

Gujarat Riots - The Ugly Scar on Secular India

Dr. B.V. Muralidhar,
Assoc. Professor in Pol. Sci. &
Pub. Admn.
S.V. University
TIRUPATI - 517 502
INDIA.
e-mail:drbvm@rediffmail.com

ABSTRACT

Secularism is the backbone of Indian Constitution. The Constitution writers deliberately included this as India is a land of many religions. Occasionally, one could witness communal conflicts between Hindus - Muslims from the days of British rule and Hindus - Christians (now). They became a regular feature of late. The differences between the Indian National Congress and Muslim League during independence struggle sparked communal tensions which was exploited by British. The partition of the sub-continent in 1947 is the result of the hatred between these two communities. The purpose of this paper is to trace the roots of this problem, how far the secular concept is followed and the backdrop of Gujarat riots which is a blot on Indian secularism.

Introduction

In the West, the term secularism was coined by Holyoke in 1849. To India and Nehru it means "Granting of equal status to all religions" - (see Ghule, Third Concept, December 1990). Secularism involves a whole way of life - an enlightened, rational view of society. It demands that not only there should be tolerance between various communities but there should be a close and active interaction among them (see Singh, Third Concept, December 1990). The main concern of the leadership during independence struggle was to build an integrated nation. India being an ethno-cultural mosaic provides scope for variety and diversity. At the dawn of independence religion became a formidable force and led to partition after considerable blood bath and painful migration on both sides of the border.

After independence, the fact remained that India is the second largest Muslim population in the world next only to Indonesia (see Mohanasundaram, Third Concept, November 1999). Hence leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Moulana Azad and others tried to preserve the unity of India. This was partly because of their training in the West and partly due to their non-religious character were against the domination of religion in politics. Nehru wished to have an "Unity of mind and heart, which breaks down the barriers raised in the name of religion" (see Ravindra Kumar, Composite Culture of India and National Integration. 1987). This brand of secularism was termed as a radical form. The Indian model of nation- building should be viewed from the background of a highly diverse society with a long history of disunity.

Though the Nehruvian model of secularism was put to practice, there were threats to this concept even during his tenure. The painful memories of partition, the ever present problem of Kashmir since independence, in addition to communal tensions tested the applicability of this model. But as Rajni Kothari observes, Certain elements in the nation-building process prevented any major danger to this concept during the first decade of India's independence (see Kothari, New Delhi, 1977).

Growth of Secularism

Indian secularism has been buttressed by its people's fascination with non-violence and aversion to violence in course of their inquiry into the nature of life, as manifested till date in its vegetarianism. It started with Buddhism and Jainism and though it was also extolled by the Upanishads (Ancient Scriptures), was seldom followed because of the myriad of other competing values. Buddha was an embodiment of non-violence and later Mahavira (founder of Jain religion) treated non-violence as an absolute and supreme virtue. But it was Buddha's teachings which was carried across the world. This noble task was performed by Emperor Ashoka (after the Kalinga war) and by Buddhist monks across Tibet, China, SouthEast Asia and Japan (See Sharan, Mainstream, 27 December 2003).

The tragedy and bane of India has been that after Ashoka, the logic of non-violence was not carried to politics or statecraft. Where as large sections of her people want to live by non-violence, the ruling class has been un-inhibited in using violence to capture power (This was since 1960's). The country therefore presents a strange spectacle of extremes of violence by its rulers and non-violence by a great many of its people. It was left to Mahatma Gandhi to link non-violence with the country's political culture and social change. He became the greatest revolutionary of his time and addressed the crucial importance of the purity of both ends and means in attempting social change.

Gandhi adhered to Jainism for its principles of non-violence and universal tolerance. He was greatly impressed with Buddha and Christ for their revolutionary nature to change the old rotten traditions. He thus observed, "Jesus and Buddha were capable of intensely direct action. Christ defied the right of a whole empire and Gautama brought down on his knees before an arrogant priest hood" (see Jha, Third Concept November 2000). The same was carried into the independence struggle by Gandhi and other majority Indian National Congress leaders.

