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Regional Disparities and Tensions

On the eve of independence, the Indian economy was not only backward but also characterised by much regional imbalances. As has been mentioned in earlier chapters, there is enough evidence to suggest that the colonial rulers did not bother about the balanced economic development of India. In fact, the very exploitative nature of it helped either to create or accentuate regional disparities. Even after about 50 years of independence the problem of regional inequality in India is of typical nature. There are poor regions possessing rich resources like Orissa and Bihar, and rich regions poor in resources such as Maharashtra. Regional inequality is complex and it is due to several factors. The starting point, of course, is the effect of colonial rule.

Imperialism and Regional Disparities

To begin with British imperialism every where sought to introduce a market in land in India. But the tenure system differed from region to region depending on the specific conditions conducive to colonial exploitation. These variations in land tenure led to different systems of surplus creation and absorption, and the size of the surplus also differed. Further, keeping in view its own colonial needs British rulers whereas made some significant efforts for improvement of agriculture in some areas, the other areas were completely neglected. Thus there were considerable variations both in the production relations and level of production in different states and regions.

The pattern of urbanisation based on the strategy of exporting primary products laid the foundation for the emergence of port towns as the major centres of urban-industrial activities. Also capitals of several princely states developed a

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pattern of centripetal development around them. Therefore, the growth of trade and commerce in colonial India meant the creation of jobs and educational opportunities at coastal centres like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras and in some princely state's capitals. This also led to the emergence of some consumer industries in these enclaves and hence to the development of a merchant capitalist class which started to invest in industry. This gave these regions a head start over other regions where the vast tracts of agriculture had lost their traditional handicrafts and other small scale non-agricultural activities in the face of competition from the high technology associated with the modern processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. Also small towns including a large number of port towns became stagnant.

Another factor in the uneven regional development was the growth of the education system. As the British imperialists had linked India to the metropolis via trade relations and the coastal areas especially around the ports of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, these areas became the intermediate links acting as an agent of the metropolis to the Indian hinterland and of the hinterland to London. To man the establishments in these areas modern education was introduced. An educated professional class, mainly lower paid government and commercial clerks, grew up in these areas. These regions also threw up an elite bourgeoisie group of lawyers who were involved on both sides of the independence movement.

Therefore, after independence, India emerged as a federation of a few relatively rich and industrialised states and also of many poor states which subsisted mainly on agriculture with primitive techniques and semi-feudal agrarian relations.¹

In Independent India, the government was not only committed to the removal of disparities, both personal and regional but it was imperative if allegiance of different people towards a common political authority was to be obtained. For the existence of pronounced regional disparities in the levels of living was fraught with very dangerous consequences, particularly in view of the fact that regions (both at state and sub state level) differ from each other, in terms of political culture and traditions. Hence it was accepted that the state has to play a major role in removing regional disparities.

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Regional Policy in Independent India

In view of the above, the theoretical formulation and the policy concern in the post-Independence development strategy should have been correcting the spatial imbalance. This implied that the planning process should have been designed to bring higher growth in the poor states in comparison to the rich states. This need for the removal of regional disparities in a way was well recognised by the leadership. In fact, the Constitution of India, itself, made it incumbent upon the Government at the Centre to appoint a Finance Commission once at least in every five years to examine the problems arising out of the gaps between the needs for expenditure and the availability of revenues of the different states of India and other similar issues [Article 280 (3)]. Thus balanced regional development has been a repeatedly declared goal of the central government and of its two principal agencies that can influence the process, namely, the Planning Commission and the Finance Commission. One of the objectives of planning was to restore the balance between various areas and regions. However, these institutions were to work within overall socio-economic infrastructure of the country and the political process developing in that. As has been mentioned already that because of the strategic position of the ruling classes and adopted model of development right from the beginning the development has been drifting away from the desire and described goals. In the same context the idea to remove disparities has remained more a precept than a reality. A brief analysis of the steps taken in this regard and their consequences will suggest the true nature of regional policy of India. Here it may first be pointed out that in our Constitution the centre has been provided with the most potent instruments of resource mobilisation. Most of the high yielding and elastic taxes have fallen in the share of the union government. The Central government can easily raise resources by increasing the prices of some of its public sector products. The centre is also able to mobilise resource through its budgetary deficits. All these practices provide the centre with the resource mobilised from the people and corporate sectors located in the states.

The institutions through which part of these resources gets transferred to or invested in the states are the Finance Commission awards, the plan assistance by the Planning

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Commission, the investment by the non-departmental Public sector undertakings, the central and centrally sponsored schemes and public sector financial institutions.²

Finance Commissions

To suggest the criteria and principles for division of economic resources there have so far been recommendations of Ten Finance Commissions, these being appointed in the years 1951, 1956, 1960, 1964, 1968, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, and 1992. The recommendations of various commissions have aroused interest in the problem of regional inequalities and measures provided through the implementation of these recommendations. But to begin with it appears that in general the Commissions have not had the reduction of regional inequalities in levels of living as their terms of reference. They have not been, in specific terms considering this as an objective in recommending devolution of finances from the centre to the states. Two further points need to be noted here. Firstly the transfer of funds from the centre to states as a result of the recommendations of the Finance Commissions are not of that magnitude as the allocation from the Planning Commission. Secondly the major issue is not the mere allocation of funds but the manner of utilization of these and the impact it produces on the economy of the less developed regions. In this context, Finance Commission has no role to play.

All this does not mean, however, that the Finance Commissions have not taken into account the existence of interstate disparities in the levels of living at all in making their recommendations. Different criteria have been used to distribute among the states the different components of the total devolution as a result of the recommendations of the Finance Commissions. In regard to some of these, explicit attention has been paid to the fact that the needs of expenditure of the different states are different. In fact it appears that the devolution, except those on the basis of the second Finance Commission, have been progressive in the sense of being more favourable to states with lower per capita Net Domestic Product. But, as already mentioned above, it is extremely doubtful whether even a deliberate attempt on the part of the Finance Commissions to allocate the total amount transferred between the states in such a way as to reduce inter-state disparities in the levels of living,

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would have led to a reduction in these. This is so because resource transfers from the centre to the state Government through the Finance Commission awards are relatively less important than those through other means. In fact, for the period 1951-78, more than 62 per cent of the total transfers seem to have taken place through other means. Also Finance Commissions have nothing to say on development strategy which in itself is quite significant in this regard.

Planning and Regional Disparities

More important role, in the removal of regional disparities, therefore, was expected from the Planning. In fact at the time of the establishment of planning commission in its aims and objectives an important place was assigned for this task. But as was mentioned in the chapter on development strategy, the planners right from the beginning were caught in the unnecessary

conflict between the needs for increase in production and justifiable distribution of resources and products. In this planners have been more concerned with the rate of growth. Moreover to begin with planning was primarily restricted to the national level. In this period, which was one of pure adhocism, the plans formulated were in terms of sets of directives and goals for the orientation of the economy as a whole. Hardly any attention was paid to the problem of regional disparities and the few measures that were taken were adopted to deal with specific problems faced by certain areas having natural calamities. Thus the problem of regional development in a national context did not get adequate attention of the policy makers. It did not receive any attention during the First Plan. As a result the development programmes definitely resulted in lop-sided and distorted development, some of the already developed regions enjoyed the privilege to develop further at the cost of the backward regions which continued to stagnate. The record plan did recognise the importance of the problem atleast theoretically. It accepted in principle that disparities in levels of development between different regions should be progressively reduced.

The Third Five Year Plan devoted some attention to the problem of regional disparities specially. Some efforts were made to identify the backward regions. Fourth plan onward have increasingly emphasized this objectives. Deliberate policy measures are being also taken to improve the levels of living of

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the people in regions identified as backward. However, in practice, inspite of the increasing awareness of these aspects, very little has been achieved. It has not meant the formulation of a regionally balanced plan in which the plan is made with the pulling up of the level of living of the people in the backward regions to a specified level within a prescribed time horizon as an avowed objective. Actually the lack of a regional dimensions to the Indian plans seems mainly because the entire approach to the issue is coloured by certain assumptions which are being proved wrong.

With regard to regional policy one such assumption is that there is a trade off between the reduction in regional disparities, in the levels of living and national economic growth, particularly in the short run. This is, in fact, what has prompted almost all plan documents to repeatedly stress that in the short run, with limited resources, a developing country like India can ill-afford measures for the reduction of disparities. Another erroneous assumption has been that Industrial development can be treated as synonymous with economic development at the regional level. Such an assumption was stated as early as in the second five year plan period and continues to dominate the thinking on regional policy by the framers of the Indian plans. As a result of this, while industrially backward regions have been identified by India's Planning Commission, no such attempt has yet been made as regards regions which can be deemed to be backward from the point of view of overall economic development. Actually the main focus of regional policy during the Indian plans has been on the dispersal of industry among the different regions of India. In this process, one of the simple lessons emerging out of a reinterpretation of the history of the economic development of the countries of Western Europe seems to have been neglected. This is the fact that the agricultural revolution has to precede, by decades, the industrial revolution and is more the cause than the result at least in the initial stages of the industrial revolution.

In spite of so-called attempts for rapid industrialisation agriculture continues to be the most important economic activity still from the point of view of output and employment in the states of India. And within the agricultural sector again because of emphasis on immediate increase in production inter-state

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disparities in per capita agricultural production have been on the increase. As is by now well known in agricultural development policy in green revolution and its impact has been confined to relatively small areas and under highly skewed distribution of land among different size of holdings. The strategy of concentrating on modern input in irrigated areas for crops for which high yielding varieties were available (mainly wheat) was inherently poised to accentuate inter-state disparities in food production. Thus the disparities in socio-economic conditions of the people have been increasing both within and between different regions of the country.

