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POLITICS AND THE ISSUE OF MINORITIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

India home to almost one-sixth of the world population has become a unique case of heterogeneous society. Almost all major different races, cultures, religions, ethnic groups and diverse identities find an element of their presence in this subcontinent. This varied character of population has always been a significant factor in determining the course of Indian among almost all of them inhabit this region. Further there are Kashmiris, Punjabis, Bengalis, Malayalis, Tamils, Telugus, Kannadas and other linguistic identities in India. In addition to it there are rich and poor, rural and urban people living in India giving it a further flavour of diversity.



politics. Today this has come to occupy the pivotal issue around which the struggle for power in India revolves. There are Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Buddhists, Jains and Zoroastrians in India. At the same time traditional identities of Brahmins, Kashatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, Ashrafs, Ajlafs, Jat Sikhs, Ravidasia Sikhs, Mazhabi Sikhs, Rai Sikhs, Catholics, Protestants and Dalits

KEYWORDS : *linguistic identities , Indian politics , heterogeneous society.*

INTRODUCTION :

Though term Secular has no where been used in the main text of the Constitution of India yet its Preamble declares it to be a secular democratic country.ⁱ The constitution makes it clear that there shall be no State religion and there shall be no preferred citizens. As far as democracy is concerned India happens to be the largest democracy in the world warranting political participation of all diversities present in India as they have an equal stake in the policy making and determining the future of the country. However, democracy is not only related to governance but is about numbers as well. Therefore different sections depending upon their numbers become more or less significant as far as government making is concerned and here the issue of minorities takes prominence.

The term 'minority' pertains to a fraction of the population having a distinct race, language or religion or some other social feature because of which others look on them as somewhat different and separate from the rest, while the minority suspiciously views the others as dominant.ⁱⁱ In the socio-political context of India, the term 'minority' encompasses groups of every possible type—racial, linguistic, religious and territorial and in addition groups unique to Indian society: minorities on the basis of inferior caste status etc. Generally speaking all the religions in India other than the Hinduism and various weaker sections of society are taken as to be a part of minority. Taking advantage of the vulnerability and insecurity of minorities in India, which is natural to a minority anywhere in the world, electoral considerations have led

secular political parties to treat the minorities as vote banks. Many scholars and academicians along with different political interests believe that this has led them to encourage, or at-least not oppose, the political consolidation of minorities on non-programmatic, non-ideological or even plainly communal grounds.ⁱⁱⁱ

Muslims in India though next only to Indonesia in terms of number constitute the largest minority.^{iv} Although they comprise of almost 14% population of India yet happen to be the economically most backward with lowest employment rate. The Christians second largest minority have the biggest presence in the state of Kerela and other north-eastern states. They are well represented in welfare and other social services of under privileged like health and education field. The Sikhs though scattered through out the country have a big presence in north India specially, Punjab where they happen to be not only in majority but the dominant ones. They are excellent agriculturalists, have played a very significant role in the Green Revolution and have always maintained a larger share in the Indian defence forces. Apart from it other religious minorities like the Jains and the Buddhists have also contributed significantly to the Indian socio-political system.

The debates at the time of framing of Indian constitution spirited around the idea that India shall have no concern with any religion, creed or profession of faith; and shall observe an attitude of absolute neutrality in all matters relating to the religion of any class of its citizens or other persons in the Union.^v Constitution of India provides for many different provisions related to avoidance of discrimination and securing the interests and progress of these minority communities. Nevertheless, like any other nation of the world, minorities face several problems in India as well. These minority groups despite living side by side to Hindu population have not been able to identify and mix totally with the Hindu dominant society. The minorities allege that they have been discriminated against Hindus and have been rather disadvantaged in fields of employment, politics, economic front and other social facilitations. The minorities are poorly represented in bureaucracy, medicine, engineering and education departments.^{vi}

