

COMMUNALISATION OF HINDUS IN PUNJAB

PRAMOD KUMAR

The author has made surveys in Punjab to understand the perception of the situation that the Hindus have. He has tried in this article to identify the various historical, economic and cultural factors which have led to growth of communal consciousness among the Hindus. The leadership in almost all political parties betrays this consciousness. He holds the policies of the British government basically responsible for the cleavage between the two communities and finds the policies followed by the Congress governments since independence have further deepened it.

Recent developments have gravely affected the social life in Punjab. Prejudice has so overwhelmed reason that each section tends to put the entire blame on the other without even an attempt to analyze the circumstances that have led to the present tense situation. The seriousness of the situation is evident from the acts of religious sacrilege committed by communalist Hindus and Sikhs, the rampant violence and terror promoted through killings and assassinations and the demand for Khalistan raised by a section of extremists.

In such a tense and heated environment, it is hazardous to highlight the process of communalisation of the religious group while neglecting the other. The hazard may be practical and there are serious theoretical difficulties in this enterprise; the communalization of one group is always related to and promoted by the communalization of the other group. As it is not possible to work out and analyse the relationship and interdependence of the communalization process of both the Hindus and the Sikhs in the limited span of one article, we shall concentrate primarily on the rise of communalism among the Hindus, and only incidentally refer to it wherever necessary*

In order to understand the communalization of Hindus, we shall focus attention on:

- (i) The nature and form of the consciousness of the Punjabi Hindus vis-à-vis Sikhs and vice-versa;
- (ii) Understanding of the historical process of formations of the present consciousness;
- (iii) Analysis of the contemporary situation in the light of (i) and (ii)

Alienation of Hindu from Language and Culture

It has been consistently argued by a section of the intelligentsia that Punjabi Hindus do not identify with the Punjabi language, the culture and traditions of Punjab. They have been further accused of being culturally sterile and that their contribution to the culture of Punjab is almost negligible. A typical example is P.K. Nijhawan who has written a long article the *Man and Development*. He says:

“Among the totality of Hindudom, the Punjabi Hindu is alone the one who spoke a deliberate untruth to disown the own language – the Punjabi Hindu had long been alienated from cultural roots”

Such observations’ implicitly assume that:

- (i) The Sikhs, in general, identify with the Punjabi language, culture and traditions. This, however, does not take into account changes to the economic and social milieu and political structure and its differential impact on the sections of sub-sections of Sikhs.
- (ii) The Punjabi Hindus constitute a homogenous category: If the cultural alienation of the Punjabi Hindus is the product of socio-economic changes, the Punjabis in general should also be affected by them. It is understandable that one group may be more exposed to the pressures of change. The difference may be of degree but not of quality. By identifying the social position of various groups and their involvement in different sectors of the economy, it should be possible to understand these differences and place them in their historical context.

Another dimension of the problem is that a majority of the Sikhs have developed a feeling that they are being discriminated against by the central government, which is dominated by the Hindus; they say that they were being treated as second class citizens. They also accuse Hindus of treating them as ignorant fools, lacking in common-sense and culturally inferior. This accusation is borne out by the jokes and other humour prevalent among the Hindus. This indicates that they are treated not only as second class citizens, but as second rate human beings too, which to them is the worst form of humiliation.

Majority of the Sikhs also allege that Hindus refuse to recognize their separate identity, and assert that the Sikhs belong to their tradition, their culture. In this context, some of them referred to an appeal made by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. To quote:

“Today, The Vishwa Hindu Parishad gives a clarion call to all factions, sections, sects, sub-sects of all factions. Sections, sects sub-sects of all denominations of Hindus (Sataatan Dharmas, Arya-Samajist, Buddhist, Jains, Radha Swamis, Nirankaris, Nam-Dharis, Sikhs, Ravidais, Valmiki, etc.) to unite together on a common platform to jointly struggle against this above mentioned foreign conspiracies”

The Hindus in general, on the other hand, claim that Sikhism is a branch of their own religion, which has been alienated from their mainstream. Some of the Hindus also counter the claim made by Sikhs that they were the protectors of Hindus. In their opinion, it was an unnecessary and irrelevant assertion in the present context. Such pronouncements, they observed, were akin to treating Hindus as their protégés.