Political Process and Regional Disparities

In abolishing or sustaining regional disparities more important role, then either of Finance Commissions, or Planning Commission, is that of political process. Not only policies are formulated and implemented by the political institutions and pressures but also the Finance Commission and Planning Commission work within its context and influence. As has been mentioned in earlier chapters given the historical and socio-economic context politics in India was looked upon as an important instrument for development. For this purpose the political elite adopted a strategy of Mixed economy within the framework of democracy to achieve class conciliation and goals of equity and justice. For the success of this model was required establishment of a social system based on equality, decentralisation of powers and satisfaction to the masses of participation in economic and political processes. However, keeping in view the votes in elections and support of elite groups to acquire and retain power the rulers had to placate those classes and sections who could obtain or influence the votes and support for them. As a result allocation of resources and products or fulfillment of demands were not decided on the basis of overall social necessities, class or regional inequalities or goals of equity and justice, but under pressure of these influential and strong sections of the society who on the basis of their social and economic status could influence politics.

With regard to regional policy obvious effect of such a situation was priority for already developed regions and sectors. With in capitalist system the industrialists from developed regions with their economic power, administrative connections

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and political links were able to get more infrastructural facilities (like power, transportation and communication, Railways etc.) in those very areas, similarly political elite from the developed, states, on the basis of their better education, skills, manipulative capacities and role in the overall politics of the century were able to present the demands for their own states in a way as if those were concerned with the development of the nation as a whole. For example in the states where the Green Revolution has been most beneficial for the landlords, even to-day subsidies,

assistance, concessions and support are demanded for the sake of solving food problem of the country. Similarly because of better education, skill and technical training people from the better off states had been in control of most of the administrative decision making and even political institutions in the centre. In spite of administrative neutrality and ideological commitments these people had overt or covert attachment towards their states or region. No doubt it is a contradiction as far as liberal democratic values are concerned. But in the given socio-economic infrastructure it is a hard reality.

As such, in spite of the acceptance of the goal of removal of regional disparities at ideological and programmatic levels, insertion of these ideas in the constitution and plan documents and adoption of various policy measures, after 45 years of independence the regional inequalities and disparities not only continue but in many cases have increased. There is virtual unanimity among scholars who have analysed inter-regional disparities in India on two points the disparities have increased and central policies on resource transfers have not only been unable to prevent the increasing gap between the rich and poor states, but may have contributed to accentuating the disparities. Most indexes designed to measure the relative standing of the several states do not show much change since Independence. The more urbanised states and the states that benefited from intensive irrigation development ranked high in per capita income and net domestic product at Independence and they continue to rank high today. Those states that experienced little of either urban or rural development before Independence ranked low in per capital income and net domestic product then and continue to do so today.² Disparate regional development divides the country into zones of poverty and prosperity.

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Socio-Political Effects of Regional Disparities

Existence and continuance of regional inequalities and imbalances create various types of tensions. In a country which is multi-ethnic and multi-religious with ethnic-religious groups concentrated in some states in many cases these disparities also become course of social conflicts leading to political and administrative problems. Sometimes therefore a challenge to very integrity and unity of India.

The very first impact of regional disparities is the growth and development of regionalism and sub-regionalism. It may be pointed out at the outset that in a plural society like India, to an extent regionalism and sub-regionalism is obvious. Also by itself these are not dangerous to the integrity and stability of the country. On the contrary many a time regionalism has been proved more conducive for the maintenance of unity. But in the context of economic inequalities and disparities regionalism may become separatism and a serious problem. There are various reasons for the growth of regionalism as a result of regional disparities.

In the absence of National economy there are a large number of bourgeois entrepreneurs whose activities are confined to small regions. These businessmen rely for their labour and market on the local population. Their interests thus frequently conflict with the big bourgeoisie, which relies on a national market. For its part, national capital in India derives mainly from early merchant capitalists like from Bombay and Calcutta, who to-day control a major part of the

industry, trade and finance not only in these cities but throughout the sub-continent. Naturally, the regional bourgeoisie of the different states, who arrived late on the scene, resist monopolistic control by the big bourgeoisie. And for this they look towards the state governments to place restrictions on the national level monopolistic interests. Obviously, therefore, they support such parties and groups at state level which are state or region based. In the fifties and sixties this also produced violent struggles for the creation of linguistic states, which mobilised both regional capital and the non-bourgeoisie opposition parties in such states as Maharashtra, Orissa, and Mysore. The movements were launched on linguistic and cultural basis, but an analysis of support base and leadership patterns clearly suggest that it was a protest against the big

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bourgeoisie, who mostly came from other states or regions. This unleashing of regional chauvinism also often hinders the creation of national level class consciousness.⁵ Even to-day these groups of petty bourgeoisie and middle classes support and sustain regional parties in various states.

Two recent examples of growth of regional movements currently active are those of Jharkhand and Uttarakhand.

Jharkhand area also known as Chotanagpur plateau, includes a cultural region comprising 21 contiguous districts in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. The region has the richest deposits of mineral wealth. More than 25% of mineral activities of the country as a whole are carried on in this region. But for years these resources have been used for industrialisation without any benefits to the people of region a large majority of whom are tribals. The setting up of industries and subsequently the development process initiated by five year plans rather than helping the indigenous communities have been adversely affecting them. They have been uprooted from their lands and forced to become labourers. A significant portion of tribal population had to migrate out in search of livelihood. On the other hand a large number of outsiders had come to the region as businessmen, contractors and in various positions in industries.

A section of Jharkhand protagonists have designated this economic plight as one due to internal colonialism where underdeveloped region has been exploited by developed regions as their colonies. The ingredients of this colonialism have been earmarked as (i) The caste system which determines the division of labour in the country and shapes the mental attitude to physical work. The administration and police also work on this basis. (ii) The uneven development of the society is said to be the second ingredient. Related with it is the discrimination in development between the two regions, viz. plains and hill areas of Jharkhand. (iii) Land and Forest alienation has gone deep due to implementation of river valley projects and setting up of industries. ⁶ Thus, a sense of economic and cultural deprivation among the tribal people of the region has given rise to strong movement for creation of a separate Jharkhand state.

Similarly in the hill regions of Uttar Pradesh known as Uttarakhand the grouse of the people is that successive governments have neglected and exploited them. At the planning

level the problems of Uttarakhand have been well understood. For example, the increasing denudation of forests due largely to commercial felling, the large scale migration of able bodied males and the consequent emergence of a "money order" economy with increasing feminisation of the hill economy and society, have been well-documented. It is also recognised that the hill areas have a comparative advantage in horticulture and agro-processing which have a favourable export demand besides being environment-friendly; that the expansion of public distribution of foodgrains is necessary to protect the environment by discouraging the cultivation of food crops, and that there is a great potential for the location of pollution-free industries which are skill-intensive such as electronics. The need for the active involvement of the people, particularly women for the protection of the environment has been repeatedly stressed.

Despite all this, if the impact in terms of development, conservation of environment and the expansion of employment opportunities has not been satisfactory, and if the feeling of neglect persists in the region, the inescapable conclusion is that all this wisdom has largely remained on paper and has not been backed by effective administrative arrangements for putting these ideas into practice. It is readily acknowledged that there is no regional planning worth the name for the hill areas in Uttar Pradesh. The so-called regional plan is reduced essentially to putting together schemes undertaken by various departments at the state capital.⁷ Result is that even though as many as three Chief Ministers — Govind Ballabh Pant, H.N. Bahuguna and N.D. Tiwari — came from these hills there is widespread poverty and backwardness. People are condemned to living a hard life. There has been slowly developing a sense of dissatisfaction among the people. The issue of reservation provided them a catalyst and now there is a strong movement for a separate Uttarakhand State.

Apart from sense of deprivation in the neglected States or regions the development efforts and benefits concentrated in certain areas or states have also given birth to vested interests, particularly in the rural parts of the developed states. For instance in areas where Green Revolution was introduced and has been successful the new rich farmers class has become economically and politically important. They are now interested in

perpetuating the concessions and facilities which were given to them to usher in the Green Revolution. In spite of agriculture having become quite profitable they want subsidies to continue even at the cost of neglect of other areas. Not only they are trying to influence the policies at state level and through that at national level, but of late have started organising and directly participating in politics on class level. Success of Akali Dal in Punjab, Lok Dal in Haryana and Western parts of U.P., to an extent Telegu Desam in Andhra Pradesh and movements like Shetkari Sangathan in Maharashtra etc. are pointers to this direction. With the strength of newly gained economic power, its numerical value, social status and links with the administrative machinery this class has been able to appropriate various development funds for its own use. They have also been successful in preventing the imposition of tax on agricultural income, get reduction in price of fertilisers and pesticides, getting remunerative support prices for foodgrains etc. Consequently much of the tax burden and increase in prices fall on poor urban people and

agriculturally backward regions. As a result, one, regionalism and regional parties are growing, second there is emerging a rural-urban conflict and there tensions, between developed and under-developed regions are becoming severe.

Another aspect of unbalanced development is that because of development only in limited areas the work force from other states and areas keep on flocking to the developed areas in search of jobs and employment. Continuous large scale arrival of Industrial labour from South India and other parts of Bombay, from Bihar and Orissa to Calcutta and agricultural labour from eastern U.P. to Punjab, for example, are creating two types of tensions. On the one hand it affects the cultural harmony of those areas by creating apprehensions among the linguistic and cultural groups about their position. One of the backgrounds of Punjab problem in 1980s was this. There is a fear among the Sikhs of their being reduced to a minority in the state of their concentration. Second it generates ill-feeling in the local work force, who either are unable to get jobs or in view of migratory labour's willingness to work at lower rates become unable to bargain effectively with the local employees. This gives birth to the sectional organisations and sons of the soil agitations. The phenomena of Shiv Sena in Bombay is the glaring example of

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this.

Further in the absence of job opportunities in rural areas and small towns, educated, semi-skilled and unskilled and uneducated unemployed people keep on arriving in metropolitan and big cities thereby increasing in the population pressure tremendously. This results in unplanned and unchecked growth of these cities, failure of civic and transport services, nonavailability of houses, growth of slums and rapid increase in cost of living. This on the one hand frustrates all the plans and efforts of city planners and on the other creates and increases social tensions, crimes and protest movements of various types.

