COMMUNALISM: A CHALLENGE TO INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

    Indian democracy is largest democracy in the world and driving India towards development since 76 years. It has upheld values such as sovereignty, equality, humanity, collaboration and so on. Still, the Indian democracy is facing many of the problems and challenges and the attitudes of different political parties are mainly responsible for the same. The major challenges of Indian democracy include corruption, communalism, casteism, religious fundamentalism, gender inequality, etc. Of which, communalism has become not only threat to Indian democracy but also threat to national integration. This paper discussed the features and impact of communalism, which have become major challenge to Indian democracy. To solve the communalism problem, it is essential to strengthen secular institutions, promote interfaith harmony, reform education, empower marginalized communities including women and develop political will to counter communal forces.

KEYWORDS : *Democracy, Indian Democracy, Challenges to Democracy, Communalism, Secularism.*

INTRODUCTON

    Democracy means rule by the people to ensure that every citizen takes part in the decision making process either directly or indirectly through elected representatives (Mothe Raju, 2022). Indian democracy comprises the values of freedom, acceptability, equality, and inclusivity in a society and allows its common citizens to lead a quality and dignified life. The Indian democracy is truly a festive proclamation of veracity, cooperation, collaboration, peace, sympathy and collective strength of the people. India is the largest democracy in the world. In the last more than 7 decades it has worked successfully. Still, it is not free from problems and challenges.

    The problems and challenges faced by Indian democracy include Corruption, Communalism, Casteism, Religious Fundamentalism, Gender Discrimination, Poverty, Illiteracy, Social Inequality, Criminalization of Politics, Political Violence and so on. Of these challenges, there is growing challenge of communalism, which is major threat for secular Indian democracy.

    India's democratic edifice, characterized by its diversity and pluralism, has been challenged through the lens of communalism—a phenomenon deeply intertwined with the socio-political fabric of the country. Communalism, in the Indian context, refers to the imposition of religious identities over national identity, leading to tensions and conflicts between different religious communities.

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Communalism is undermining its foundational principles and giving rise to multifaceted socio-political ramifications.

Political opportunism is seen to have played a significant role in the rise and spread of communalism in India. To achieve their goals of popular support, political influence, and public office, political parties and leaders have no qualms about recruiting the aid of communal forces. Politicians in independent India are not restrained from pursuing the dangerous path of sectarian politics to seize or maintain political power. No matter whose party is in power or opposition, dirty communal politics is practised by all political parties and organizations. Both the government and the opposition engage in irresponsible behaviour, place a greater emphasis on political opportunism than on political duty and dignity and make concessions to communal forces (Barman, 2023).

COMMUNALISM: MAJOR CHALLENGE TO INDIAN DEMOCRACY

Communalism always remains a political weapon in India. Politician has played the major role to creating a serious communal situation in India. The communal politics rooted in the painful partition in the name of a particular religious community. Communal violence strengthens the vote bank of ideologically alliance political parties and it affects serious damage to communal harmony in the long run. Simply communalism refers to a politics that attempts to unite one community around a religion identity in hostile opposition to another community. The religious differences are expressed in the field of politics. Communalism and Indian politics there is a closer relationship (Jhuma Das and Santana Saikia, 2023). Thus to gain politically, the parties are using communalism and it is biggest challenge to Indian democracy.

Communalism threatens the foundational tenets of secularism enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Secularism in India is meant to guarantee equal treatment of all religions, ensuring that the state remains neutral in matters of faith. However, the rise of communalist sentiments often induces a polarization that undermines this principle. Politically motivated leaders have increasingly exploited religious identities to consolidate their vote banks, thereby transforming secularism into a mere rhetorical device rather than a guiding philosophy of governance. The shift from secular governance to religiously aligned politics not only complicates legislative processes but also raises questions about the legitimacy of the state's neutrality.

Communalism manifests itself through violence, as seen in various riots and communal clashes throughout the nation's history. Events such as the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, the 2002 Gujarat riots, Manipur violence in 2024-25 and the more recent communal tensions in various states underscore how communal narratives can escalate into violence, causing significant loss of life and displacing communities. Such incidents do not merely represent sporadic unrest but reflect a systemic issue where communities are pitted against one another, breeding a cycle of retaliation and animosity that significantly compromises social cohesion, which is essential for a functioning democracy.