Reasons For Communal Violence

Then why one witness communal violence in India? Ever since India's independence, the adult franchise extended to the millions of people slowly forced castes and communities to realignment. The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru adopted various methods to foster national unity and suppressed separatist and secessionist tendencies besides regional and communal fanaticism. Due to his efforts the elements were made to accept a secular framework through modification of their respective stance. The Congress party was the one which stood by the Muslims. Mrs. Gandhi who came to power after the split in 1968 laid a great deal of emphasis on secularism and socialism which continued till the "Emergency period" (see Mohansundarm, Third Concept)

The qualitative change in the thinking of Muslims against Congress began after 1977 general elections as it started to adopt a policy of 'Soft Hinduism'. Such a step pushed parties like Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP) to the other extreme, the hard 'Hindutva' line which naturally did great deal of damage to the secular polity (see Engineer, The Hindu). The progenitor of the concept 'Hindutva' was V. D. Savarkar, who implied that Hindu alone and exclusively is a full fledged Indian. (Quoted in his work, 'Who is Hindu?'). This made Muslims and other minorities of other religious faiths to think they are supposed to be inferior and not complete Indians. The emergence of Hindu fundamentalism, naturally stimulated other forces which eventually weakened the nation-building process. Besides the Hindu-Muslim problem, the Sikhs issue in Punjab also became the focal point.

One must understand the role of local issues or micro-level factors to understand the pattern of communal politics in India in the recent past. Asghar Ali Engineer, a noted columnist argued that the changing socio-economic factors played a crucial role in the communally sensitive areas. This was due to slow process of economic growth which resulted in large scale unemployment and poverty. The result-ruling classes in India easily

converted the economic problems into caste and communal problems (see Engineer, The Hindu). Though the word 'Secular' was incorporated in the constitution through 42nd Amendment in 1976, the handling of this sensitive concept produced negative result.

The social transformation which took place during Nehru's period gave birth to a spirit of Nationalism and identity as Indians. A sense of belongingness, though not cultural but secular emerged in the years after independence. It is this feeling which got rudely shaken in the communal frenzy since 1980's. The communal riots in places like Meerut, Aligarh, Moradabad, Jamshedpur, Benarus, Bhiwandi, Old city of Hyderabad, Coimbatore to name a few made the common man to lose faith in the practicality of secularism in the Indian context.

It is unfortunate that while paying lip service to secularism, all attempts were made to exploit religion by the political elite. Majority political parties made compromises with the fundamental elements for the sake of power and political benefit. Another trend emerging in the recent past also indicates how the government sometimes succumbs to the communal pressure from the fundamentalist elements. This politicises the religious identify and inturn gives legitimate role to communal organisations as real representatives of different religious communities (see Singh, Third Concept, March 1989). The Hindutva concept submerged in the body polity surfaced again in the changing atmosphere. They began to question the very secular spirit of the constitution. These forces gradually became a major challenge to the secular fabric in the country. To achieve their narrow political goals, places of worship became a battle field to gain the support of what was believed as the 'Hindu vote bank'. The post Ayodhya scenario explained a number of things. The failure of the ruling class to preserve the principles of secularism in the face of communal pressures, emergence and later submergence of fundamental elements on both sides and the realignment of forces against such communal flare-ups make the issue a dynamic one (see Mohanasundaram, Third Concept).

Poverty and rate of illiteracy is very high in India. They are the pillars through which the journey of communal riots starts. They cannot understand the 'ifs' and 'buts' of religious conservatism. There are many ills in both Hinduism and Islam. We need to change these religious conservatism with the growing needs of time. It is easy for the political elite to fool public and achieve their goal of vote bank through communal card, if people are poor and illiterate and think that they do not have anything to do with changing times. They are the soft targets of politicians who use them to achieve their selfish political ends (see Purnima Singh, Third Concept, May 2002). This is very much evident in any incident of communal violence. It is the poor, who are the prime targets and pay dearly with their lives which is evident during the post-Babri masjid demolition Bombay riots and even the worse Gujarat's Godhra carnage.

Background of Godhra Carnage

If communal politics began to dominate the political system in the 1990's another malaise which afflicted the body polity from the beginning was corruption. It was from then the entire nature of Indian politics changed into a more visceral politics based on Caste/ Other Backward Castes and a communal agenda. It was a result of the fragmentation of the Indian society between castes, due to a policy change by the central government led by V.P. Singh to implement Mandal Commission report. The decision to reserve jobs for the other backward castes excluding caste Hindus led to a great upheaval in the country particularly among the youth. The BJP, which was waiting for an opportunity to garner the Hindu votes decided to meet the Mandal challenge with 'Kamandal' (see Sharan, Mainstream). The party which was a coalition partner withdrew support to the government on this issue. It also successfully mounted a national campaign to build a Ram temple at the site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The BJP was of a strong view that mosque had been built allegedly after pulling down the temple in the past.