One more effort of this is that the educated middle classes of the developed regions are politically and otherwise better equipped and skilled. They, therefore, are able to take the best government jobs all over India. The new and emerging educated sections of backward areas see them as appropriators of their opportunities, particularly within their own states or regions. The class interests of the educated classes from developed regions and states working in backward regions make them side with the national government while the newly educated groups of the backward regions look towards their own state governments as guarantors for share in economic surplus.

Similarly expansion of education, particularly higher education, but not industrialisation and other job creating institutions is increasing the army of educated unemployed youths in the backward regions. These frustrated youngmen are allured by the movements against the inflow of people from other countries and states. One of the basic reason behind Assam agitation is this. Similar developments are simmering up in parts of Bihar, and Orissa. On the other hand these unemployed youths are also attracted by the caste, communal and other sectional agitations fighting for the protection of rights on sectarian lines. Conflicts on caste lines, particularly for reservation of jobs in Bihar and Gujarat, growth of caste and sub-caste associations in towns and

cities and continuous increase in communal conflicts, inspite of so-called modernisation and expansion of education are, to an extent, because of this reason.

Finally lack of national economy in industrial projects and the predominance of small peasant agriculture in large parts leads to a tendency towards fragmentation of class struggle into

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regions with inter-regional antagonisms added to class antagonisms. A revolutionary movement in a single region thus gets isolated since the objective conditions of alliance with other regions are lacking. Having inherited the administrative superstructure of a nation state without an underlying base of national economy and national division of labour, the federal government can use this fragmentation and isolation of regional struggles to defeat them. The agrarian unrest in Telengana, and sporadic Naxalite activities are examples of such isolated struggles. The Naxalite movement particularly deserves attention. Beginning in 1969 it was definitely an ideology and strategy based movement. But its localisation in certain parts of India, especially West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala meant that the federal Government was able to counter it with the Central Reserve Police and other Para-military forces in each State separately. Attempts to link up separate movements met with little success.

Uneven regional development, therefore, has meant uneven and often isolated development of the class struggle, trade unionism and ideological uprisings in different parts of India. Inter-regional difference in the intensity of class struggle, and inter-regional rivalry between the politically articulated petty bourgeoisie of different regions have extended regional factions of political parties also. While parties have national labels they have diverse regional existence. The ruling party has for a long time been a coalition of regional forces. When it is in power it can dispense jobs and patronage, which keeps this coalition together. For the purpose of perpetuating the coalition it has at its service the administrative superstructure and the ideology of nationalism, first developed in anti-colonial struggle, but kept on since then by an appeal to the unity of India, against foreign enemies. But out of power the parties find it hard to perpetuate the coalition of regional interests. Division of Congress after the defeats in 1967 and 1977 election, disintegration of Janata Party after 1980 and Janata Dal after 1990 debacle are its glaring examples. Even ideologically committed leftist parties have not been able to spare themselves from this paradox. As their best chance of coming to power is at regional levels; the temptation is to define the class struggle at the regional level alone.⁸ The peculiar problems faced by the CPI(M) being a ruling party in West Bengal afford a very good example of the contradictory

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pressures faced by a regional party.

As a whole the existence and continuation of regional disparities at the outset do not allow either a national economy or a national politics. It helps to create different levels and patterns of politics. Second it gives rise to inter-state, inter-region and centre-state disputes and conflicts. It stimulates parochial, communal and sectional organisations and finally helps the traditional ruling classes maintain their control over the state power and thereby sustain the development

process maintaining status quo, resulting in concentration of economic power. But in view of democratisation and mass mobilisation, these contradictions cause political instability, social tensions, alienation of masses from the efficacy of the political system and ultimately a threat to national unity. Because of the uneven process of development, some ethnic groups move ahead more rapidly than others, and the latter (mostly indigenous population of an area), feeling out paced against the migrants and outsiders, are compelled to put at first claim to local resources and benefits. At the same time more developed regions also develop a vested interest and when there is sudden talk of maintaining regional balances they feel they are being discriminated against because of their having done well. Thus today in India large number of inter-state, inter-community and to a great extent Centre-State tensions are because of the persistence of regional imbalances. The need to adopt a developmental model for balanced development therefore is very important.

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Secularism : Theory and Practice

Since its use first in 1648 at the end of Thirty Years war in Europe to refer to the transfer of church properties to the exclusive control of the princes, secularism has been a critically important development as a system of social ethics based upon a doctrine that as far as state activities are concerned, ethical standards and conduct should determine exclusively with reference to the present life and social well being without reference to religion. Secularism since then has implied, that there is no state support for religious bodies, no religious teaching in state schools, no religious tests for public office or civil rights, no legislative protection for any

religious dogmas and no penalty for any questioning of or deviation from religious belief. In this context a secular state is by definition one which sees individuals as equal citizens of a society in which no religious or social stratification are recognised as the basis for exercising political rights.¹

In India, the concept of secularism acquires added significance. Being the world's most complex plural society India has been striving to weave a pattern of communal harmony and composite national existence. In Indian history there are many examples where rulers treated all religions with equal respect or irrespective of their own religious beliefs saw their subjects as equals.

The pioneers of the Indian National Movement, no doubt hoped to develop political nationalism to secure political ends irrespective of religious differences. In an age of rationality, enlightenment and socio-religious reform movements, they wanted to keep religion strictly at personal level and away from political principles. But since the national movement had to mobilise the support of all classes against foreign domination,

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the leaders of the different classes could not press the principle of secularism firmly for fear of losing the allegiance of religious minded and obscurantist groups. The merchants and the moneylenders in Punjab or the landlords in Bengal were soon to realise that their economic interests could be protected only with the blessing of communalism. The Congress cold-shouldered the cause of socialism in the same manner in deference to the vested interests whose support it could ill afford to forfeit.

The competitive interests in the Indian society exploited the religious, caste and regional divisions which constituted the source of communalism in Indian politics. According to Bipin Chandra, "the social, economic and political vested interests deliberately encouraged or unconsciously adopted communalism because of its capacity to distort popular struggles to prevent the masses from understanding the social and economic factions responsible for their social conditions and to turn them away from their real national and socio-economic interests and issues and masses movements around them. Communalism also enabled them to disguise their own privilege sectional, economic and political interests in the garb of communal ideology and religious identity and instead to secure for their interests not only a moral and ideological cover but also popular mass support inspired by religious passions. The leadership of the nationalist movement in the given situation lacked the political will to counter this communalism. The constraints of electoral politics, though limited, introduced by the colonial government were formidable. So was the desire to achieve political freedom at the earliest.

Independence and Secularism

In independent India, in view of the religious diversity of society, the traumatic experience of the partition and the insecurity of the minorities, the concept of secular state was considered essential. However, right from the beginning there were differences about the two meanings of secularism. The first meaning of secularism becomes clear when people talk of secular trends in history or economics, or when they speak of secularising the state. According to this meaning

religion is not to be admitted in public life. One can have religion in one's private life : one can be a good Hindu or a good Muslim within one's home or at one's place of worship. But when one enters public life, one is expected to leave one's faith behind. Implied

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in this ideology is the belief that managing the public realm is a science which is eventually, universal and that religion to the extent it is opposed to the bellonion world-image of science, is a potential threat to any modern polity.²

In constrast, the second meaning of secularism revolves around the idea of equal respect for all religions. According to this secularism is opposite of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and fanaticism. One could be a good secularist by being equally disrespectful towards all religions or by being equally respectful towards them. And true secularism, the second meaning insists, must opt for respect. It is this non-modern meaning of secularism which anti-colonial India stressed, given its concerns with mass mobilization and a broad consensus against the British rule. The meaning recognises that even when a state is tolerant of religions, it need not lead to religious tolerance in a society. For tolerance by the state can not guarantee tolerance by the society. State tolerance may ensure, in the short run, the survival of a political community; in the long run the community must go beyond it. This meaning of secularism recognises covertly what we are now finding out painfully, namely that the growth of secular or modern vested interests in a secular public sphere is an insufficient basis for the long-term survival of a political community. Otherwise the Scots and the Welsh or for that matter, some of the religious communities in India would not be creating so many problems for their countries.

Mahatma Gandhi was the most ardent advocate of this approach. He advocated non-interference by the state in the religious affairs of the people and profound respect for all religions. His prayer meetings were symbolic of this approach. This approach above all, won him the confidence of the minorities. The secular leftists of course viewed this Gandhian approach with suspicion at best and hostility at worst. Though not free from pitfalls, the approach had its own wisdom. The cultural ethos of our people require that we adopt our cultural rather than eurocentred idiom of atheistic secularism. Combined with an open and progressive mind, such an approach can be much more productive.

However, there is always a lurking danger in this approach. Religious conservatism can claim the better of this. In other words it can degenerate into utter conservatism blocking the

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process of change. This has been unfortunately the fate of Gandhism in this country. Gandhism could not play a creative role after independence either in the field of social justice or in the field of religion. Its real spirit died with Gandhi himself. Nevertheless, the Constitution of India adopted for this kind of secularism which comes out from Articles 25 to 30 providing for freedom of religion and protection of cultural and educational rights of minorities, as well as some other articles. First, it guarantees freedom of religion to individuals as well as to religious groups. Second, it guarantees equality of citizenship that is no discrimination on grounds of

religion (Article 15.1), equality of opportunity in public employment (Article 16.1.2), no discrimination in educational institutions (Article 29.2) and no communal electorate (Article 325), although there is special provision for reservation of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (Article 330.1 and 332.1). Third, it provides for separation of state and religion that is, no special taxes for promotion of religion (Article 27) and no religious institution in state educational institutions (Article 28). The provisions in these articles make clear that the intention of the Constitution is neither to oppose religion nor to promote a rationalisation of culture, but merely to maintain the neutrality and impartiality of the state in matters of religion.