Though secularism and equal respect for all sections of society specially minorities has been adopted as the fundamental tenets of the Constitution of India yet it is confronted with multi faceted and multi dimensional challenges. Many a times different extremist political groups like BJP/VHP/RSS brand it to be a pseudo secularism with a tendency to appease minorities especially Muslims. In a conference at Bangalore RSS declared that the security of the minority community depends on the Good will of the majority. The RSS and organisations of the *parivaar* have been constantly criticising the Congress leaders for their appeasement of the minority, especially Muslims.^{vii} It also becomes evident from the fact, that the Indian National Congress keeping in view the multi religiousness of Indian society could also not desist itself from the phenomenon of appeasement of minorities and advantages thereof. That's why in order to reassure the minorities the Congress elected its first three presidents out of four from among them only: Badruddin Tyabji (Muslim), Dadabhai Naoroji (Parsi), and George Yule (Christian).^{viii}

Contrarily there have been apprehensions among dominant groups that in order to enlarge their presence, the Christians are involved in the process of converting the low caste Hindus or tribes to their own religion. This has many times resulted in the killings and intense violent conflicts between the majority Hindus and the minority Christians. Obviously this has led to distrust and feeling of insecurity amongst the Christian minority in India.^{ix} The Hindu-Muslim communal riots, especially during and after the partition instilled a sense of insecurity among the Muslims. The Babri Masjid demolition and then anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat, 2002, in retaliation to the Godhra incidence have also brought to the front the communal sensitivity and divide in India. The religion has been manipulated by different political parties for their gains by vitiating the electoral process by communal and extremist forces. The above mentioned incidents like Ram Janam Bhoomi-Babri Masjid, Godhara riots etc. stand an example to it.^x At the time of these crises different minority groups tend to look towards the government apparatus for providing them security. However, many a times, governments fail to provide it because of an element of surprise with which they are taken, unpreparedness or even unwillingness. The inability of the Modi government in Gujarat to control riots and provide protection especially to the Muslims after Godhra incidence stands a perfect example.^{xi}

This is not to raise finger at a particular political party but had also been witnessed when the Rajiv Gandhi Congress government at the Centre was humiliated for its failure to provide adequate security to the Sikhs after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi the then Prime Minister.^{xii} The government has also time and again succumbed to the pressure of communal organisations and groups as is evident from the enactment of the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, banning of Stanic Verses, opening up the locks of Babri Masjid etc. All this makes it ample clear that government have played ethnic/minority card from time to time for the promotion of their own sectional interests.^{xiii}

The most of these communal riots in the country have been the handiwork of disgruntled politicians, in nexus with mafia, anti-social elements and criminals. The above mentioned and other like incidents which are very common in India reveal some serious inherent weaknesses and vulnerability of Indian commitment towards secularism, democracy and other principles enshrined in our constitution. These instances not only make the condition of minorities complex and critical but also reduce secularism to mere slogan of opportunism and populism. The recent Jaipur literature festival brought another amusing fact to the fore front where the government felt that Muslim minority, almost fourteen crore in number, was vulnerable to a few writers and cartoonists. Political gains have been the main guiding principles behind all this which also reflects the inability of the government to deal with the crises.^{xiv}

Dalits and other weaker suppressed castes and classes in India represent another facet of the minorities in India. The roots of Dalit oppression can be traced back to the origins of the caste system in Hindu religion contained in the Manusmriti, a sacred Hindu text dating from the second century BC.^{xv} Although the constitution of India abolishes untouchability primarily associated with Dalits yet they have not been able to become a part of mainstream debates and discussions despite the controversial system of reservations at all levels. As most of them are marginal farmers or landless labourers, economic exploitation remains their biggest concern. Large numbers migrate to cities or other places in search of better living prospects whereas others are in debt and are obliged to work-off their debts as bonded labour. In practice such debts are almost impossible to be paid back as interest rates are high and poverty forces the labourer into deeper debt which is likely to be passed on to the next generation creating a vicious cycle. In case of resistance it is met with violence.^{xvi} Undoubtedly, reservation has been in existence since independence and even before that and has helped in creation of new educated dalit middle class, but this is relatively and proportionately very low.^{xvii} The benefits have been found to be limited to a few dominant groups within dalits where as the majority of them who are actually needy, still fail to utilize the privileges.^{xviii}

Another drawback has been the absence of their children from schools. Though education documents assure that schools are available within walking distance to all children yet when it comes to ground reality the picture is not that encouraging. Moreover, most of the times these schools are located in upper caste area practically in accessible to lower caste children also adds to the plight.^{xix} Again different political parties from time to time tried to take up the issues related to these minority groups of castes but they have ultimately led to disillusionment and disappointment only. Congress, BJP, SP, RJD, BSP etc. all have been tried from time and again but all of them have so far only paid lip service to these communities and nothing concrete has come out as of yet. The gap between rich and poor has only widened and given rise to only a new class of rich dalits who have gained out of the political exploit of their ex brethren.