They also allege that Sikhs want to establish a theocratic state. Some of the Hindus resent what they call the appeasement policies of the Government and political parties towards Sikhs. They are of the view that this appeasement was at the cost of the genuine interests. They also alleged that Sikhs are backward in almost every respect, but they are favoured for higher governmental positions. The persecution complex was rooted in the consciousness of both the groups.

Minority Complex

The Hindus, though in a majority at the all India level, suffer from a minority complex within Punjab. The Sikhs, though a majority in the Punjab, have minority complex when they look to India as a whole and the character of the power structure at the centre. The Sikhs who fear assimilation into Hindu religion aspire for strengthening of the revivalist fundamentalist tendencies in order to retain their separate identity. The Punjabi Hindus fear the domination by the Sikhs in the Punjab and, therefore, have a strong tendency to identify themselves with the all India mainstream rather than the Punjabi mainstream.

The self-proclaimed Messiahs of both the Sikhs and the Hindus play on the apprehensions, prejudices and fears of their co-religionists and exploit the discrepancies of self-perceptions between the two, to foster and promote their respective electoral interests. The attitude influences their reactions to the territorial integrity and development demands of Punjab, such as the demand for the inclusion of Chandigarh and other Punjabi speaking areas into Punjab; of the Thein Dam and Mini-steel plants etc. The communalists actively and vociferously advocate and agitate in favour of these demands, which they tend to project as the demand of the Sikhs only. The self-proclaimed leadership of the Hindus does not actively participate and mobilize people on these demands. In the event of the non-realization of such demands the Sikh feeling of being discriminated against gets strengthened.

Communal Consciousness

The kind of attitude may be the manifestation of, as explained earlier, the persecution complex suffered by both these groups. This minority complex which is the basis of communal consciousness can be analysed and understood in the long term historical context. Communal consciousness being a socio-cultural and historical phenomenon, we have drawn a distinction between elements of communalism and communal consciousness. Elements of communalism may be the part of an individual's sub-conscious. He may not be professedly communal, but still these elements may be rooted in his personality.

For most of the time, pseudo-religion takes over to form a political grouping. It is stressed that the group concerned had a glorious past although the glorious past has not led to a satisfactory present. The present aspiration somehow manages to colour the past. "And therefore, contemporary communal politics were projected into the past and the happenings of the past were described so as to serve communal politics of the present, to justify present day communalism".

Start of the Process

This process amongst the Punjabi Hindus started in the pre-Independence period, which was reinforced by the conscious British policy of Divide and Rule. Now whether Britishers actually discriminated against Hindus or whether there was a glorious past, which has not led to a satisfactory present, is a question of enquiry, but that the Hindus perceived so is a question of subjective reality.

The original Hindu culture was invaded by Islam long long ago. The first among the believers reached the shores of Malabar as traders in South East Asia-Roman trade nexus. This intervening variable gave a perception to non-Muslim population as “Hindus”. Centuries of this continued ascription gave an identity to native non-Muslims i.e. Vaishnavites, Shaivites, Jains and other sects. The Hindu elite participated in Muslim world and started learning Persian and adjusted to their culture. These Hindus created a new form of identity and concept of self. There was not much of a crisis of cultural and political identity during the medieval period.

Allowing Hindus to share the spoils of power was a conscious policy of Mughal rulers. The privileges of the rulers and their loyalists depended on communal harmony and stability which they thus ensured. Towards the end of the 17th Century there surfaced a crisis in medieval Indian society. The increasing expenditure of state, due to incessant wars and luxurious life styles of the nobility and intermediaries, could not be met within the old pattern of economic organization. The nobility inflicted more taxes on the already heavily taxed peasantry completing it to rebellion. Failure of the state to maintain law and order resulted in the decline in trade. Thus, the economic crisis deepened. It created conditions which after 1750 broke the monolithic political edifice of Mughal empire into regional kingdoms in Oudh, Bengal and Hyderabad.