In various cases the Supreme Court of India has reaffirmed that the concept of secular democracy is one of the basic features of Indian Constitution. In March 1994 in Bommai's case a nine-judge bench elaborated this concept. Among other things the Court laid down the following : One, Secularism in India does not mean that the state should be hostile to religion but that it should be neutral as between the different religions. Two, the neutrality of the state would be violated if religion is used for political purposes and advocated by the political parties for their political ends. From this premise flowed two vital conclusions : An appeal to the electorate on grounds of religion offends secular democracy and politics and religion can not be mixed.³ The bench attached such supreme importance to this principle that they went to the extreme length of upholding the Presidents Proclamation under Article 356 declaring that the BJP governments in Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan should be unseated because the BJP government in

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Uttar Pradesh had been involved in the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya.

Again while giving its opinion on Babri Masjid case in early 1995 the Supreme Court observed that it is clear from the Constitutional scheme that it guarantees equality in the matter of religion to all individuals and groups irrespective of their faith emphasising that there is no religion of the state itself.... The concept of secularism is one facet of the right to equality woven as the central golden thread in the fabric depicting the pattern of the scheme in our Constitution.⁵

The adopted model of secularism is premised on at least a certain degree of secularisation of civil society, in the sense of dissociation of religion, if not entirely into the private sphere at least into some very limited domains of public life. Secularism in this sense is also seen as a protection of minority rights. It is instructive that minorities in India despite being intensely religious and sometimes even fundamentalist, are among the most ardent supporters of secularism from which they primarily expect the impartiality and neutrality of the state.⁶

According to one opinion this meaning of secularism is purely negative. It is defined negatively as something which is not against religion. But what is religion? In the Constituent Assembly Debates there are frequent reference to 'true religion' which the founders desired that our Constitution should safeguard. When they spoke of true religion, the founding fathers were distinguishing it from superstitious beliefs and practices associated with religion. But in practice every religion involves faith or belief in some metaphysical proposition; a code of ethics or a system of values; and prescription of rituals. Then when the theory of secularism talks of not

being against religion or of supporting all religions, does it mean religions in each of these aspects or only in respect of one or other of these three aspects? Or again, will it support some part of each not all? Thus, such a concept only gives birth to more problems.⁷ In sum the state in India is supposed to be not hostile to religion. It implies allowing all the existing and even new religions to flourish with the role of the state being one of active neutrality to their activities — a liberal interpretation of secularism which hoped to preserve and protect the cultural heritage of India while building a new nation on unity of faiths.

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Secularism in Practice

In the earlier years after independence, thanks to a number of fortunate circumstances, one could follow the logic of the more local meaning of secularism in Indian politics. But soon secularism began to be used merely as a slogan of opportunism. Neither the ruling party nor the opposition implemented it in its true spirit. Politicians in the name of equal respect to all religions started using secularism either to appease religious groups or mobilise people in the name of religion for creating vote banks. Unfortunately the law does not debar political parties to be organised on the basis of religion etc. Though electoral law prohibits appealing in the name of religion. In a judgement delivered on 17 July 1995 even the Supreme Court has given some leverage to this when it ruled that political parties which are identified with a particular caste, community, religion or language can seek votes to promote their cause without creating hatred for their adversaries. The three Judge bench observed they had recognised that there were several parties whose membership was either confined to or predominately held by members of some communities or religion and than an appeal made by candidates of such parties for votes may in an indirect way be influenced by considerations of religion, race, community or language. If the law recognised such parties such situations could not be avoided.⁸

What to talk of political parties even the government has been actively connected with religious activities and affairs. After independence many official functions have been accompanied by communal rituals. The Prime Ministers, Ministers and State leaders have been going to temples offering puja etc. There can be no objection to any state leader professing any religion and worshipping in accordance with its tenets. But that must remain a strictly personal matter. When it is published in the mass media, it can not but weaken secularism. And that would still remain the position if the state leaders were to visit places of worship of other religions too, and these were to be published in the same manner.

This type of equal respect to all religions by the state, in fact, creates more problems. To quote Chanchal Sarkar "in the name of secularism we observe the festivals of all the communities giving a developing country more holidays than

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perhaps anywhere else in the world. If, to meet a severe food crisis, we pass an austerity order, then churches, temples, mosques and gurudwaras are exempted for purposes of bhog or prasad. And our leaders do not think twice about particulating in a denominational religious ceremony at

the dedication of a dam or a factory, thereby offering a gratuitous, even if unintended, insult to other communities." Moonis Raza summarises it as "Pakistan is an Islamic theocratic state, India signifies Hindi theocracy Muslim theocracy, Christian theocracy and all the cracies put together."

Along with the other factors this notion of state participation has given birth to communal antagonism rather than creating an atmosphere of harmony as envisaged by the framers of the Constitution. The very process of the formation of sovereign state in such a situation, among other things, has stimulated sentiments of parochialism, communalism, racialism and so on; because it has introduced into society a new price over which to fight and a frightening new force with which to contend. When the state is viewed as a positive instruments for the realisation of collective aims the different people tend to organise on the basis of religion and language. It works because among other reasons, it is easier to organise small, culturally distinct groups than large multi-cultural class categories and because admittedly, state authorities would rather recognise cultural categories. In recent years a certain kind of perversion has crept up in this regard. Before a general election is held, the religious issues get projected and emotions are aroused. By virtue of the momentum so generated, the election is won. These developments have strengthened communalism. Even a decade or so ago, there was hardly any talk of what is called Hindu resurgence. Today the phenomenon is known as Hindu backlash and, more often than not, it is said or implied that the minorities have been getting away with all kinds of concessions and that the majority too has some rights. This is a new idiom which is being used on a large scale in independent India for the first time.

Thus while the constitutional framework provided a strong basis for the separation of democracy and religion, the actual practice of democracy has revealed that the practitioners of various religions have not internalised the Constitutional framework of India. According to C.P. Bhambhri there are two

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very important reasons for this. First, the absolute majority of Indians are extremely religious in personal life. A secular state in a highly religious society has to keep proving that it does not intend to hurt the religious sentiment of the citizens.

Second, India is not only a multi-religious country, but its believers are also very proud of faith and flinky about maintaining their religious identity. In this socio-cultural context, the functionaries of the secular state have to maintain equi-distance from all religions and at the same time they have to harmonise inter-religious social relations.⁹

In addition to that and to an extent because of this, the political as well intellectual class in India has become highly divided on the issue of the actual practice of secularism. Asgar Ali Engineer describes the major streams as follows.¹⁰ Firstly, there are those who interpret secularism in the western sense and context, its implications being strictly a religious approach to politics and state policies. We can include in this category leftists, liberals and rationalists. However, those under this category are in a small minority in our country. Secondly, there are those who interpret secularism as equal respect for all religions both in state policies and social behaviour. Gandhites

and some believers of religion can be included in this category. Speaking in a genuine sense, even those in this category happen to be in a minority.

Thirdly, there are those who pay lip service to secularism and interpret it in whichever way suits them politically. Politicians of all hues and colours can fit into this category. In fact, it is these people who promote communalism in the name of secularism and cause intellectual confusion and hence are more dangerous than those who are openly communal (though no one claims to be communal).

These politicians and political parties make opportunistic alliances on a caste and communal basis. It is as if they would make an alliance with the devil himself if it helped them capture a few more seats in elections. The Congress (I) and the Janata are known to have made alliances with the Shiva Sena in the Bombay Municipal Corporation thus giving it a great deal of political credibility. The CPM made an alliance with the Muslim League in Kerala, though of course it has broken the relationship now. Many secular parties, including a section of the Congress

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have alleged that the Narasimha Rao Government followed the policy of "Soft Hindutava" in dealing with the Tempal-Mosque controversy. One can give any number of such instances from different states and even at the centre. The candidates are set up not on the basis of merit and public record but on the basis of their caste and community which might ensure their chances of -winning:

In view of all this today there is widespread concern that Indian secularism is facing a serious crisis and that what came to be known as the Nehruvian consensus has collapsed as is collapsing. We find an increasing use of religion in the social construction of ethnic and communal identity which is made the basis for communal identity which is made the basis for the articulation of common economic interests and political mobilisation. There is also the contraction of an unprecedented pan-Indian Hindi consciousness that cuts across caste and regional divisions. This has often been described as the "Hindu Backlash", the Hindu reaction against the political mobilisation of other religious groups. There is little doubt that these movements are responses to a wider cultural crisis associated with modernisation that has also brought in its wake social dislocation and perhaps a pervasive sense of anomie. It is in this context that the attempt to re-examine Indian secularism is gaining prominence."

An Assessment

The experience of past 45 years in India suggests it is wrong to think that just with modernisation of the medieval society, with economic development and the secular pretensions of the government, the process of ascriptive identity building or the minority and majority problems can be liquidated. On the contrary it suggests that the realities of social and economic antagonism arising out of generation and articulation of demands in a backward plural society undergoing development through westernised capitalist path can give birth to a religious vocabulary. Hence the problems of communalism and parochialism having its roots deep in the historical events and human psychology cannot be solved by stigmatising this or that group. The

basic issue is, can we find a solution to communal and similar problems in a conciliatory political system? Of course

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the real cure must penetrate the social structure. But initiative can be taken by jettisoning the idea that secularism means equal respect for all religions by the state. Instead, religion will have to be ruthlessly thrust out of entry into public and political life.

It does not mean that secularism has to be equated with irreligion. Secularism as irreligion in Indian context is a questionable proposition on grounds both of practicability and desirability. The overwhelming majority of our people are neither atheists nor agnostics. They believe in one or the other of the traditional religions. In the situation, if a state is determined to be a totalitarian and thereby looking for limited and negative meanings only then it can be anti-religious. But if it is democratic then it need not be so. In fact in positive terms secularism means that "the rights of citizens are independent of their faith they profess and no man may be punished for his religion.¹² In this context secularism subsists on two fundamental convictions relating to the role of the state. One is repudiation of the totalitarian concept of the state, that is there are areas of human interest and endeavour wherein the state has no role to play. The other point basic to the concept of secular state is that as it is not a polity that lives in fear of ideas as other forms of polity could be deemed to do.

