of their cultural and educational rights, appointment of minority commission as statutory body, special schemes for their promotion and so on. There are special provisions given in the 5th and 6th Schedule of the Constitution for the protection and advancement of ethnic groups in north-east region. However, this has been done within the broad framework of the constitutional provisions and unity and integrity of India. Rajni Kothari (1970:302) highlights the practical aspects of Indian approach to socio-cultural identities and notes that the two main characteristics of Indian approach have been the growth and consolidation of unitary processes through the penetration of authoritative structures of government and the dominant party; and a process of accommodation of diverse interests and pluralities, which are acknowledged as legitimate constituents of slowly crystallizing centre. Sunil Khilnani (1997:166-175) analyses ideational inputs of Indian approach and observes that India has adopted a mid way approach towards cultural identities between the one adopted by liberalists and the other by ethnic nationalists. On the one hand, it avoids the liberal presumption that individuals could transcend their cultural inheritance and moves away from the perception of ethnic nationalists that cultures are self enclosed wholes, on the other. John Zavos and others (2004:8) note that Indian insight into the experience of identities enabled her to engineer a state which was able to accommodate a multiplicity of identities whilst maintaining a unity of purpose. In this way the political significance of cultural and religious identities was not denied, but at the same time the cultural integrity of the nation was not challenged. However, when this public policy of cultural integration mediates through the rough terrain of electoral politics, it is the latter which dominates the scene.

Politics of Religious Identities in Contemporary India

The political mobilization on the ground of religious and other is a regular feature of the democratic process in contemporary India. The assertion of religious identities has shifted from religious and cultural domain to political domain and has taken the form of communalism. Communalism is a belief held by religious groups that they have shared economic and political interests also because they have shared religious practices. It is the belief that in India Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs form distinct communities, which are independently and separately structured. Such belief of these religious groups, consolidates a sense of identity based on religion, i.e., religion has to become the basis of their basic social identity and the determinant of their basic social relationships (Chandra: 1987: 01). The decentralization of political process through democratic decentralization in 1992 (by empowering local bodies by 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, 1992) and the growth of mass media have provided vertical and horizontal space for mass mobilization on the basis of religious identity.

The politics of religious identity since 1990s has been characterized by certain dominant tendencies.

First, it was expressed in the form of protection and advancement of minority rights, often termed as policy of minority appeasement or 'vote bank politics'. Second, there was a resurgence of Hindu nationalism, more active since 1990s articulated around the idea of cultural nationalism. Third, it generated a renewed debate on the nature of Indian secularism and scrutiny of secular practices and behavior of political parties in India. Each party blamed other for communalism or fake secularism. Those parties (Congress, Communist Parties and Samajwadi Party) which claimed to champion the cause of minorities declared BJP as communalist party and the latter declared them espousing 'pseudo secularism. However, the behavior of none was above the board as all parties have deviated from the path of secularism, due to political exigencies.

The minority identity politics Muslims is in the state of flux. Traditionally, Muslim community has been the supporter of Congress party, but in the wake of Communal tension of 1992 and demolition of Babri Mosque by Hindus mobilized by Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allied organizations, they shifted their allegiance to regional parties at least in the states (like UP and Bihar), where regional parties were in position to challenge BJP. This was because the Congress party was the ruling party at the centre when mosque was demolished. However, in other parts of the countries, where they did not have credible option against BJP, they continued to support Congress party. Their open and declared hostility to BJP has been exploited by regional parties to the core. This gave rise to treating Muslims as vote banks and politics of symbolic appeasement. The Muslim support was mobilized around such issues as promotion of Urdu language, making noise for job reservation, opposing ban on SIMI (a Muslim students' militant organization), opposing implementation of Uniform Civil Code [2] and abolition of Article 370 of the constitution, which special status to Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir and so on. None of these issues relates to their social and economic welfare and development. Even the recommendations of Sachchar Committee (2006) accepted way back by the Union government for the socio-economic improvement of minorities, were not implemented fully by the ruling Congress party.

