

Community, Communalism and Globalization: A Sociological Analysis

Anindya Bhattacharyya

Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Gour Banga, Malda

Abstract: *Communities are volatile in a globalized era. Consequently, community-identities are not fixed. Yet the world visualizes a number of conflicting situations. This article shall discuss the construction of identity and how communalism is differently oriented than the idea of community. The paper aims to see why ascriptive status is questioned but the achieved status of the community is never put into any question when we talk of communalism and/or communal violence?*

Keywords: community, community violence, communalism, community-identity, communities in a globalized era

In India in particular and South Asia in general, we find an academic discourse on communal violence where a substantial number of scholars and academicians in their writings on communalism refer to inter-religious violence as an example of communal violence and its shock-waves. In these discussions, we find two analyses of why and how violence is organized and if movements are an expression of those or what the results of such violent acts are. What we do not look for is what causes two communities to move continually apart from each other causing cultural and socio-economic distance between them. In India, the word communalism itself symbolizes and is used in connection to division and conflict. But in other parts of the world especially outside South Asia, the word 'communal' is used concerning social integrity and solidarity. We in India use the word 'communal' as negative feelings toward other religions. If we delve deeper into this discourse, we might find concepts like 'communal dance', 'communal living', 'communal sentiment' and 'communal decision' which are associated with social integrity and solidarity. All these concepts influence us as social beings and our thought; we tend to discuss these in the backdrop of our own values of public sharing. The concept of 'public sharing' stands in opposition to what is 'private' and 'good' and teaches us to be patient with other communities. In India, the word 'communal' is looked into from a negative perspective as a social divisor, politically regressive.¹

The historical root of such linguistic illusion can be found in cases where the British rulers have identified non-Hindu, minority upsurges or

movements as 'communal' in the past.² The result was that whenever there was a non-Hindu conflict of interest with the colonial rulers it was labelled by religious identity and marked as 'communal.' Therefore, the use of the word 'communal' and its backdrop is very important to understand the evolution of the concept and the causes of its use in India. When we speak of a 'village community,' or an 'urban community,' or 'rural community' then we do not ascribe any religious identity to those. It is in common parlance or commonsensical terms the word 'community' is added to mean a group of people like the teachers, students, citizens but this meaning of the term 'community' is not extended to the term communal.'

Till now the in context of the discussion we can say that communalism is an ideologically operative concept and before going into a detailed sociological analysis of the word 'communalism' we need to understand the word 'community.' The Cambridge Dictionary defines community as the place of living of all people in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group or nationality. Sociologically speaking community is a group of people who interact with one another for example as friends or neighbours. Second, this interaction is typically viewed as occurring within a bounded geographical territory such as a neighbourhood or city. Third, these community members often share common values, beliefs or behaviour.³ It means a community is identified with a distinct area or geographical locality where the people residing there interact with each other in their life experiences, share values and identify with the same norms. This generates a 'we' feeling strong enough to identify with commonly shared values and beliefs. Crossing the immediate genealogical ties may also help to build relationships that construct the blocks of feelings of one community. This type of extended relationship lends us identity, gives us the meaning of playing different roles in everyday practices.

The classical understanding of 'community' in sociology wanted to look at how the societies live in harmony; how different groups stay integrated and how their own features help them to stay united and strong enough to endure changes. Community upholds group-oriented living and hinders any kind of isolation and individualism. In short, community creates a range of activities for people, unites them and discourages isolation. This idea of community is relatively stable and homogeneous. But with time community slowly develops into an association⁴. If we look at community from this perspective then the community is a reality of the past and association is of the present. This association is dominated by commercial organizations and bureaucratic normative structures. So, we see that community subsides with the rise of urban centres. The relationships slowly are oriented toward a specific purpose and conflicting nature.

The idea of a community brings with it the sense of comradeship where individual members show their identity with the sense of belongingness oscillating between deeper to the subtlety of its kind with their primary kin

and other members of the community. Agreement, recognition, cooperation is the key to their relationship with other members including their kinsfolk. The unifying factor gets stronger with their identity with the features that their community stands for. It is not always natural unity but sometimes it is assumed to be natural or as imagined.⁵ In comparison between communities what stands as important is the division between 'us' and 'them.' Any person can stand for a group to which s/he feels that s/he belongs and understands, feels easy to share everyday social activity. On contrary, 'others' comprise those whose lives we cannot enter, we believe to be difficult to understand nor aspire to belong to. We suspect 'them', are fearful of 'them' causing concern for 'us.' This distinction between 'us' and 'them' are presented as our group and theirs marking severe breaks in-between, separable yet closely knot as there cannot be 'us' without 'them.'