Situation under Mughals

The characteristic feature of the stable Mughal rule was a kind of *lessaize faire* in religious matters each religious group had its own personal law, which it administered through its own agents. There were the ‘Qazis’ for the Muslims and the ‘Pandits’ and caste-dominated village Panchayats for the Hindus. It did not matter to commoners who ruled in Delhi-Mughals, Marathas or anyone else. Economic structure based on more or less autonomous villages underpinned for religious group autonomy.

With the advent of British rule, the natives were drawn into the colonial milieu and were compelled to interact with the same. Interaction with the vigorous, modern, secular culture led to the crisis of identity impinging at various points – “from the tradition of Indo-Muslim civilization, from the specific traditions of castes and sub-castes and from their own regional culture. Simultaneously there started a process of reformulation of identities”. This search for identities produced a new form of group consciousness.

A unique situation emerged in Punjab, after the decline of Mughal Empire and ascent of Ranjit Singh to the throne. It gave us exclusive sense of identity to Sikhs. Faced with two proselytizing religions, Islam and Sikhism, the Punjabi Hindus perceived a threat to their identity. The dogmas, superstitions and orthodoxy of Hindu religion was openly attacked. Sikhism was by-product of the degeneration and decline of Hinduism and attracted large number of converts from its fold.

The threat posed by Christianity further accelerated the process of boundary-definition and maintenance amongst Hindus. The lack of political power and inability to protect themselves from competing religions, made Hindus feel insecure. The Hindu tradition was too vague,

too universal and too abstract to cope with this new complex situation created by the imposition of this advanced, cultural milieu which dominated the social and intellectual world of Punjab.

For Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims the arrival of Britishers was a kind of common defeat and common threat. The fear-psychosis accelerated the process of self-identification and purification amongst three groups which ultimately brought them into conflict with each other. The sense for new separate identity was further sharpened in Punjab province because of the minority complex which gripped all the groups at that time. To quote:

“Muslims were a majority in Punjab, a minority in South Asia, and members of a great world community. Hindus were a minority in Punjab, a majority in South Asia and members of a unique but somewhat isolated community on a world wide scale. Only the Sikhs retained a consistent minority status whatever yard stick was used to measure them.....Majority and minority status then were not determined by statistics but perception was more often than not shaped by underlying fears”.

Perception of Threat

This minority complex, in then situation of hostile political arrangements was coupled with the threat from the religion of the rulers. In the case of Muslims, and Sikhs, it was more due to the loss of privileged position enjoyed by them in the pre-British period.

Violent attempt to overthrow the British in 1857 having failed, the oppressive system produced simultaneously, a cultural renaissance and a nationalist movement. The reformist movements were launched. A small group of Bengalis, along with a few Punjabis founded the Brahmo Samaj of Lahore in 1863. It did provide, for a while of course, a sense of identity to the Punjabi Hindus. The Sikhs, unlike the Hindus, had a history of political dominance. They could look back to their immediate past when they ruled and the presence of Sikh princely states was a symbol of their past dominance.

Adjustment with British

The Punjabi Hindus uprooted as they were, were too quick to adjust with the British system. This created a psychological crisis of participating to alienation of the Punjabi Hindu middle class in general. On the other hand, the growing urge of the Sikhs and the Muslims for self-identification also contributed to the isolation of some sections of Hindu extremists. This alienation was all the more visible in its cultural form. These Punjabi Hindus needed a faith, which should be a mixture of the British and the regional culture. The Arya Samaj in the end of the 19th century made inroads into Punjab with great success for it answered that need. The Brahmo Samaj did offer some resistance, but their acceptance of European culture and social forms proved a tactical error. “Many Punjabi Hindus saw the world as a positive place of opportunity and hope. Arya ideology filled the psychological vacuum felt by marginal and alienated Hindu striving to relate both to their parental world and the new anglicized reality of British India. The class interests of an emerging Hindu elite converged with Arya ideology which stressed literacy and the need for Vedic knowledge” Partly these reformist

movements and their irresponsible literature, and partly the British policies carefully formulated to reign as the supreme political force, aggravated the tensions and conflicts”

In the beginning of 20th century history was rewritten. B.G. Tilak’s revival of Shivaji as a national hero and Sivarkar’s *The First War of Independence* provided a reference point to Punjabi Hindus specifically. It was evident from the fact that even municipalities were used to purify Hindu religion. The existing parties including the professedly secular Indian National Congress accepted the absurd extremist demands and allowed itself to be drawn into Hindu revivalists movements and activities. For example, in Punjab, “The cow protectionists were very generally Congressmen – and many of them were also the pioneers of the Hindu Sabha, founded in December 1915, with headquarters at Allahabad”. Lala Lajpat Rai mobilized Punjabi Hindus on communal lines. This led to the use of Hindu symbols and heroes both within and outside Punjab. It was communal competition which provided direction to future political actions of Punjabi Hindus.

