

**Special Article/ Harbans Mukhia**

## **What is Communalism?**

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At the outset, let us understand the distinction between community identity and communal identity.

Our very birth endows us with a community identity. Each of us is born into a Hindu family, or Muslim family, a Sikh or Christian family, etc. and that identity stays with us through our life in most cases barring the very few who opt for another religion later in life. Indeed, each of us is born with several identities: gender, class, economic and social status, even the colour of skin and so forth and all these identities last our life time. We might call these our community identities. Each of these establishes both the similarities and differences between and among us. However, no adversity inheres in these differences. Difference is given to us by nature; adversity is a human creation.

When any of these existential identities or differences gets mobilised by others for a given objective that is outside of ourselves, it takes on an adversarial hue. Thus when the SanghParivar seeks to mobilise the Hindu community identity for building Ram temple at Ayodhya or for collecting votes or demonizing the other communities, the Christians, but more pointedly the Muslims, and when the Muslim leadership seeks its community's backing for votes or engaging in riots involving other communities, adversity takes the place of difference. The community identity gets mobilised into communal identity. It is thus a definitive defiance of what nature had intended for us.

It is then left to each one of us whether or not to allow our community identity to be converted into communal identity. There are invariably stories of devout Hindus and devout Muslims giving shelter, succour and support to individuals and families, even groups of the other community when communal fires are raging in their locality. Clearly,

those giving out help preserve, even cherish their community identity, yet do not allow its transformation into a communal demon.

In many significant ways, this lesson comes to us from medieval India's great saint poets like Kabir, Nanak, Dadu Dayal and others. When Islam arrived in India through various routes and many agencies, its concept of one God in lieu of many gods (*La ilaha ill illah*) and its unique form of worship stood face to face with the Hindu concept of numerous gods and goddesses and its own forms of worshipping them. There was bound to be tension at the theological as well social levels. For, each religion's God stood as a rival to the other's God or gods and each demanded stern, unshared loyalty. The illiterate and semi-literate saint poets, Kabir above all, put forth a resolution of this tension: they conceptualized one universal God for all of humanity in lieu of separate sectarian Gods who stood as each other's rivals. They recognised differences, but did not let them turn into hostilities on behalf of their faiths and their Gods. It was for this reason that during the five and a half centuries of medieval India, when Muslim rulers were at the helm over most of India's territory, when a large number of violent conflicts occurred at the political level between the Sikhs and the Mughal state, the Marathas and the Mughals, the Jats and the Mughals, yet social peace prevailed. For, the first recorded evidence of a communal riot (as we know it today) occurred in 1713-14, seven years after Aurangzeb's death, when the Mughal empire was beginning to decline. The riot happened in Ahmedabad on the occasion of Holi when some Muslims objected to the throwing of colours on them. There was also another angle to it: rivalry between a Hindu and a Muslim jeweler who both added to the communal tensions. The disturbance was controlled within two days by a Muslim administrator of the city. Prior to that there is no record of any communal riot. In the whole of the eighteenth century there is record of five such riots. I would attribute to the preservice of social peace for so many centuries to the ideology of one universal God for us all, enunciated and promoted by the saint poets. It greatly diminished the space for tensions arising out of religious differences.

Today we are being led into the opposite direction on all sides. Differences are constantly being constructed as irreconcilable hostilities and therefore one witnesses tensions and violence all around. Tensions and violence as an integral element of state policies and the political process. What is the aim of this politics?

Partly the aim is to win elections, through the famous policy of divide and rule. Its success was patently demonstrated in Gujarat in 2002 and after under the able leadership of Shri Narendra Modi. But winning elections is the not the final objective; it only helps one along the path of the final objective with the exercise of state power through the bureaucrats, the police, the army. The final objective is to change the language of society, to change its manner of, its categories of thinking, to permanently lose respect for differences and turn these into permanent hostilities. To turn the glorious plurality of Indian society and culture into the single vision of Hindutva. In some ways one has to admit that when the RSS was founded in 1925, it had the vision of transforming India in the very long run through first creating social bases for itself, the RSS shakhas, and gradually to enforce its vision through the use of state power; that long term vision is now being realized. It is also being helped by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the world, even though the Indian Muslims have by and large remained immune to it. Islamic fundamentalism and the RSS share the basic premise of antipathy towards any sort of pluralism.

The fight against communalism then is the fight for the preservation and the celebration of pluralism; it is the fight for cherishing difference and not allowing it to be turned into hostilities. That has been the greatest strength of Indian society and culture through its millennia long history and it is this greatest strength which faces the severest threat. Can we, for the sake of India, let go of this strength?