

# Politics using religion in the subcontinent

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For much of the 20th century, intellectuals and policy makers were guided by a powerful, if mistaken, vision that with modernization would come an inexorable decline in religious faith and adherence.

Indeed, it was an article of Enlightenment faith among some of the West's great thinkers that as societies embraced modern technology and rational forms of social organization, religious "superstition" would increasingly recede into the narrow recesses of the private sphere, losing its power over how people organized their collective life[i]. Infact, till the 1960s sociologists studying modernization and secularization predicted the demise of religion in the age of science. Since the 1970s we have had just the opposite, global religious resurgence. The resurgence of Islam, the growth of assertive Christian churches in the Third World, the public papacy of John Paul II, the role of church-based civil societies in undermining communist regimes of Eastern Europe, and the rise of various fundamentalist political movements—Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu—all testify to the salience and power of religious devotion[iii].

Some have argued that religions exhibit such a great diversity in beliefs, practices and symbols that one cannot capture them in one definition. At least since the 17th century one can identify a multitude of different notions of religion which have competed with each other and have changed over time. An interpretative sociological approach based on complexes of social interaction (social institutions) analyses religion in terms of its shaping of values, norms, and interests and its effects on social interaction, life conduct and the shaping of an "ethos".[iii]

Religion has done more than any other institution to shape the development of nations and influence the lives of people. It is what people hold sacred. Every society is politically owned by a sense of the sacred and there is a strong connection between religion and politics. Mahatma Gandhi, one of India's greatest freedom fighters, once said, "I can say without the slightest hesitation&hellip;that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means."[iv] However, it is sad to know that this connection between religion and politics is encouraging many around the world to misuse this sacred institution to their advantage. My research has its focus on how religion has been progressively gaining attention as a strong political tool in the subcontinent.

To get to the root of the real problem, I would have to go back a 150 years into Indian history. In 1857 Indians revolted against the British. They called it, "the first battle of independence"; while from the British angle it was a sepoy mutiny. It was triggered by the introduction of cartridges containing beef and pork among the Indian soldiers working for the British. The former was prohibited in the Hindu religion and latter in Islam. Both Hindus and Muslims took part in the uprising but Muslims were in the forefront. Hence, after 1857 the British divide and rule policy was pro Hindu and anti Muslim. As a result Hindus made rapid gains economically, politically, educationally and socially. Muslims on the other hand slowly lost all the power and wealth they had accumulated during their rule in India. Muslims, though in minority, had been the rulers for many centuries before the British. But with the turn of the century the British changed its policy and started favouring Muslims and encouraging separatism. This again changed a few years before Independence with the arrival of Lord Mountbatten, who was closer to Nehru and Gandhi than Jinnah.

This policy exacerbated tensions between the religious factions in India and contributed to decades of communal strife, countless deaths and the eventual partition of India into two separate countries, India and Pakistan[v].

The scene today is not more pleasant than it was at the time of partition. We are suffering the consequences to this day, not only because of the hatred between India and Pakistan, but also because of the communal hatred within the country. The partition, however, would, be remembered as the epitome of Hindu-Muslim violence on both sides of the border.

India and Pakistan have fought two more wars over Kashmir, in 1965 and 1971. This area remains a thorn in relations between Hindus and Muslims, "the most incendiary legacy of the deep-rooted conflict" that led to the 1947 partition of South Asia. The problem can be viewed as a dispute between India and Pakistan over control of Kashmir that is a consequence of an unfair implementation of the Partition Act of India and an unfulfilled commitment by the United Nations since 1948. Some people view it as a part of the secret agenda against the Muslims, or a conspiracy against the people of the sub-continent. The real Kashmir problem lies in the colonial policy of "Divide & Rule". This political game started some 250 years ago and is still being played in the subcontinent and all around the world. India & Pakistan, Israel & Palestine, Kuwait & Iraq, Iran & Iraq, North & South Korea, China & Taiwan and many more are still suffering the consequences of this policy[vi].