Hindu Money-lenders

The commercialization of agriculture and the new system of revenue collection in which land became private property provided an opportunity to traditional Punjabi Hindu money-lender to corner the limited benefits. This limited nature of development is also evident in the slow growth of Punjab’s cities and towns. The Hindu commercial classes got leverage from this system and started buying land. This transfer and alienation of land from peasant proprietor created new sources of tension. The British Administration at this time introduced Land Alienation Act, which divided Punjabis into agriculturists. The Bill adversely affected the economic interests of the Hindu traders.

“Educated Punjabi Hindus reacted to the proposed Land Alienation Act with anger and fear”. This Punjabi middle class perceived that they were consciously discriminated against and policies framed by the Britishers were jeopardizing their privileges.

Unity and Break

At this juncture, the peasant movements were launched against increase in the water rates on the land irrigated by Bari Doab Canal and the proposed Colonization of Land Bill strengthening government control over the Chenab colony. The above mentioned two factors and issue of the Land Alienation Act tended to unite rural and urban Punjabis. Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh spearheaded a movement against the British in the first decade of the 20th century. British Government accepted the two demands of peasant proprietors and in the process isolated the urban Hindu money lenders. The apparent solidarity with rural counterpart, under the ruthless repression of British administration crumbled. Not only this unity of Punjabi Hindus also vanished, as every group sought to process its own interests.

By 1910, the competition for jobs and other benefits became communalized. These feelings of communalism were institutionalized through: (i) the process of boundary-definition and maintenance, intensified against each other. Earlier, Hindu reformers directed it towards Christianity and Islam but now it was against Sikhism also. Similar trends were manifested amongst Sikhs too, as is evident from the Singh Sabha and Gurudwara reform movements;

(ii) the economic and social pressures gave distinct identities to otherwise indistinguishable elite belonging to the same class, identifying at particular time, one as a villain and the other as a hero and vice-versa.

The growing on the part of educated Sikhs for self-identification added fuel to the fire. The communalism of one group fed the communalism of the other. The basic argument here is that the economic imperialism and political sovereignty of the British in India-dictated to them a policy of fanning communalism. For instance, British writers consistently projected Sikhs as having a separate entity and identity and recruitment of Sikhs into armed forces strengthened the notion of martial race and the defenders of Hindu interests. The promotion of Chief Khalsa Diwan against the Nationalist Movement further cemented this separate identity of Sikh intelligentsia. This situation posed a question before educated Sikhs, "Were Sikhs simply another branch of Hinduism or a separate faith and a separate people"

Arya Samaj leadership

The Arya Samaj leadership due to their own ideological and circumstantial compulsions like the Sikhs could not avoid becoming victim of British designs to create communal rivalry between these two groups. For instance, the extremist Arya Samajists started a Shuddhi programme, in which Rahtia's (the outcaste Sikh's) heads were shaved. "In a swirl of frustration, fear and anger, the educated Sikhs struck out against the Aryas; with this rejection of Arya support came as well the rejection of Shuddhi as a concept that was essentially Hindu. Sikhs turned back to their own traditional ways as a true form of conversion". This Sikh fear of assimilation into Hindu religion impaired strength to the revivalist fundamentalist tendencies.

Economic Competition

Economic competition that developed between educated Sikhs and Hindus contributed to a greater extent to the process of creating a gulf between these two groups. The educated Sikhs and Hindus, a minority of the minority, devised ways and means to reinforce their privileged position. It was more applicable in the case of the Punjabi Hindus. This was more the initiation of the process of politicization, leading to the clash of interests of Hindu traders with emerging peasant leadership.