There are many minority groups in every society which are often surplus in contrast to the 'one' major group of persons within each society viewed as the independent group that has nothing to do with 'other' minority groups. The 'other' is predictably seen as a menace to the 'one'. 'Othering' within society customarily results in the elimination of the 'other' from the 'one.' By 'othering' we mentally or practically classify an individual or group as 'not one of us.' Therefore, inferior or less a human person than we are, a process of casting another person/ group or object into a position or role different from mine or ours and 'I' or 'we' subsequently establish 'my' or 'own' identity in opposition to the other person in a relationship of superiority that allows me or us to hate the 'other.' By this process of 'othering' a system of blocking the other comes to play where the fundamental opportunities and rights of a group or a community are jeopardized.⁶

The separation of 'us' from 'them' is sometimes presented in sociological literature as in-group and out-group. We cannot separate them completely, for there cannot be one without the other. Thus creating a map of the antagonistic relationship of binary opposition. Such fixities in assumptions render both groups aware of their membership in each group. In this way, inner solidarity and coherence are created. Such logic evokes in each group a sense of belongingness expressed through metaphors like sisterhood, brotherhood and nationhood. That inspires loyalty towards my own folks. This imaginary we-feeling provides us with a cushion of emotional safe-guards and mutual sympathy with a determination to defend our own interests against those who challenge them. But the most important thing here is that these situations are those where class, gender, race, ethnicity and religion cut across to give a layered concept of identity formation and boundary maintenance. The boundary of a group may be endangered from outside these people and from inside too. Within the group, there might be some people who might leave the group. From the outside, there may be some who are considered to be potential threats. Those who come from outside may be strangers who question the clarity and features of the group. Thus, it creates tension, conflict of interests: turning a favourable situation into a situation of ridicule and

hostility. At a national level, this can play havoc creating impracticable situations of separation, the close process of interaction and creating hostility and prejudice. The idea of containing purity of the communities can come to the fore stretching the idea of contamination as a tradition of avoidance in both groups. This boundary set by both the communities, 'we' and 'they' are thus fixed with the possibilities of porous infiltration open both ways. In this ubiquitous insider/outsider dichotomy, in the process of collective identity development, one community disentangles the other through boundary formation that produces 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Cultural knowledge scripts this identity by negotiating collective understanding of 'what we are' and 'what we are not.' In the latter part of identity formation, the 'what we are not' is exclusionary fuelling dehumanisation and leading to violence.⁷

In India, ethnicity has a close equivalent in the term communalism, particularly in the way the latter is used in the Indian context. Communalism is about identities which are ascriptive in nature and has in addition a particularly critical connotation. Communalism is backwards-looking in contrast to forward-looking secularism.⁸ In America in contrast, communalism is a good word for it calls out to community-fellow feeling and a rather cherishable attribute of goodwill and neighbourliness (Ibid). In India, communalism in particular is seen in the light of the nature of the relationship between Hindus and Muslims or between Sikhs and Hindus.⁹ In India, in public discourse, in particular, communities are often thought of as religious groups in the first place.¹⁰

The objective of this paper is to see why ascriptive status is questioned but the achieved status of the community is never problematized when we talk of communalism and/or communal violence?

Argument

Modernity is a historical situation. But contemporary time is labelled as 'modern', 'post-modern', 'late-modern' etc. Out of these, there is a potential debate among social scientists on the suitable label to explain the contemporary time. In India, if we label the British regime as 'modern' then communalism has to be understood in the context of this modern. The British rule in India destroyed the rural differentiation and created the idea of a nation-state by producing a coherent village community out of the isolated village communities. The use of machine technology in agriculture increased the development of communication, the establishment of determined bureaucratic rule, money economy brought about a structural transformation in Indian village society. After one hundred and ninety years of British rule, the state under independent India gave lesser importance to everyday community living of its citizen and its dynamics than to industrialization. The result was the state was largely ignorant of the small changes within communities; how these communities were maintaining boundaries with each other. Therefore, after seventy-six years of independence, the seeds of

community antagonism were sowed and it grew into a magnanimous range. In the question of identity formation at least in its formative stage, the members of different communities did not look at their achieved status under the magnifying glass but rather looked at ascribed status.

In India in the first half of the 1990s globalization brought about massive changes, introducing open markets and liberal economies. The concept of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) not only affected India's eco-structural basis but also started to influence the psyche of its citizens. It affected economic sectors directly and indirectly affected traditional thinking, agriculture-based pluralistic society and most importantly culture. The goods and services produced in any part of the world were made available at the click of a button in any part of India. This brought about changes in the urban and the rural communities by influencing choices made, choices available in clothing, food, aesthetic culture, films, language, behaviour and the world of thought and intellect. The traditional collective existence started to change into individualised subsistence. The culture of the community started to yield to the new forces slowly.

The inevitability of globalization cannot be ignored now. The networks of my economic, social and political life are bound by the 'world wide web.' As a corollary to that the culture of the communities is now framed for a larger perspective. The communities at the remotest corner too are now part of a continuum and shaped by different events that take place in different parts of the world. The revolutionary changes in ICT brought about new symbols. The consumer products of a globalized world also have brought about homogeneity in the world. The use of different apparatus and virtual platforms not only brought different people spatially scattered on a platform of equality but also communication was made easier and affordable. The relationship quotient changed yielding to newer kinds of relationships bringing people together in a 'global village.' The technology-oriented communication empowered the regional/local communities.

But the crisis of cultural autonomy was never free from these newer kinds of relations. With the rise of consumerism, the purpose of every individual, group and community is how they would guzzle the various goods and services produced for the mass.