The plea, therefore is not oppose or even to ignore religion. A democrat or a secularist can not and must not dismiss religion lightly. At the same time, the very fact of religion being a continuous reality at social level calls for the state to be away from it, so that it can keep the rights and obligations of its citizens separate from religion.

What is required of state in India is to follow a policy of secularism and secularisation. Among the secular values basic to a secular society, are tolerance, social justice, economic welfare and equality before law. Religion is not antithetical to Science. But there is a contradiction between promoting a scientific temper and the rise of godmen, astrologers and the practice of obscurantist rituals. Nehru found the answer in science tempered by spiritualism — an inchoate term, but sufficiently understood as being a corrective to scientific absolutism.

It requires considerable understanding and sophistication to accept the proposition that India's unity rests on an acceptance of its rich diversity. India has to be shown to be a territorial idea

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that has the space and will to accommodate all its citizens and fulfil their aspirations for development, identity and growth. Universalisation of (primary) education, modernisation of traditional communities and occupation, the creation of accessible avenue for skill acquisition and the amelioration of living conditions in crowded city centres and squatter colonies are as relevant to defusing communal tensions as law and order measures or the puny efforts of the National Integration Council and the Minorities Commission. This is the direction in which we must move.

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Politics of Communalism

A "communalist" in traditional English usages is a person of altruistic compassion, attached to his commune or community, a person of deep social impulses and humanism identified with larger societal goals and community interests, "communal", "communalist", "communalism are hence terms of approbation in the western context in contrast to the exclusively negative and pejorative construction put on the word in South Asia. Here term communalism, in general means the tendency of the socio-religious groups to attempt to maximize its economic, social and political strength at the expenses of the other groups. In other words, as it is known in India, Communalism can be defined as "the political functioning of individuals or groups for the selfish interests of particular religious communities or sects. The adjectival form "communal" is one of the most negatively weighed terms in the Indian political vocabulary. It is used to describe an organization that seeks to promote the interests of a section of the population presumably to the detriment of the society as a whole, or in the name of religion or tradition opposes a social change. It is thus an epithet implying anti-social greed and reactionary outlook.

In this context Prof. Rasheeduddin Khan suggests that Communalism is basically an ideology of political allegiance to a religious community as a primarily and decisive group in the polity, and for political action. Hence Communalism is a modern phenomenon, and not a phenomenon of the medieval past. It is a sectarian, restrictive and negative response to the process of modernization, and modern nation-building. Communalism envisages a religious community alone as a base and universe of its political ambition and action. For a communalist, the religious community is the only relevant and valid category in politics

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and in state affairs, and environment. For a communalist, a political system and the sub-systems like a party system and state craft, can and should be structured on the recognition of religious communities as the foundational grass roots and operational reality. Communalism is perception of other religions, communities as inimical entities within a polity and within a nation, arranged in an unfriendly, antagonistic and belligerent equation, one to another. Communalism is a political orientation that recognises a religious community, and not the nation and the Nation-States, as the terminal community, the final point of political allegiance. Therefore, Communalism is a political strategy, opposed to nationalism, as an aggregation of multiethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual communities.¹ The most glaring manifestation of this is communal violence or riots.

It has been said that technological and economic development lead ultimately to the decline of communal conflict and that the emergence of new kinds of socio-economic roles and identities under cut the organizational bases upon which communal politics rests. But in India even after forty five years of independence, in spite of modernization, especially education and urbanization, the communal violence and frenzy not only continue but are assuming more serious dimension. The communities which have traditionally remained close, frequently interacting socially, to the extent of marrying and happily converting children to the fellow religion, have also been trapped in it.

Causes for Communalism

An analysis of the growth of Communalism and communal politics before and after Independence, reveals that the determining role has not been played by religion and culture but by non-religious and non cultural forces operating in the political and economic system. A careful scrutiny of the demands which have been made by communal leaders will reveal the true character and objective of communal politics under the mask of religion, culture and tradition. The communal leaders have aimed at protecting the interests of the lower middle class and urban intelligentsia. In this sense Communalism is a middle class phenomenon.² It can therefore, be easily suggested that Communalism had to be seen as a structural phenomenon of society and also as a strategy of the ruling classes to divide the masses for gaining maximum advantages and of the vested

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interests to reap purely economic benefits. Powerful group loyalties in a pluralist society functioning in the context of an economy of scarcity lead almost inevitably to intergroup rivalry and conflict. In this respect, conflicts in which language and caste defines the group identity have many of the same manifestations as communalism based on religious differences. This process is evident in India both because of the nature of colonial rule before independence and the developmental approach and cultural policy of the Government after independence.

Colonial Legacy

In the pre-British times the predominance of medieval forms of agriculture, primitive techniques, slow means of transport and communication, production largely dependent upon nature's bounty, domestic modes of industry and other factors created conditions of static life and self-sufficient isolated economy. Caste, clan, tribe and village were the inevitable forms of social organization in these economic conditions.

What the British rule did was to change some of these conditions; but it failed to modernise agricultural organisation and technique or transform industry which are the necessary conditions for the integration of social groups and growth of various nationalism. The unbalanced economic change induced social development of lopsided kind. Some of the obstructive customs and institutions remained e.g. caste, and the specter of communalism made its appearance in view of differential rates of mobilization among communal groups.

The consequence of communal groups being mobilized at different rates was that some people gained a head-start in competition for the scarce rewards of modernity. New socio-economic categories, therefore, tended to coincide with, rather than interact, communal boundaries, with the consequences that the modern status system came to be organised along communal lines. There was consequently, little to ameliorate the intensity of communal confrontation. The fewer the cross-cutting socio-economic linkages, the more naked such confrontations and the greater the likelihood of secessionists and other movements of communal nationalism.

Unbalanced development under colonial rule thus caused differential rates of mobilization. It brought old animosities to

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the surface and gave rise to alienation and hostility. To begin with Hindus and Muslims, in particular, tended to view the British consolidation of power in two different perspectives. For most Hindus, it appeared to be a transfer of political authority from an archaic to a modern set of foreign rulers. The adjustment to the latter was deemed to be easier and considerably more desirable for reasons of future development. Hindus were relatively more prone to reconcile themselves to the new political system as well as the general process of modernization. For Muslims the matter was quite different. They looked upon the British as the usurpers of powers. Muslims held the British responsible for the destruction of their political power. A feeling of humiliation and defeat persisted especially among the Muslim aristocrats, whose strongest centre was located in North India. With the decline of traditional crafts, the slow encroachment of the Hindu merchant and money-lending class the Muslim began to experience further hardship.

This position, however soon started changing. The new Muslim middle class dissatisfied at the disparity between themselves and the established Hindu middle class started looking towards the government. The government also started moving to a policy of conciliation towards the remnants of the precapitalist ruling class. The idea was to turn the Muslim aristocracy from enemies to the most steadfast supporters of the British regime. The main reason was that by this time the urban middle class, which happened to be largely Hindus, had started organising and challenging the British rule. This had culminated in the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The rulers therefore started looking towards landowners, the so-called natural leaders of society who particularly in North India, happened to be Muslims as their allies.

The Muslim professional groups also feared that a campaign, supported by leading Hindu Congressmen to develop the Hindi language and to introduce the Devanagiri script in the courts and government departments would place them in a disadvantageous position in government service, in journalism and in the legal profession.³ And finally the introduction of representative institutions and of open competition for Government posts gave rise to material fears amongst some Muslims. The persistent Congress demands for representative

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institutions and competitive examinations also aroused their hostility. Thus, a combination of religious, and more significantly, material fears led to the communal antagonism. Differential mobilization widened the socio-political cleavages not only between the country's major nationality groups but also between majority and minority communal groups within each administrative region such as Hindu-Muslim Sikh relations in Punjab and even between sub-groups of a single nationality like Brahmins and non-Brahmins in Madras.

There is also the factor of imperial diplomacy. The colonial administration sometimes encouraged the formation of conservative parties to oppose the more radical nationalist parties. Some Indian writings in fact, squarely blame the British Government for encouraging and fostering communalism arguing that the British introduced separate electorate, and granted special cleavages in Indian Society. This was alleged to be machinations of a "divide and rule" policy used to impede and finally to frustrate the ambitions of those who desired a free united India.

There is no doubt that the colonial rulers found that religion could be profitably exploited in their approach to the Indian people—communal divisions could be encouraged in order to keep the larger community divided against itself and ensure the permanence of their own dominion. To them horizontal division of the Indian people was not relevant. They totally ignored the vital realities of language, culture and classes of the Indian communities. They were not the authors of religious divisions but they utilized the division of religious feelings and the element of race to their advantage. They found Divide at impera to be a useful motto and division of the Indian people along religious lines the bulwork of British rule in Indian people, to end their consolidation and unification and to disrupt the process of the Indian nation in the making.⁴

National Movement

The pioneers of the Indian National Movement, no doubt, hoped to develop political nationalism to secure political ends irrespective of religious differences. In an age of rationality, enlightenment and socio-religious reform movements, they wanted to keep religion strictly at personal level and away from political principles. But history moved on its own precarious course. The growth of nationalism came to be subjected to

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dialectical inevitability and attracted its anti-thesis within the form of communalism.⁵ In fact, the emergence of anti-imperial consciousness in India was very much linked with religious revivalism. It was because unlike European nationalism, Indian nationalism was not an indigenous product. We did not have radical and secular movements such as the Renaissance, the reformation and the enlightenment that Europeans witnessed. There was no French Revolution no Napoleonic war, not even the rise of a broad based middle class or the growth of industrial civilization which broke the stranglehold of feudalism. It was upon these and other developments that nationalism was founded in Europe whereas Indian Nationalism arose as a by-product of British occupation of India. Even the claim that we were a nation conscious of ourself in the bygone past was advanced only subsequently to the confrontation with the British. The British according to K.K. Gangadharan were instrumental in the development of three brands of nationalism in India. Their presence meant three things to India—a foreign culture, a foreign religion and a foreign rule. Resistance and rebellion to the foreign culture gradually grew up into a new brand of cultural nationalism.⁶ Even militant leaders of the Congress, like Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, Lala Lajpat Rai, etc., in the prevailing conditions and in order to arouse anti-British feelings among masses, used religious, platforms and festivals like Kali Puja, Ganesh Festival cow protection societies etc.