The social and educational status of Muslim community is also responsible for this state of affairs. There is a marked absence of sizable middle class in Muslim community due to lack education, public employment and economic development. This has obstructed the rise of enlightened leadership among Muslims and opportunity to Muslim religious leaders to mediate between the Muslim community and political process. Since 1990s, the religious identity of Muslim has become more rigid and their opposition to BJP so intense that they resort to tactical voting (voting for a candidate who is in position to defeat the candidate of BJP). This form of minority identity politics is likely to continue in near future also.

Since independence, the political mobilization among Hindus was largely done on the basis of their caste identities with few exceptions. However, in early 1990s, the Hindu religious identity also witnessed some unusual upsurge leading to unprecedented communal tensions in different parts of the country. This upsurge was led by a national political party Bhartiya Janata party and its affiliate organizations like Vishva Hindu Parishad, Rastriya Swamsevak Sangth (RSS), Bajrang Dal etc. This resulted in the mass Hindu mobilization across northern and western parts of India and demolition of Babri Mosque [3] on 6 Dec. 1992. This was the most wide and intense expression of Hindu religious identity since independence of India. It communalized political sphere and generated a new sense of fear and need of articulation among Muslim community. This issue dominated political agenda for many years and its reverberations were felt in the new communal riots [3] in Gujarat state of India in 2002.

This religious upsurge among Hindus was the result of number of social, political and economic factors. First, the ruling coalition government at the centre was in crisis in 1990.The BJP withdrew her support and in reaction ruling Janata Dal party decided to mobilize the support of other backward classes by implementing reservation scheme for them. In reaction, the BJP went for mobilization of Hindus on the basis of Babri mosque issue. Second, there was a reaction against the minority appeasement policy of ruling congress party at the centre. Otherwise also the Congress was on decline and the BJP was ready to fill the gap. Thirdly, it was a time when India was also facing a deep financial crisis with declining growth rate and employment, discredited public sector, crisis of foreign exchange etc, which generated a feeling of resentment against the Congress and people, mostly the youth, joined the BJP bandwagon.

Thus the contemporary upsurge in the Hindu religious identity is the result of peculiar circumstances and at best may be describe as counter reactionary religious identity (reaction to another reaction appeasement of minority) The visible rigidity in Muslim identity is the outcome of sense of increased insecurity and perceived threat to existential identity. The recent Hindu-Muslim communal riots in Muzaffarnagar district of western Uttar Pradesh in north India in 2013 exposed the dirty

face of the communal politics. Political parties were divided on taking sides as per the calculation of their electoral gain or loss. Though in parliamentary elections of 2014, the charisma of Narendra Modi, the Prime Ministerial candidate of BJP was the main factor, observers feel, there was a hidden current of Hindu mobilization in certain states like UP as a reaction to minority appeasement and recent communal riots. The BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi may have come to power on the assurance of good and corruption free governance, India's Muslim community is apprehensive due to her past experience as well as rigid articulation of her religious identity. Yet there is marked difference in the nature of identities of majority and minority religious communities. The intensified expression of Hindu religious identity in politics is casual, transient, non-pervasive and disorganized. Political parties and their communal agenda have only limited success to gain political power by invoking Hindu religious identity or mass mobilization on religious grounds. Majority communal agenda cannot ensure electoral victory on regular basis [4]. Muslims, being a minority, perceive greater sense of loss, insecurity and fear. Hence, the expression of Muslim identity is more organized, intense, regular and always in search of further consolidation. Chhibber and Sekhon (2013) also note similar difference between Hindus and Muslims in the expression of their religious identities: 'Hindus do not express greater confidence in politicians using Hindu religious symbols. This is true even for observant Hindus residing in areas with high levels of communal strife. Muslims, on the other hand, are more likely to express confidence in a leader who uses Muslim religious symbols than one who does not'. They concluded that Muslims, unlike Hindus, are responsive to co-religious appeals even in a state where the party system is not divided along communal lines.