In the early eighties, the BJP in order to consolidate her position began to question the Nehruvian concept of secularism and attacked it as 'Pseudo – Secularism'. It started a strong propaganda saying it was a sham and was meant only to create a Muslim vote bank. It also demanded a 'Common Civil Code' (At present Muslim Personal Law allows a Muslim to have four wives where as under the Hindu code Bill of 1956, Hindus can have only one). This demand was further aggravated by the agitation Muslim launched on the Shah Bano case. The Muslim leadership in the country construed the Supreme Courts' verdict as an interference in the Shari'ah law which is divine and cannot be changed. Without realizing the long-term consequences, they launched a very aggressive movement forcing the then Rajiv Gandhi government to change the law for Muslims. When the Muslim Women's Bill was passed (which make section 125 of the CrPC inapplicable to Muslims), Rajiv Gandhi as a balancing act, had the doors of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya got opened, where Ram Lalla idol exist sealed under court orders since 1949.

Rajiv Gandhi's step unleashed another controversy which was exploited to the hilt by BJP. In order to expand its political base in rural areas, which was hitherto confined only to urban upper-caste Hindus. It launched an aggressive movement for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya by taking the Ramjanmabhoomi movement into rural India. The BJP propaganda easily caught on and began to pay rich political dividends. In the 1989 general elections, V.P. Singh made seat adjustments with the BJP to check Congress from coming to power. It had 88 seats (In the 1984 elections it got only 2 seats). The Ram janmabhoomi movement and the 'Rath yatra' across the country by L.K. Advani helped BJP to win that many seats. As a result of the rath yatra nearly 300 riots took place all over India.

Babri demolition and its Aftermath

The V.P. Singh government could not survive in power for a long time and this led to mid-term elections in the country. During an election campaign in Sri Perumbadur, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a human bomb. The elections brought Congress party back to power and P.V. Narasimha Rao became the Prime Minister. Keeping up pressure on his government, the BJP and its other constituents like Sangh Parivar, Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal (B D)

finally entered Ayodya with thousands of Kar Sevaks from all over the country. The Uttar Pradesh government sensing trouble asked the centre for full police assistance. The response of P.V. Narasimha Rao's government was not encouraging. Ultimately taking advantage of the dilemma of both State and Central governments, the Kar Sevaks demolished the Babri Masjid on 6th December 1992 which shocked the nation. This was followed by communal riots in Mumbai, Surat, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Bhopal, Delhi and several other places. Its impact could be felt even outside India - where Hindus were attacked in neighbouring countries. Mumbai witnessed one of the worst riots in the post independent India (see Engineer, The Gujarat Carnage). It was a black day in the history of India.

Though there was a lull in communal violence after the post – Babri Masjid riots, Gujarat remained hypersensitive throughout. On every festival occasion of either Hindus or Muslims, riots broke out claiming few lives. After coming to power in Mumbai state elections with Shiv Sena as its ally, the BJP was planning carefully to seize power in Gujarat also. In the following Assembly elections it captured power and Narendra Modi was its Chief Minister. The VHP and BD became more militant and started attacking both Muslims and Christians under one pretext or the other. This was in the view that Christian missionaries are bent upon converting the low caste Hindus into Christianity. The Gujarat riots must be seen in this background. The Godhra carnage did not occur suddenly and simply in reaction to what happened on 27 February 2002. The liberal funds from Gujarat NRIs to VHP, the defeat of BJP in assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, the scandals in Gujrat earthquake relief fund of January 2001 were some of the hard reasons which made the state and central governments to polarize

Hindus and Muslims and consolidate Hindutva forces. According to different mass media and press reports, it was a well planned and executed with finesse (see Engineer, Ibid).

It all started with a group of Muslims in a fit of rage over an heated argument with kar Sevaks who were returning from Ayodhya, set fire to coach No.6 of Sabarmati Express in which they were travelling 56 passengers were roasted alive, 43 sustained injuries. The State government ordered an enquiry. Even before the investigations could be completed to know the reasons for the incident, the Gujarat government jumped to the conclusion that Muslim militants at the instance of Inter Services Intelligence of Pakistan (ISI) planned this incident well in advance. The next day VHP announced Gujarat bandh and the government assured the police officials that it would be peaceful. On the contrary violence broke out on a large scale and by the end of the day more than 100 persons were done to death. The Chief Minister, Mr. Modi justified that violence subsequent to the Godhra incident was keeping with Newton's law of action and reaction.

The violence continued unabated for more than 60 days with only one section of the population becoming the prime targets. The whole police force with some honourable exceptions was communalised or abdicated its duty. The administrative apparatus was no different. People were burnt alive, women raped in front of their own children and family, infants were done to death before their mothers. By the time the state government, coming under severe criticism both inside and outside the country realised its blunder, more than 2000 people were killed or burnt alive and displaced from their homes.

There are some interesting points to be noted about the Gujarat carnage

First, it was not a pure Hindu - Muslim riot. It was carnage, meticulously planned and organised against one community.

Secondly, never in any of the communal riots of the past, there was such a furious outburst of violence as witnessed in this against one community.