From 1920s onwards when Gandhi took over the leadership of nationalist movement he realised that to counter the powerful British rule was required mass mobilization and a sense of unity among the people from various communities and sects. He, therefore, attempted to develop amity and harmony among various religions and groups, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. His, success, however, was short-lived. First of all Gandhi's appeal was only at emotional level. He never attempted to develop a secular image of the Congress or the movement on scientific basis. Moreover Gandhi himself was a split personality. On the one hand as politician he was a shrewd strategist but on the other hand he was a deeply involved Hindu. Though he tried to create communal harmony on the basis of equal respect to all the religions, he never realised that his own utterances, actions and use of vocabulary like, "Ram Rajya" and cow

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protection, etc. as a leader could be misinterpreted by the people and elite from other religions, particularly in view of conflict in material and economic interests.

Nehru, of course, tried to analyse the situation objectively and dispassionately. But he also did not show any determination to create secularism in the real sense within the Congress. As such in view of Gandhi's inability to create communal harmony, use of Hindu religious rhetorics and symbols by militant leaders like Tilak, Lajpat Rai, Madan Mohan Malaviya etc. and halfhearted

attempts for secularization by leaders like Nehru kept on pushing Congress to be a Hindu oriented body. Though Congress denied this charge vehemently and attempted to remain a national and secular organisation it could not succeed in checking growing alienation among various religious, caste and cultural minorities. As such, to an extent, in the context of India, communalism may also be viewed as a consequence of the contradictions of Indian nationalism. It was inherent in the objective situation as it obtained after the advent of the British Raj. The Government, Congress and the political leaders of the Muslims all accentuated it.

The leaders of the national movement did not pay proper and sufficient attention to the problem of communalism. They lacked theoretical clarity and the will to wage consistent and persistent fight against the divisive forces. They spoke in changing styles and employed conflicting approaches according to the situation, wavering and vacillating all the time. Sometimes they compromised and when they decided to fight communalism, they fought half heartedly. The basic flaw in their approach was their conception of the community. They thought that every community in India was homogeneous and well-knit. And the 'communal' leadership was the authentic spokesman of the problems of the community. In 1888, at the Allahabad Session of the Indian National Congress, it was resolved that "no subject shall be passed for discussion by the Subjects Committee or allowed to be discussed at any Congress by the President thereof, to the introduction of which the Hindu or Mohammedan delegates as a body object, unanimously or near unanimously". This Resolution practically evaded the issues in order to appease certain sections of the elite leadership. Whenever the Congress leaders thought of involving the minorities or religious

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communities with the national issues they looked to the Muslim or Sikh or Christian leaders and not the masses of those communities. They equated Sir Syed or Ameer AH who were the representatives of the upper classes of the Muslims, with the entire community. These Muslim leaders looked down upon the lower classes in their own community. Their concern was jobs and concessions for the educated sections. The League never had any mass base upto 1937. The Congress approach to communal unity was 'unity from above' and through 'middlemen'. The Muslim leaders who joined the Congress also subscribed to this notion. Hence there was an emphasis on 'pacts', "agreements", and 'conferences' etc.⁷ Since the national movement had to mobilise the support of all classes against foreign domination, the leaders of the different classes could not press the principle of secularism firmly for fear of losing the allegiance of religious minded and obscurantist groups.

The nationalist movement reflected the strength and the weaknesses of these interests in waging political struggle or in managing the provincial governments after 1937. It has also to be noted that the national movement lacked the political will to counter the forces of communalism. The constraints of electoral politics were formidable. The leaders failed to involve the masses in exposing the reactionary design of communal leaders. According to Bipin Chandra, "the social, economic and political vested interests deliberately encouraged or unconsciously adopted communalism because of its capacity to distort popular struggles, to prevent the masses from understanding the social and economic factors responsible for their social condition and to turn them away from their real national and socio-economic interests and issues and mass movements

around them. Communalism also enabled them to disguise their own privileged sectional, economic and political interests in the grab of communal ideology and religious identity and instead to secure for their interests not only a moral and ideological cover but also popular mass support inspired by religious passions.⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru used to describe communalism as a conflict between progress and reaction. It signified the unity of imperialism with the Jagirdari elements it opposed "all radical forces in the fields of social and cultural change and religious reform. It also opposed, socialism and social equality.

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Independence and Communalism

During colonial rule because of differential rates of modernization, competitive capitalism and exploitation of classes, which coincided with communal groups there arose a gulf between different communities. Soon these communities started considering themselves as separate nations. The coming of independence opened the door for further accentuation of primordial identity building and the tendency to fragment. A major factor in this was that with the removal of control by the colonial power the issue as to who was to govern whom came to be starkly posed as it generally had not been before. Moreover the expectations of the masses had been raised quite high.

Given the peculiar Indian conditions in dealing with the formidable problems of nation building the India required a new model of society—a society based on full respect for human liberties, on pluralism and on a better social deal for all. In order to meet effectively the challenge of modernization and meet the demands of expanding participation the leadership had to have both the will and the capacity to initiate, absorb and sustain continuous transformation. It also included providing facilities to each nationality to fully develop its own potentialities, providing full economic and social opportunities to the poor masses of that nationality. The Indian leadership, however failed in this. On the one hand their ambivalent attitude towards secularism and nationalisties question and on the other its commitment to rapid economic growth and transformation through a model based on the postulates of capitalism and class reconciliation had given, along with other problems, an impetus to the growth of parochial and primordial sentiments. Added to this was introduction of electoral politics. In a situation of poverty, illiteracy and lack of awareness the caste, religion, language and region became handy tools of political mobilization for both individuals and political parties. In this background the communal question in India has become a complex one. It has developed ethnic, caste, regional, linguistic, religious and power dimensions. It needs, therefore, to be understood in that perspective.

Socio-Economic Basis of Communalism

As already mentioned that Communalism in its present form is a modern phenomenon and its roots lie not in religion

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but in politics and process of development. In fact to a certain extent the belated capitalist development laid the material basis for communalism. The imperialist domination was a great hindrance to the growth of indigenous capitalist class. In the given historical situation, the capitalist class of India could not become the bearer of modern ideology like rationalism or secularism. In the presence of the coexistence of pre-capitalist formations and capitalist mode of production and social relations, archaic communal feeling and identity survived. The dependency and the loyalist posture also sapped the revolutionary potential of the Indian capitalist class.

The other aspect of the economic component is the fact that resources are scarce and demands disproportionately heavy and ever-growing in the wake of continued population explosion. During the independence struggle, the people were fed on the idea that all their suffering and miseries were due to the alien rule and once the British left the country they would have an era of plenty and all their suffering would come to an end. This could have been achieved only if a new category of social institutions, new devices of social control, and also new agencies of social change, such as would meet the needs of a rapid and harmonious development of the economic and social life of the Indian people in consonance with the principle of equality of citizens were created. No doubt, instrument of planning was adopted and establishment of a socialistic society was proclaimed as the goal. But neither the politicians, who decided to try Five-Year Plans nor the civil servants and technicians, who prepared them had any definite theories in mind. As a result, planning became empirical, intended to provide answer to some urgent problems and to satisfy a certain hope and need. It became an instrument for state capitalism to provide cost-free infrastructure for the private sector.

Consequently, power in India is monopolized by a class which does not represent the masses of this country. The facade of democracy is maintained in order to rotate power within the rival groups of the same class. Poverty, ignorance, injustice and exploitation are inseparably linked with each other. The minority groups, particularly, are condemned to be unequal and discriminated in the politics of scarcity, more so in the field of education. A.R. Kamat is not wrong when he says that the

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backwardness in education is closely related to the economic and social backwardness and bears the same hallmarks of a society divided against itself.

It must be admitted that neither the founding father of the constitution nor the political elite have ever been serious about the economic and religious emancipation of the members of the minority groups. No justiciable article of the constitution ensures this. It should also be noted that the political elite among the minorities are concerned only with articulating the demands of the educated middle class segment or raise non-issues like personal law or renaming of a university etc. Such politics is a compromise with the "national" elite which is keen to accommodate them. This is how the facade of consensus in the polity is maintained. The breakdown of this pattern means the dissatisfaction of a section of the same elite with the total group style of performance. The participation or involvement of the common man implies nothing but legitimization of the elite rule. Even from the point of view of elite politics, let alone the real question of economic emancipation of the oppressed and suppressed ones, the performance of the system is absolutely

unsatisfactory. The minority leaders cannot come to the rescue of their communities, whatever position they may occupy in the system. Their approach betrays the worst kind of hypocrisy. The simple law of asserting their hold on the community as described by Marx, in a different context is to adopt a religious attitude to politics and a political attitude to religion. Secularism, therefore, has amounted to no more than political rhetoric and a compromise with religion for political gain.⁹

This provides an opportunity to vested interests, whether politically motivated groups or foreign agencies to ignite communal, cast and ethnic feelings. The conviction that minorities are vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and suppression by those who control the state and its resources is very easy to travel in scarce resources society. It may be recalled here that most of the demands for constituting new states were primarily based allegedly on unfair and unequal distribution of development benefits and expenditure in the multilinguistic states. The reorganization of states on supposedly linguistic and cultural basis has not solved the problem in the absence of required economic and political action. For these problems are

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not exhausted by the mere acceptance of linguistic states. The unity of leadership manifested in the struggle for achieving such demands normally gives way to certain divisiveness among the elites when it comes to occupying power. As they settle down to the problem of delivering goods they find that they also cannot achieve all that they had promised. The people get disenchanted in the process. The leaders try to retain their support desperately by raising a new bogey, resurrecting a historic myth or forging a new and shifted alliances to meet the challenge of the counter elites. The best example of this is the developments in Punjab in the recent past.¹⁰