Though secularism is supported by minorities as it has allowed them to preserve their personal laws and minority status yet on the contrary they criticise Indian political system on the pretext that it has failed to protect their interests particularly during times of crises i.e., communal riots etc.^{xx} Nonetheless, various minority related issues have put a lot of pressure on the governments to formulate and implement policies keeping view of them. These groups are so much heterogeneous and fragmented that it becomes difficult to cover the varied interests in a single plan. There are substantial difficulties faced while dealing with the issue; these include problems with the implementation of policies currently dealing with property rights and interests and the restructuring of rights of religious minorities. The plurality existing within the political framework and the pressures generated by it are now witnessing the results and a process of social blending affecting the position of minority groups can be realised.

It is urgently required that the various social benefit schemes being run on papers actually reach the masses and for it the people need to be made aware about these and their utilisation. India has been running caste-based reservation since independence for the upliftment of dalits and to some extent it has proven useful too. These new educated dalits should come forward and make others also aware so that they may also benefit from it. The various governments have brought different education schemes but most of them have failed to yield desired results. The government should address these issues and concerns of the people by recognizing their felt needs. Until and unless these people are educated, their upliftment is going to remain a distant dream. Further the power structure curtails the freedom of dalits to choose to live as they desire playing a fundamental role in the perpetuation of their poverty. Assessing the power structure of the caste system is important to understand the dynamics of the well-being of dalits. The states are required to recognise the existent diversity and act accordingly.

The concept of minorities is a relative concept. Fourteen crore Muslims in India as compared to other minorities do not seem to be a minority. Generally, the states tend to secure the interests of the smallest of minorities considering them to be at a greater risk as compared to other larger minority groups. However, the political leaders in India look at the issue of minorities only through the prism of elections and try to woo the largest of the minorities i.e. Muslims at the cost of others. The silent minorities like Manipur, where there are only two Lok Sabha seats, are met with indifference while minorities of states like Uttar Pradesh or Bihar which send a huge number of leaders to Parliament are never ignored.^{xxi}

It is time for overhauling of the concept of minorities and giving it a wider and new shape. There are a number of groups of minorities which are not getting adequate attention as they do not carry a big organised vote bank with them. Some of these deprived and silent minorities may be the people of the North-east, writers and artists, tribals, contractual labour, single parents, hookah smokers, live-in couples, prostitutes, queer and transgender adults, village schoolgirls, prisoners, the mentally challenged etc.^{xxii} As the needs and vulnerabilities of these groups are inversely proportional to their numbers, none of them really matters to the opportunist political class of this country.

The difficulty today is how to make the heterogeneous mass have a resolution which is universal and marches on the way which leads to unity. Certain steps are urgently needed to be taken to address the wide range of issues related to minorities in India. Some of the measures that may be suggested are: Politics should be tried to be separated as far as possible from the domain of religious divides and be focused more on development, employment, equitable growth and unity. The various government or privately managed institutions should function in a non partisan manner and in times of any crisis should act properly to prevent the loss of material and human resources. Besides these efforts, stringent laws should be made and in the same sense be implemented whereby the culprits of communal riots are strictly dealt with.

In addition to it, the need of the time is that civil society groups and secular forces should strengthen themselves so that they can untidily fight the growth of fundamentalist forces. These various steps, if implemented, will instil not only a sense of security amongst the minorities but will also prevent the loss of vast material and human resource present in the form of diverse character of the nation. Apart from helping the political machinery in diverting its attention to other pertinent issues dealing with development and growth this will also reveal a true democratic and secular character of India.

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ⁱⁱ According to Article 29 of the Constitution of India minority includes any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own. Article 30 states All minorities whether based on religion or language, shall....

ⁱⁱⁱ Chandra, Bipin, Communalism: A Primer, (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2004), .57

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