Communalism can erode the principle of equal representation, leading to marginalization of certain groups within the democratic framework. Electoral politics, influenced by communal identities, can result in the systematic exclusion of minorities and weaker sections from political power dynamics. This marginalization alienates communities, reinforcing the notion that certain groups have lesser rights within the state, thereby contradicting the principles of justice and equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Such exclusion raises fundamental questions about legitimacy and equity in a purportedly democratic society.

The impact of communalism extends beyond immediate violence; it infiltrates the very fabric of society, creating an atmosphere of distrust and fear among communities. This atmosphere can severely undermine civic engagement, as individuals become hesitant to participate in democratic processes due to fears of reprisal based on their religious identity. This resultant apathy not only disenfranchises large segments of the population but also distorts the democratic process, leading to governance that increasingly reflects the interests of a select few rather than the will of the majority. Moreover,

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communal polarization can lead to the silencing of moderate voices within communities, furthering an atmosphere of extremism that stifles dialogue and deliberation—key components of a healthy democracy.

Political parties have, regrettably, often found it beneficial to align themselves with communal ideologies to secure electoral success. The polarization that results from communalist appeal can distort public discourse, prioritizing identity over issues of development, governance, and social justice. This phenomenon has often resulted in the neglect of critical socio-economic issues, as political leaders cater to the emotional and communal rhetoric rather than addressing the pressing needs of society, such as poverty alleviation, education, and healthcare. This decline in substantive discourse correlates with a broader disenfranchisement of voters, who find their interests and concerns overshadowed by religious affiliations and communal tensions.

Key Features of Communalism in India:
The key features of communalism in India are:
- ❖ Emphasis on religious identity: Communalism promotes the idea that one's religious identity is the primary basis of social and political organization, rather than shared citizenship or other common interests.
- ❖ Portrayal of religious communities as homogeneous: Communalism presents different religious communities as monolithic blocs with fixed, unchanging identities and interests, ignoring internal diversity.
- ❖ Perception of religious communities as rivals: Communalism fosters a zero-sum mentality, where the interests of one religious community are seen as necessarily opposed to those of another.
- ❖ Politicization of religion: Communalism involves the active use of religious symbols, beliefs and organizations for political mobilization and gaining power.
- ❖ Exclusivist nationalism: Communal ideologies define the nation in religious terms, often privileging the majority community and marginalizing religious minorities.
- ❖ Historical reinterpretation: Communalists often reinterpret historical events and figures to fit their narrative of religious antagonism and past wrongs.
- ❖ Majoritarian intolerance: Communalism can lead to the intolerance of minority religious practices and the imposition of the majority community's norms and customs.
- ❖ Communal violence: Outbreaks of communal riots and violence are a key feature of communalism, leading to loss of life, displacement and erosion of social harmony.

Impact of Communalism on Indian Democracy:
Communalism is a major challenge to Indian democracy. Following are few impacts of communalism in Indian democracy.
1. Divisive Politics: Communalism promotes divisive politics based on religious, ethnic or linguistic identities. This undermines the idea of a united, secular and inclusive Indian nation.
2. Minority Marginalization: Communal politics often leads to the marginalization and oppression of religious and ethnic minorities, undermining the principles of equality and non-discrimination.
3. Communal Violence: Outbreaks of communal riots and violence disrupt social harmony, lead to loss of life and property, and erode trust between different communities.
4. Polarization of Society: Communal politics creates deep-rooted divisions and polarization within the society along religious or ethnic lines, making it difficult to build consensus on national issues.
5. Misuse of State Power: At times, communal forces try to capture state power and abuse it to further their divisive agenda, undermining the neutrality and fairness of state institutions.
6. Hindrance to Development: Communal tensions and conflicts divert attention and resources away from vital issues of socio-economic development, thereby impeding the progress of the country.

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7. Undermining Constitutional Values: Communalism goes against the constitutional values of secularism, equality, and fraternity, which are the bedrock of Indian democracy.

The roots of communalism in India can be traced to the colonial era policies of divide and rule, as well as the competitive politics between religious communities in the run-up to Partition. Addressing communalism remains a major challenge for India's democracy and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION:

To address communalism, a multipronged approach is required by strengthening secular institutions, promoting interfaith harmony, reforming education, empowering marginalized communities, and political will to firmly counter communal forces. Upholding the democratic, pluralistic and inclusive character of the Indian nation is crucial.

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