The constitutional development – Motley-Minto Reforms of 1909, Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 and the Act of 1935 – perpetuated and intensified (in as much as they necessitated competition for the limited unofficial elected seats) the communal problem and also reinforced the sense of exclusiveness in social inter-action amongst Hindus. For the Punjabi Hindus, these issues were communal, and not national. Then developments like Shuddhi and the Sangathan movements of 1920s hardened the communal outlook of the Hindus.

The Gurudwara Reform Movement and later on the movements launched by Master Tara Singh mobilized urban educated and Sikh traders and also Sikh Jat peasantry. This further accelerated the process of the assertion of a distinct and unified identity of the Sikhs. This

phase of unity between different factions of the Sikhs could not survive for long. It was at this time that the educated Sikhs provided leadership to the rural Sikhs.

To counter the Punjabi Suba demand raised by Master Tara Singh, agitation for Hindi was launched during the phase¹². The Punjabi Hindus having affiliation with Arya Samaj, Jan Sangh, etc. were of the view that this issue had nothing to do with language and it was primarily a political question. They advocated 'Maha Punjab' irrespective of language. The traditional nature of society and mobilization on communal lines led to this kind of reaction on the part of Punjab urban Hindu traders. This was the political manifestation of religious assertion on the part of educated Hindus and Hindu trader. Communal overtones in this were quite visible and explicit though there was not much tension between these two religious groups.

Language Politics

The impression that the non-identification of Punjabi Hindus with the Punjabi language is the root cause of the problem of communalism is too superficial, an explanation for such a complex phenomenon. It is also alleged that since Punjabi Hindus do not accept Punjabi as their own language, they are not emotionally involved with it. But this is not the case. Many movements and agitations launched in Punjab, in favour of the Hindi language, could not emotionally detach Hindus from the Punjabi language and culture. The movements remained anti-Punjabi Suba in character. (These observations are based on a survey conducted in the year 1979.)

The language question was thus primarily a political question. To identify politically with a particular issue is quite different from being emotionally involved with it. The Punjabi Hindus did mention their mother tongue to be Hindi, but Punjabi was nevertheless in their blood. The 1981 census has made this point crystal clear, in which a overwhelming majority of Hindus have offered Punjabi to be their mother tongue. From this it can be interred that it is superficial to argue in favour of or otherwise, of emotional attachment/detachment with a particular language, on the basis of mere identification with one or the other language, by two competing groups.

It was a political question, in the sense that the Hindi agitation was launched, when there was a move to re-organize states on the basis of language. Most of the leaders of Hindi agitation were of the view that there was an attempt to establish a Sikh and theocratic state. The pro-Hindi movement was thus only a political response to the danger of a Sikh state being created in the name of a Punjabi state. That it was altogether illogical is a different matter. The slogan was different from reality. The articulation of communal interests, as reflected in the slogans used for this purpose, should not, however, be seen as the cause of communal disharmony. They are in fact symptoms of a deeper malaise. The cause of this malaise must be seriously investigated because while symptoms do not explain a phenomenon, causes do.

Split in Akali Dal

The extremists and the moderates kept on raising slogans like self-determined political status for Sikhs in one form or the other. The split in the Akali Dal in the year 1962, led to

the concentration of power in the hands of rural Jat peasantry in the organization. It also increased their share in political power. Sant Fateh Singh was elected the President of the parallel Akali Dal. The reorganization of the state in 1966, coupled with the success of green revolution strategy strengthened the hold of rural Jat bourgeoisie on the state politics which isolated the urban Sikh traders.

Punjab Pradesh Congress shared the ideology of communalism. The only point of difference was whereas the Akali Dal, the Jana Sangh, the Arya Samaj were professedly communal, passive communalism prevailed in Congress. Pratap Singh Kairon gave equal share in power to both the Hindus and the Sikhs. Representatives of both the groups specially having sympathies with the Akali Dal, the Arya Samaj and the Jana Sangh, may have co-operated with Kairon, but the cooperation was seen as one between the representatives of the Sikhs and the Hindus. Further Kairon's flirtation with SGPC elections also helped in politicization of religious affairs. That, however, did not lead to tension. The reasons were quite obvious. It was a period of rising economic and political expectations - development of industries, the building of an infrastructure, the extension of area under agriculture production, the expansion of education and increase in the employment. This phase was also characterized by the presence of national leaders with somewhat clear long term perspective.