There are a number of reasons why India and Pakistan have been used as targets by the colonial policy. The west would benefit when India and Pakistan remain in a state of fear of war and spend their revenue on the import of arms and ammunition. As a result of heavy defence bills; education, health and development would suffer. Consequently economic growth and industrial development will be slow and both countries would remain poor.

The birth of Pakistan in 1947 did not settle Hindu-Muslim differences or end conflicts. To the contrary, all the old problems remained. Religious differences and orthodox zeal provided ample fuel to keep the fires burning once the power, political ambitions, and fears of leaders of the Muslim League, Congress, and the British Raj sparked the initial rage. Hindu temples with their towering gates and walls, often covered with naked gods and voluptuous goddesses, remain a source of constant provocation to Muslim eyes and minds, even as Muslim butchers provoke Hindu rage and fury each time they lead a cow or her calf to slaughter[vii].

Fifty years ago, at the time of Independence, India had, of course, been as now, a down and out country, with the majority of our people overwhelmingly impoverished. We had nonetheless the reputation of being a relatively honest nation, quite unlike, say, Indonesia or Thailand in Asia or most of the countries in Latin America. Progress of a remarkable sort, that condition is fundamentally altered. India's progress from a relatively honest to an internationally recognised corrupt nation has an interesting historical course. Distinctions, they say, come in pairs. In the United Nations chart, India happens to be the 10th poorest country from the bottom. We are also, a private international survey suggests, among the 10 most corrupt nations on earth.[viii] In the early years following the attainment of freedom, politicians were still scared of deviating from the straight and narrow path. But opportunities were many, the temptation was too great and some of them could not be prevented from indulging in venality. They would do so with circumspection though. They would have at their beck and call one or two thieves or crooks or hangers on of other assorted descriptions to perform the dirty work surreptitiously on their, that is, the political leadership's behalf.

Two major political parties have dominated Indian politics since partition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the National Congress Party. During the past decades, both parties seem to have adopted policies harmful to Muslims and beneficial to Hindus. Everywhere one looks, the government's non-partisan approach is obvious.[ix].

The most visible evidence of the government's pro-Hindu policies is the formal change of the name of Bombay to Mumbai, after a Hindu goddess. However, the problem is more complex and involves more than simply a difference in values. Violence and communal strife have defined the relationship between Muslims and Hindus since partition. The religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims has been perpetuated by numerous occurrences and issues over the last decade in India. At the heart of the present-day dispute is the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, in North-central India. Hindu fundamentalist parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiv Sena contend that the mosque was located on the birthplace of Ram, who is an incarnation of a Hindu god, and that a Ram temple was torn down in order to construct the mosque on the same site a couple of centuries ago. Acting on their beliefs, a mob of Hindu zealots stormed the mosque in 1992 and reduced the eighteenth century building to a pile of rubble. The destruction touched off Hindu-Muslim rioting across the country that has killed thousands in the past few years[x]. Varshney, associate professor of political science at Columbia University in USA, led a team of 20 scholars in a seven-year project titled "Civic Life and Communal Conflict: Hindus and Muslims in India." According to the study, which covers a period of 45 years between 1950 and 1995, there were as many as 700 Hindu-Muslim riots in India with at least 7,200 deaths and ten times as many injured. "The overwhelming proportions of them were Muslims," said Varshney. While Hindus constitute over 80 percent of India's population, Muslims, with nearly 12 percent, are the single largest religious minority. "The occurrence and prevention of riots depends on how well Hindus and Muslims are integrated in the city through organizations, assemblies and civic sense. There is an integral link between the structure of civic life in a multiethnic society on the one hand and the presence or absence of ethnic violence on the other hand," said Varshney. The study observed that inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic networks of civic engagement played very different roles in ethnic conflict. "Because they build bridges and manage tensions, inter-ethnic networks are agents of peace, but communities are organized only on intra-ethnic lines and the interconnections with other communities are very weak, ethnic violence is quite likely, it said. Riots in India, Varshney said, were an urban phenomenon. "With increased urbanization there was greater need to strengthen civic sense in Indian cities. As many as 96 percent of the deaths due to communal riots during the period of study were in urban areas. While Mumbai and Ahmedabad, with 1,200 and 1,150 deaths during the 45 years under study, accounted for the maximum number of casualties, Aligarh, with at least 400 deaths, accounted for the highest per capita deaths in India, said Varshney. On record, the first riot took place at Mumbai as well as in Azamgarh during 1893[xi].[xii]. History has shown that our enemies are in our own ranks. [xiii]. Of late, both nations have been routinely using international crises to manipulate domestic politics. Border tensions build whenever either nation's ruling party is threatened politically, only to dissipate after the party's hold on power is re-established. A link has long been suggested between the BJP's domestic anti-Muslim actions and its aggression toward Islamic Pakistan. By stoking domestic ethnic tensions and casting in a religious mode, India's complex political disputes with Pakistan over Kashmir, the BJP has won massive domestic support. And it is using this jingoism to further whip up ethnic tensions at home, thereby establishing a cycle of anti-Islamic sentiment and nationalism from which it draws its power. On May 14 last year, insurgents attacked the Kala Chuk military base in Kashmir, killing 34 people. Although the attack typified the 14-year-old period of terrorism in the long running Kashmiri conflict, in which more than 50,000 people have been killed in almost daily violence, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee chose that moment to call for massive military retaliation against Pakistan[xiv]. The current Indian Government is also very effective at pitting; Sikhs against Sikhs, Muslims against Sikhs, Muslims against Christians and Hindus against all other groups in India. The non-Hindu groups in India are busy fighting among themselves or defending themselves from attack. At the same time the Indian Government is busy consolidating their power base within India, and making powerful friends overseas who will argue against pressure being applied against India should the argument ever be made[xv].