Conclusion

The story of intense articulation and expression of religious identities by Hindus and Muslims in the recent past may suggest that India is not a secular country or communalism is a dominant mode of thought of Indian people or majority communalism is the reliable tool to gain political power. These suggestions need scrutiny. Communal agenda may be employed by certain political groups and formations, but majority of Indian people have not so far espoused the ideology of communalism. The ideology of communalism, in spite of causing tensions and hatred among different communities on many occasions, largely remains on the fringe of vast public

sphere of India. It is brought in the centre stage by certain interested groups and sections but without much success. A noted scholar on the subject Bipin Chandra (1999: 443) concludes, 'India still has a basically healthy secular society. Even though communalism is perhaps the most serious challenge of Indian society and polity, it is not yet the dominant mode of thought of the Indian people......the believers of communal ideology constitute a fringe....In no part of the country, an aggressive majority arranged against a beleaguered minority.' The rising popular consciousness is aligned against communal overtones. However, India is a secular country; not because its political parties and elites are secular; no even because India's Constitution declares India to be so; but only because majority of Indian people are still not prone to communal manipulation. And India is a functional democracy, where people voice matters.

Notes

1. These figure are taken from the Census of India (2001) *Religion*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Available At: *http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx*

The head count of India's religion was undertaken in the latest Census of 2011. However, the figures of religious communities were not published due to political reasons. Many observers allege that in the 2011 census, the percentage of Hindus has come down to less than 80 per cent and that of Muslims have gone up more than 14 per cent. This disclosure may be a sensitive issue in religious identity ridden politics of India. The growth rate among Muslim population, in comparison to other communities, has been high as because of religious reasons they do not adopt population control measures. This demographic change may become a cause of communal tension in Indian political process.

2. Under Article 44 of the Indian Constitution, the State is required to implement a common civil code for all religious communities of India. This code refers to common family laws with respect to marriage and divorce and maintenance of divorcee for all communities. The code is intended to ameliorate the status of women and protection of their rights. At present, in these matters Muslim community is regulated by their religious laws (Sharia), which go against the rights of women. The government has not implemented this code for Muslims so far because of political consideration as Muslims oppose this code on the ground that it interferes in their religious affairs.

3. Babri Mosque-Ramjanmbhoomi (Birth place of Lord Rama) controversy is the most important communal issue in Indian politics. The Babri Mosque

was constructed by the first Mughal emperor Babur 1527 in Ayodhya (Faizabad District of State of UP in north India). Hindus believe that it was constructed after modification of a temple on the birth place of Lord Rama (Hindu God). Both communities laid claim for the place for long time and the temple was sealed by the court orders. However, the doors of the temple were reopened in 1986 by the court order. The BJP demanded the construction of Ram Temple and its senior leader LK Advani organized a march (Rath Yatra) to Ayodhya in Sep. 1990 to mobilize Hindus for this cause. Finally, on 06 Dec 1992, some 150000 Hindu volunteers gathered at Ayodhya and demolished Babri Mosque. This was followed by large scale Hindu-Muslim riots in different parts of the country. However, the Hindu organizations could not construct Rama temple so far and the dispute is yet to be settled. The BJP also has distanced itself from this issue during 2014 elections. This issue resurfaced in the form of communal riots of Gujarat in 2002. A train carrying Hindu volunteers coming back from Ayodhya was put on fire by some Muslim miscreants on 27 Feb 2002 in Godhara (Gujarat) railway station, in which 59 Hindus were killed. This incident sparked off riots in Ahmadabad and other city of Gujarat, the western province of India. In these riots 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were killed.

4. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP): Originally founded as Bhartiya Jan Sangh in 1951, it espoused the cause of cultural nationalism of India or 'Hindutva'. It could not score any major success in elections during 1951-77. It merged with newly formed opposition party -Janata Party in 1977 in the wake of National Emergency. The Janata Party government fell in 1979 and Jan Sangh left the party. It was reorganized as Bhartiya Janata Party in 1980. It won just 02 seats in 1984, 89 seats in 1989, 120 seats in 1991, 161 seats in 1996, 182 seats in 1998, 138 seats in 2004, and 116 seats in 2009 General Elections to the House of People. In fact, its popular vote share fell down from 25 percent in 1998 to 18 percent in 2009. During 2014 General Elections, the party did not raise the *Hundutva* issue and laid emphasis on good governance, clean administration and development achievements of its leader Narendra Modi. Thus, without going for *Hindutva* agenda, the party scored 282 seats in House of People (highest so far), with 31 percent popular votes and formed the government in the centre in 2014. Therefore, its mixed electoral performance in General Elections since 1984 till 2014 did not attest the thesis that it *Hindutva* agenda is a viable tool for the mass mobilization of Hindus on the basis of their religious identity.

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