Globalization is not a unilateral force. The push of globalization is immense; as a result of it, the local culture is impacted. It not only opened up to the globalized market it also started to show resistance. The reason behind this is that the mixed culture though India is pluralist still has homogeneity in some sectors. The caste, ethnic relations, religious affiliations have started to show their discontentment in some areas. As the market is open, so is the right to expression and therefore any concept is challenged at any time by anyone. The space or the field which was specified in the past, the value-tolerance that was inevitably followed changed. With the rise of individualism members of all communities now have multiple choices. But

the point to remember is the field now is competitive. The people who have control over resources try to control others. Thus, there is a rise in a new narrative. Relatively spread and open field in real terms has shrunk. The self-identity construction which was a part of socialization inevitably gave way to a globalized citizen impacting change like feeling for the community, feeling for other communities. As a result, we find a separate and distinct presence of self-identity. To manipulate the resources, the communities run into each other in competitions. The communitarian tradition was never salvaged and communities and community sentiments emerged as mutually complementary two issues. Modernity and globalization gave new meaning to communalism. This communalism is embedded in mistrust and misogyny. Trust is not meant for those who are discernible. Rather it is a feature of communities of traditional societies. Therefore, in a globalized world, there is a lack of trust which runs into risk and insecurity for communities.¹¹

If we look at globalization as the symbol of plenty then communalism becomes a symbol of decay. In India, as the British are considered the promoters of the phenomenon called communalism, likewise caste system is a hindrance to modernity. The tremendous forces of globalization have attracted people to get included in the global order. The only condition presented before all is the presence of a body, not any individual. We look for certain signs and therefore some with the signs we know get included and we discard those who have different signs. So, globalization is not a network worldwide spread over distant bases, not the ultimate development of information technology, it is a globalized transformation of the spread of family, education, business, practices, religious practices, political rights and role performance. The other name for this transformation is modernity.

Notes and References

1. P. Singh, *Institutional Communalism in India*, in Rehman, M. (Ed) *Communalism in Post-colonial India: Changing Contours*. London, Routledge, 2018
2. C. Bates, (2000), notes that communalism is a term used in India but was discovered by colonialists in the nineteenth century to refer to religious and /or ethnic differences for political ends. It is related to but is very different from the idea of 'community'. Upadhyay and Robinson (2012) have shown that besides communal being a colonial legacy for political gains, communalism is the outcome of competitive desires of authority and counter-domination which took its shape in colonial times.
3. Z.P. Neal, (2020), 'A sign of the times? Weak and strong polarization in the US Congress, 1973–2016, *Social Networks*, 60, pp. 103-112
4. F. Tonnies, *Community and Association (Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft)*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1995
5. Anderson in his essay has shown how in relation to nationalism individuals unite despite linguistic diversity, capitalist formations and

technological advancements.

6. Arselm Cole, Jimoh, (2020), and Bauman and May (2019), Third Edition
7. Rehman, *The Violence of Identity Formation and the case of Hizmet Exceptionalism*, ' in Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Timothy Seidel (Ed) *The Hizmet Movement and Peace building: Global Cases*, Maryland: Lexington Books. 2018
8. D. Gupta, *Between Ethnicity and Communalism: The Significance of the Nation State* in R. Kaur (Ed) *Religion, Violence and Political mobilization in South Asia*, New Delhi: Sage, 2005
9. R.S. Sharma, *Communalism and India's Past*, in *Social Scientist*, 18(1-2), Jan. & Feb., 1990, pp. 3-12
10. C. K. Mehmood, *Rethinking Indian Communalism: Culture and Counter-Culture*, in *Asian Survey*, 33 (7), 1993, pp. 722-737
11. A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity press, 1991

References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London: Verso
- Bates, C. (2000), 'Communalism and Identity among South Asian Diaspora,' in Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics
- Bauman, Z. And May, T. (2019), *Thinking Sociologically*, (Third Edition), Oxford: Wiley Blackwell
- Giddens, A. (1991) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity press
- Gupta, D. (2005), 'Between Ethnicity and Communalism: The Significance of the Nation State' in R. Kaur (Ed) *Religion, Violence and Political mobilization in South Asia*, New Delhi: Sage
- Jimoh, A. K. (2020), 'Justice and the Othered Minority: Lessons from African Communalism', in *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference*, Springer.
- Mehmood, C. K. (1993), *Rethinking Indian Communalism: Culture and Counter-Culture*, in *Asian Survey*, 33 (7)
- Neal, Z. P. (2020), A sign of the times? Weak and strong polarization in the US Congress, 1973–2016, *Social Networks*
- Rehman, J. L. (2018), 'The Violence of Identity Formation and the case of Hizmet Exceptionalism,' in Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Timothy Seidel (Ed) *The Hizmet Movement and Peace building: Global Cases*, Maryland: Lexington Books
- Sharma, R. S. (1990), *Communalism and India's Past*, in *Social Scientist*, 18(1-2), Jan. & Feb.
- Upadhayay, S. P. and Robinson, R. (2012), 'Revisiting Communalism and Fundamentalism in India', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, Issue 36, 8 September