In the past 15 years violent religious sectarianism has spread throughout India. Several thousand people have died and property and shops have been looted and burnt. But perhaps the greater damage has been to the psyche of the Indian people. Once Indian liberals were able to bask in the multi-community nature of society, while closet communalists were shamed into silence or rebuked as unpatriotic. Communalism not only has religious affiliation but also social, political, and especially economic interests in common which conflict with the corresponding interests of another community of believers, a group who share the same geographic space. Today it is the communalists who hold centre stage aggressively and without apology. For the ordinary citizen peaceful coexistence has been replaced by insecurity and fear[xvi].

Despite the secular vision of India's and Pakistan's first post-independence leaders, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, most Indians and Pakistanis continue to define their primary identity in terms of religion, caste and ethnicity. The conversion of religion into communalism by the alchemy of politics has to be broken. The real conflict today is not between Islam and the West, or between Islam and Christianity or between Islam and Judaism. The real conflict today is between alternative visions of the future within every religion and culture. The solution to the epic problem of Hindu-Muslim conflict lies in mutual respect and tolerance. The bloated rhetoric of secularism, constitutionalism, and rule of law must give way to common sense and realism. Sensitivity to each other's feelings and aspirations has to be a mutual affair. It should be the sacred duty of all to prevent violence; for this, all "hate propaganda" must stop. If either group has any grievance, it should be expressed in silent processions or town meetings, and not in angry or armed demonstrations. Rather than taking actions after riots have already begun, the government must adopt a more activist stance and a preventive approach. Peaceful and happy pluralism can be maintained by permitting different religious groups to manage their own faiths as they wish, without infringement or interference from others. We need to respect and accommodate differences rather than seek to erase them. It is the adamant denial of difference that provokes claims of territorial sovereignty in the political sphere. It is necessary to make a distinction between religious sensibility and religious bigotry. An overwhelming majority of people in the subcontinent have religious faith, only a microscopic minority exhibit signs of religious bigotry. There is no inherent hazard in the expressions of differences by any religious or other type of community; the hazard comes when these are not accommodated but denied. The colonial state used "religion" as a marker not in any ordinary sense but to define majorities and minorities; the Hindu and Muslim categories were used in India in the same way as Catholic and Protestant categories in Ireland. It is this, which gave "religion" the role it came to play in identity politics of the late colonial period.

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