Thirdly, one can see complete police inaction or complicity through out.

Fourthly, participation of Cabinet Ministers by leading the mobs against the Muslims and threatening the police not to book cases is a disturbing trend.

Fifthly, for the first time a few foreign nationals were killed, even though they showed their passports. They were attacked deliberately just because they were Muslims.

Sixthly, a first occasion is the fact that some nations of the European Union sent their investigating teams and submitted demarches to the Union government for failing to save lives of innocent people.

On the other, despite allround condemnation, the state government defended the killings. This was evident when not a single accused person in the Gujarat communal carnage of February-April 2002 has been punished so far. In all, 88 persons from the police and bureaucracy stand indicted, including some leading officials. Also 730 people, many of them from the Sangh Parivar, have been named and identified as perpetrators of mass crimes by witnesses, victims and NGOs. (Now the case is with the Supreme Court which was highly critical of not only state government but even of the High Court for the way they handled this sensitive case)

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and several public interest litigations have appealed that the riots be handed over to a body which Chief Minister Narendra Modi and his administration does not control.

The state government has consistently refused to recommend a CBI investigation. "I told NHRC to recommend a CBI enquiry from the very start", reminds Amubhai Rawani, former chief judge of Rajasthan High Court. In 2003, the NHRC also asked the Supreme court to intervene and initiate a CBI enquiry.

Several cases have also been stayed. This has stopped the process of punishing the perpetrators of hate. Out of a total of 4,256 FIRS filled, the police summarily dismissed 2,108 as no accused were found. This means that in as many as 49.75 percent of the

cases, no legal action was taken. In 2,130 cases chargesheets were filed (see Vora, Gagged Elsewhere, Tehelka Report).

Government response to the Carnage

Both State and Central governments took their own time to react to the gruesome carnage ever in the history of independent India. When the state government turned a blind eye to the happenings, the centre should have acted more firmly. The Prime Minister not only failed to control the situation but also lost the credibility of making totally contradictory statements. He visited Ahmedabad more than a month after the carnage. While visiting a refugee camp he asked “ what face shall I show to the World”? He further stated that Gujarat events were a blot on India which had enjoyed respect and prestige in the comity of nations because of the way in which 100 crore people of diverse religious, cultures and ethnic groups lived together happily, shared their grief and joys, but never forgot the message of peace and brother hood. He felt the happenings in Gujarat were not only heartrending but most inhuman and horrible and advised Narendra Modi to follow ‘Raj dharma’ (rulers duty towards the subjects) (see Engineer, The Gujarat Carnage).

After a week, at the meeting of the National Executive of the BJP, he made a complete turn around and accused Islam and Muslims of militancy and conflict. He almost echoed Mr. Modi’s line on Gujarat. Thus Mr. Vajpayee proved to be as much an RSS pracharak as Mr. Modi. The BJP which promised a ‘riot-free India’ in its election manifesto, is unfortunately doing the quite opposite. Mr. Vajpayee’s statements clearly show that the BJP fully approved Narendra Modi’s policies for tackling the communal situation in Gujarat. Thus the chances of peace prevailing there is very little. The party would like many more Gujarats to happen in order to establish ‘Hindu Rashtra’ (see Engineer, Ibid).

It is not the intention of the author of this article to beatify some and demonise another section of Indians. To externalise the enemy is a common human failing, to which Indians are not averse. Because of its sub continental size and great diversity of race, religion and social status, the enemy is often externalised within the country’s borders and not without.

The more powerful and homogenous European nations tend to do so beyond their borders where they are capable of projecting their power (USA did in Afghanistan and Iraq). It is easier to fit our minorities and other being too weak or too strong to fit enemy’s image and also with false images. The multi racial European states are doing the same now.

The people of India are not gullible and have traditionally seen through and rejected false images. And the secular Indian from all religions has condemned the train incident and the subsequent massacre of the innocent which could have put even a dictator to shame. The fires are out. The smoke has settled. But the carnage still haunts one community very much. They feel persecuted and have lost faith in the administration. The culprits are still at large. For the living dead, justice is only a hope. The guilty – to which ever community he may belong must be punished. The Non-Governmental organisation (NGOs) are making every effort to bring Hindus and Muslims closer in Godhra Both the communities are meeting frequently, thanks to the innovative programmes conducted by these NGOs. Hindus and Muslims badly needed space to meet each other, which the NGOs are providing. Their efforts should be appreciated and encouraged.

Let every Indian remember the photograph published in many dailies during the Gujarat turmoil, a ‘Muslim pleading with the rampaging mob with folded hands to spare him’ is still fresh in the memory of every Indian. This is not what the founding fathers of the Indian constitution wanted to happen.

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