In general the economic crisis in our country is the crisis of underdeveloped capitalism in the Third World. The developed countries have a vested interest in keeping these countries backward because they are rich sources of raw material and cheap labour. They also provide a profitable market for their goods. Also, the elite in these countries are opening up their economies under the rubric of liberalization. This liberalisation creates a highly westernized, consumerism — orientated class of people almost indifferent to religious beliefs but cynically exploiting it for political ends. On the other hand, religious conservatism, and even religious fundamentalism attract the masses who are left high and dry. Thus a liberalized and westernised economy in a developing country also sows the seeds of fundamentalism. The ruling elite then use such an atmosphere for their own political ends and in the process strengthen the bases of fundamentalism and communalism.¹¹

As such communalism is nurtured not as much by religion as by the non-redressal of secular and genuine grievances of the masses which in the case of the minorities can be projected by the elite as discrimination based on religion. It is not faith but a sense of discrimination which creates a sense of unity. It is the feeling of insecurity, not of religion alone, which provides the sheet anchor to the notion of solidarity. It is the politics which acts as the leveller of sectarian differences and not the ideal of Islam, Sikhism or Christianity etc. The various studies of the political and voting behaviour of the Muslims for instance, bear it out. They also bring forth the

concept and difference between the Muslims elite perception of the political realities and that of masses.¹² Here it may be mentioned that no community in India

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is as homogeneous well knit and consolidated as its leaders wish us to believe. Every one of them is a divided community. In fact each of them has been witnessing intracommunity riots, in which the houses are ransacked and burnt. The religious places are attacked and even the priests are stabbed. If the economic and social policies of the system lead to concentration of power and deny equality of opportunity to the overwhelming majority of the people, belonging to all communities, discord and disharmony are inevitable. The formation of parties, political and other, on communal lines is one of the consequences of the prevailing distrust between the communities. In such a system the ruling class has a vested interest in dividing the people along communal and religious lines.

The Indian ruling classes, therefore, have always found religion, religiosity or dharmikta, as a recent coinage goes, most useful for reinforcing their hegemony, their ideological dominance and social control over the common people, making easier the latter's continued acceptance of an unjust and iniquitous social order. This has been well-secured through the typically Indian concept of secularism, defined as Sarva Dharma Sambhava (equal respect for all religions). Also their political parties have never been averse to the exploitation of religion, or communalism, to a greater or lesser degree, in their struggle for power at different levels in the Indian state. While there are problems galore, an increasing loss of credibility and even significant revolutionary developments in certain parts of the country, there is as yet no real or perceived threat from below to their political power or class domination. If these ruling classes, or their political representatives, are yet bargaining a strong tendency to scuttle even formal secularism for communalism and religious obscurantism, or for that matter even formal democracy for an increasingly authoritarian rule, this is indicative not only of a certain degeneration at the core of the Indian political system in recent years, but also of the feudal colonial inheritance of the new rulers of India.¹³

In pre-supposition of the well-knit and homogeneous communities, its association of Hindu Muslim, Sikh or Christian interests, and its reliance on religion for mobilising the people, comes in the way of changing the political status and the property relations. The opposition to socialism or communism is a salient

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feature of the communal economic doctrine. The communal concept of individual and society is very much in keeping with that ideology which sustains and promotes capitalism. The communal organizations hold private ownership as the law of nature; planning leads to totalitarianisms; economic class considerations are artificial; agrarian reforms and industrialization are unsuitable; and competitive enterprise should be guaranteed freedom. They also uphold the notion that the government's job is not to interfere in the economic sphere but it should merely provide guidance to industrial policy. All these principles are those of capitalist system which produces exploitation, poverty and inequality. One fails to understand as to why the communal

organisations consider right to property and competitive private enterprise so sacrosanct if they have the welfare of the poor Indian in their kind. It betrays either their ignorance of the nature of economic system or a deliberate attempt to make politics subservient to the interests of the few in the name of community.

The ruling class thus, has a major stake in the existence of communalism and communal organisations of different communities. These organisations divide the subalterns along religious and communal lines. However artificial these divisions may appear, they effectively impede the unity of the dominated classes—whose political and economic interests are identical. The ruling class is morally afraid of such unity as it constitutes the biggest threat to its rule. It has vested interest in dividing the people. In order to maintain disunity, the ruling class has been making shrewd and cold blooded calculations, often forgetting the costs of such ventures, Assam is a case in point. The root of the problem is under-development and this is ignored and a solution is sought in hardening the religious divisions— Hindu against Muslim, indigenous against migrant, plainsman against hill dweller, tribal against non-tribal, caste Hindu against scheduled caste Hindu. The standard strategy is to fight one communalism with the help of another communalism both at the inter community and intra-community levels : Hindu communalism with Muslim communalism, Jamaat-e-Islami communalism with Jamiatul Ulema communalism, Akali communalisms with extremist Sikh and Hindu communalism. It is in this context that the youth in India today show greater

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religious fervour fundamentalist attitude and nearness to linguistic, ethnic and communal identities then ever before. The period of economic crisis that is decade of 1980s has also been worst in terms of communal violence and is continuing to be so.

The Electoral Politics and Communalism

Needless to say introduction of universal adult franchise was a bold and revolutionary step on the part of members of constitution of India. However, after taking such an important step the founding leaders did not bother to create necessary conditions for the meaningful working of the system, nor they showed faith in people's capability to exercise the right to vote as conscious citizens.

The post-colonial Indian state, unlike its western counterpart, did not adopt the stance of completely expelling religion from public affairs and making it a private matter of individual citizens. On the contrary, with the Gandhian influence on its secular character, the Indian state took upon itself to be equally respectful towards all religions and at the same time not to let religion mingle with state affairs. India did not acquire a state religion but was equally disposed towards all religions. This gave an opportunity to leaders, particularly in the government to identify themselves with the people on the basis of their religious sentiments — both in negative and positive terms — and ask votes from them. For instance the Congress sought to assure the Muslims of the security of their religious identity if they moved under its banner. On the other hand even in the Nehruvian era coconuts were broken before ships were launched, yajnas performed before laying the foundation stones of the "temples of modern India" almanacs

consulted, Sanskrit hymns sung and holy tilaks applied on the foreheads of political leaders at public functions.

Thus, in India, increasingly cynical generations of rulers went about wooing the Muslim vote and, at the same time, trying to appease the Hindu by a show of devotion and a parading of Hindu symbols. The seeds of poison planted at the time of Nehru grew into a tree during the regime of Indira Gandhi, flowered under Rajiv and bore fruit under the dispensation of Narsimha Rao. And, it was not the Congress in its various avatars, that was the only political party guilty of trying to beat Jana Sangh at its game. The communists, too, put

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up people born of Muslim parents and bearing Muslim names as candidates at the time of elections in predominantly Muslim constituencies and nowhere else.¹⁴

Since Independence, most political parties have carefully carved out combinations of support bases in which the units of mobilization remain principally community, caste and linguistic and regional solidarities. The Congress has for long banked upon the support of the Brahmins, the Muslims and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes on an all India scale, though there have inevitably been regional variations the BJP has stridently constructed upper caste Hindu fears of both the lower castes and the Muslims, and mobilized tradition, history, a cadre organisation that unabashedly derives inspiration from the Nazi apparatus, state of the art technology and the ideology of nationalism in its search for power in a modern political system— parliamentary democracy. The Muslim League in its new incarnation in independent India plays the old game of magnifying the insecurities of the Muslim community in India, though its support bases are region-specific. The Janata Dal, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Samajwadi Party are all groupings of community and caste identities. The left parties, operating at least theoretically with the alternative category of class, while a significant presence, are nowhere near a decisive edge in the Indian polity as a whole. It is thus most political parties have most of the time operated the very modern political process with units that are survivals of the pre-modern past.¹⁵

As has been explained above due to continuous failure of state in fulfilling peoples socio-economic aspirations, the people have been getting alienated from it. The people defeated and battered in their life are forced to withdraw into their communities — kith and kin groups — and lean on the supportive structures within these for their livelihood and emotional sustenance. They recast their lives there and different articulation of their political preferences and demands take shape.¹⁶ And once people come to rely heavily on their community a strong bond develops between the two. Once this closeness builds up people react very strongly to something or someone made out to be harmful to the community.

The political parties are exploiting this sense of alienation of people also. It is in this context Ashish Nandy is right when

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he says, predictably riots organised in the name of religion have become some of the most secular events in Indian society. They are organised the way a political rally or a strike is organised in our system and, usually, for the same reasons — to bring down a regime or discredit a chief minister here or to help an election campaign or a fact there. Some political parties in India today have professionals who specialise in riots and, like true professionals, do an expert job of it.¹⁷

Deepening of Crisis

The consequence of the above is that today, the marriage of politics and religion has led to the growing incidents of communal violence. Mosques, Temples and Gurudwaras are being used not only for political mobilisation but also to stockpile arms and lethal weapons. The electoral politics — nomination of candidates, campaigning, communal representation etc. — has accentuated the process of communalism in almost all states. The masses are getting increasingly communalised. Worst is that communalism has entered bureaucracy and police forces also in a big way.

In an article Prafud Bidwai tells that on the night of December 6, 1992 at Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie, a jubilant group of probationers, then only a few months into the 58th Foundation Course for the elite hand picked to join the All-India and Central civil services, had thrown a party to mark the demolition of Babri Masjid. The revelries drew over two thirds of the 225 probationers then at Mussoorie. Quoting the Academy's house journal Bidwai points out, "the Academy is training and legitimizing the induction into the top rung of the bureaucracy the people whose views and prejudices, convictions and biases are wholly incompatible and irreconcilable with the principles underlying a pluralist democratic order and a constitution based on it."¹⁸

A study of communal bias in the police by a senior police official Mr. Vibhuti Rai shows that there is enough evidence available to prove that such a bias exists. He has cited instances from U.P. and Bihar to make his point. In Bombay, the reluctance of the police to deter frenzied mobs killing Muslims in January 1993, and from looting and burning their property led to the barbric bomb blasts of March 1993. The killings of innocent Sikhs in Delhi after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination was yet another

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example of police ineptitude.