Tensions Increase

The point which is being highlighted here is that the tensions and demands which could be accommodated by mid-sixties increased in quantity and intensity to such a level that it led to a crisis. The period also coincided with the coming to an end of the generation of national leaders which represented continuity with the traditions of national leaders which represented continuity with the traditions of national movement for independence. For instance, the exit of Partap Singh Kairon as the Chief Minister and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's death, gave a fillip to blatant communal politics. The congress was a divided house in the Punjab, and the party was devoid of a powerful and popular leader, who could have resisted the reorganization of the state in communal basis.

Later in the year 1972, Giani Zail Singh, the then Chief Minister of Punjab and presently President of India, pioneered the policy of fighting communalists in their own ground, with their own weapons. This had disastrous consequences on inter-religious group relationships. The policy of appeasement of communalists strengthened the communal forces and isolated the secular elements. Zail Singh strategically mobilized the second rank leadership of these groups to suit his narrow personal political interest. He did prove successful as a politician, but cost of his success was too high to be paid by the generations to come. Despite the commitment to Darbara Singh to secular politics, the question remains: how far he would be successful in reversing the process, when his own bandwagon is full of opportunistic and communal elements and everyone is stranded in a corrupt political milieu. The tragedy with Punjabis was that majority of their leaders, whether in Congress or in any other party, were Sikhs or Hindus first and anything else later. They kept on fighting for Hindu interests or Sikh interests without realizing that in politics, in economic life and in society, there were no such interests. Indian state, whatever may its drawbacks be, is not organized on communal lines and does not recognize and entertain any such interests in terms of the Constitution.

Class Formation

The point which is being made here is that the nature of class formation in Punjabi society has created new sources of tension. The growth of industrialization has given birth to a new class of Hindu and Sikh bourgeoisie. The internal contradictions arising out of competition for market within industrial capital and that within the merchant capital, acquire a communal form of competition and antagonism between Sikh and Hindu capitalists and between Hindu traders and Sikh traders. Further, the rural bourgeoisie, having access to political powers, is now investing its surplus in industrial production. They are coming into clash with urban Hindu and Sikh traders. These competing groups – the Hindu traders, the Sikh traders and the rural jat bourgeoisie – give religious colouring to their economic interests.

The internal contradictions between the Sikh and the Hindu communalists have led to polarization at the leadership as well as the grass-root level. This polarization has a two-pronged effect: On the one hand, it has provided (not much contested) support base to extremists in the form of some sections of disgruntled, unemployed, politically deprived non-jat urban Sikhs. On the other hand, the growing popularity of puritans like Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala has brought him into direct conflict with Akalis.

The continuous propagation of the fact that political power is controlled by rural Jat-Sikhs, led the urban Sikh traders, supposedly a deprived group, to question the institutional structure and legitimacy of the dominant group. These internal contradictions in Sikh politics have aggravated the communal temper. It is relevant to mention here that some political parties may exploit this kind of situation for making their power position temporarily advantageous. Inner party rivalries in the Congress (I) is a case in point. Further, it would be interesting to note the stand taken by the BJP and the RSS. It is relevant because it explains the emergence of Brahman Samaj in the Punjab and the active role which it is playing in perpetuating communal hatred.

Development Strategy

The meaning and significance of these tendencies has to be understood by taking into consideration the perspective and vision which has influenced policy making in the formulation of developmental strategies for economic transformation. It was assumed that modernization in agriculture and industry would automatically subsume obscurantist values and regional, caste and communal tensions. And that would, in turn, create environment conducive for societal welfare, distributive justice and furtherance of scientific temper. What we see is just the opposite. The reactionary forces and obscurantist values have got strengthened leading to varied forms of tensions. So, there is need for a second look at the strategy of development. This was not a total strategy. It was confined merely to economic development and lost sight of the socio-cultural planning. It is this neglect which has aggravated the present crisis.