The situation, as a whole, is grim. Communal and quasi-religious gangs are emerging as a political force in the country. Elections are witnessing mixing of politics with religion. Religious passions are being whipped up for the sake of political power and communal issues are blurring and real issues of socio-economic transformation.

Need For Intervention

The experience of past four decades in India suggests that it is wrong to think that just with the modernization of the medieval society, with economic development and the secular pretensions of the government process of ascriptive identity building or the minority and majority problems can be liquidated. On the contrary it suggests that the realities of social and economic antagonisms arising out of generation and articulation of demands in a backward plural society undergoing development through westernized capitalist, path can be marked by a religious vocabulary. Hence the alleged problem of communalism or parochialism, which is a normal human phenomenon having its roots deep in the historical events and human psychology cannot be solved by stigmatising this or that group. The basic issue is, can we find a solution to communal or such problems in a non-mobilized and a conciliatory political system, like the one in India ? Perhaps some thing can be done by having more discipline among party leaders and workers on sectarian issues and other similar measures but the real cure must penetrate the social structure itself. Already a point of contradiction has been reached today between the available administrative structure and the level of socio-economic development of the people, between the legitimate expectations for growth and the inadequacy of the political arrangement that impedes such a growth. The experience so far has proved that the adopted approach has failed to deliver goods to the common man belonging to the so-called minority or majority. Given the present model and the relationship between production and distribution in the world, given the western style of industrialization we are pursuing, we may produce nothing but consumerism, corruption, revolts, disorder and ultimate the collapse of the democratic order.

The only alternative, therefore, is that the transformation of the social system and economic development have to go

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together. A political system based on the concept of freedom will survive in the measure in which values are generally expressed in everyday life and in opportunities of common people in human and social relationship at the level of the community. There can be no success in the system unless it envisages justice to all ensures equality in practice. Economic equality and justice are the basis of integrated society. It presents a vital and unifying goal, and is a necessity for harnessing the energies and initiative of the people in all fields of activity. The solutions have to be economic and political and not legal or administrative. The problem should be tackled at that level. Without this, high-sounding exhortation and platitudes like "unity in diversity" or "composite culture" will be of little help in achieving the goal of national integration.

Let us keep in mind that adherence to religion and a religious system is not communalism. Exploitation of religion is communalism. Attachment to a religious community or religiosity is not communalism. Using a religious community against other communities and against the nation is communalism. Indulgence in ritualism, superstition, obscurantism, magic, charm and occult practices like astrology is not communalism. They are merely irrational, unscientific and primordial orientations, due to conformism to traditions, or fear of the unknown and for unbound ambition. Even commitment to conservative values in social life and conservative orientation in politics is not communalism. It could be called social backwardness and political reaction. However, it should be recognised that all these aspects can be inputs into the development of communal consciousness, and indeed the communalist in various permutations and

combinations, have utilized most of these aspects in order to build their communal political base.¹³

At the same time in general the masses are religious, not communal. There are also well meaning religious and secular leaders in all the communities. The religious and secular leaderships of these communities should come together and form solidarity committees to fight communalists in whichever community they might be. For this it would be necessary to do honest and rigorous criticism of what is bad in one's community and acknowledge with generosity what is good in the other community. Such an approach can build the bridges of

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understanding and mutual confidence. Of course, above all is required development of a scientific outlook that encourages democracy and humanism. A genuine democrat is essentially a rational individual his self appreciation depends on the assessment of his own individual merit and not on the merit of any social group in which he may happen to be included. Communal sentiments will lose their strength in India in proportion to the growth of democratic and humanistic values among the Indian people. And for this intellectuals and concerned citizens will have to intervene in the politics effectively.

Notes

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Caste and Politics

Today among the divisive forces which afflict our national life, disrupt the bonds of unity among the Indian people and affect its development, caste is the major one. The frequent instances of caste confrontation, leading even to occasional outbursts of violence both in urban centres and the country-side force themselves on our attention. The issue of reservation in services and higher educational institutions on caste basis raises a storm every now and then. When during elections, the political and programmatic appeal does not become the central issue, we witness a rising tide of caste identification and caste animosities.

The last ten years, in particular have seen a major change in the role of caste. Earlier it was important in the politics of South India. But now it has gained very strong foothold in the politics of North India also. While the influence of caste has been decreasing in social and economic spheres it is gaining a stranglehold over the field of politics. In the last decade a new focus of caste politics has emerged. Together with its attendant spin offs—the emergence of new caste-based organisations, growing polarisation along caste lines, violence and reservation conflicts—the caste has embedded itself firmly in politico-economic fabric of the country. To understand and analyse this increased role we have first to see what the caste system is and how it has developed as a politically significant variable.

Caste System

While caste reigns supreme in the innumerable classes and divisions of Hindu society encompassing all aspects of the life, no precise definition of caste is available. Scholars find numerous difficulties in arriving at a commonly acceptable definition. One finds a lack of distinction between Varna and Jati. Also there are different perspectives to the analysis of caste stratification. That

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is why J.H. Mutton said, "The truth is that while a caste is a social unit in a quasi-organic system of society and throughout India is consistent enough to be immediately identifiable the nature of the unit is variable enough to make a concise definition difficult." In fact even to the practitioners of caste themselves the meaning of caste varies from context to context. To him, caste has a specific and particular meaning in a village society where he interacts, every day with other members of the society. However, the meaning and caste identification change when he interacts at district or state level.¹ It is often alleged that caste distinctions are similar to the civil and social distinctions of European and other nations; but one finds an essential difference in its hereditary character. Indian caste is derived from birth alone. It cannot be transferred from one class to another cannot be gained as a reward for the highest merit or bestowed as an honorary title by the most powerful monarch.²

Notwithstanding the difficulties in defining the term, most of the sociological writings on caste conclude that homeo hierarchicus is the central and substantive element of the caste system which differentiates it from other social systems-particularly that of the West. In other words the caste system in its most general but fundamental aspect can be described as ascriptive system of status and hierarchy, known for controlling and defining social, economic and political relationships for the individuals. In its extreme form, caste stratification subsumes all other stratification systems and is there for termed as homogenous or non-complex system. As the caste status is ascribed by birth, the system is thereby closed. In this model, internal differentiation among the persons belonging to the same caste is absent. All members of the same caste are alike that they have the same levels of ritual, socio-economic and political positions. On the other hand, it envisages a complete vertical differentiation between individuals belonging to different status castes. Different castes, thus differ from each other in ritual, socio-economic and political positions. It also marks non-antagonistic strata i.e. acceptance and legitimacy of the ritual determined position in the allocation of wealth, status, and power. Thus the system is non-competitive and its essential features are : (1) hierarchy; (2) commensality; (3) restrictions on marriage and foods; and (4) hereditary occupation.

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It may be pointed out here that though to an extent the origin of caste-system can be traced to the theory of varana, it is not synonymous to varana system. In fact the sacred books of the Hindus contain no uniform or consistent account of the origin of castes. Sociologists generally trace the origin of caste to the causes of (a) differences of race, (b) differences of employment, and (c) differences in geographical locate. However it is also suggested that the caste system with its

barbarous inequalities, penalties and disabilities is the natural offspring of the Varnashram Dharma.

Since our concern here is not to discuss the caste system itself, suffice it is to keep in mind that there are a large number of castes though their precise figures for any region and the country are not available. Theoretically, each caste has a definite place in the social hierarchy. Its place in the hierarchy is determined by its ritual status based on the observance of religious values and its hereditary occupation. However, the caste hierarchy has never been static throughout history. Though the upper castes have successfully tried to improve their status. Having improved economic condition, a dominant section of some of the low castes, including the groups which were at one time treated as untouchables, imitated customs and norms of the upper castes.³

Caste-class Equations

In view of and in addition to the ritual hierarchical order of the caste system, several scholars have categorised castes in terms of upper and lower as equivalent to class divisions. The studies of K.N. Raj, Andre Beteille, M.N. Srinivas and Kathleen Gough confirm the fact that there is a correspondence between caste and class, that the rich landlords and peasants come generally from the higher castes such as Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs and Thakurs while the Harijans, Adivasis and tribals contribute the bulk of agricultural labour. At the intermediary level, however, caste and class cut across each other. A majority of members of the middle castes such as Jats, Gujjars, Yadavs and Kurmis, are small and medium peasants and/or tenants, though there has been a trend for a movement upward. Some from among these backward castes have emerged as big tenants with big leases and have come to own some land, a few have also become big peasants with large parcels of land. This is especially true of northern regions like Rajasthan, U.P. and

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Gujarat; but is also becoming visible in the South as in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The middle and backward castes thus constitute the bulk of the medium and small peasants. By and large the very small land holding poor peasants come from the lower castes and also work as agricultural labourers.

In this context Mencher writes, "looked at from the bottom up, the system has two striking features. First the point of view of people at the lowest end of the scale, caste has functioned (and continues to function) as a very effective system of economic exploitation. Second, one of the functions of the system has been to prevent the formation of classes with any commonality of interest or unity of purpose." As such caste is a system of exploitation rather than a system of interdependence and reciprocity. Caste stratification has been deterrent to the development of "class conflict" or "proletarian consciousness". This is because "caste derives its validity from its partial making of extreme socio-economic differences. "Those who have emphasised a study of the Hindu value system to analyse caste have illustrated that untouchables and other lower sections of Hindu society "see their advancement in caste rather than class terms." Harper's study of untouchables maintain that they (untouchables) seek to gain in prestige by their assumption of behavioural attributes associated with higher ritual rank, such as abstinence from beef-eating, as

well as from their greater bargaining power on economic interaction, including a refusal to perform ritually degrading tasks. They seem not to reject the idea of a hierarchically ranked society, but to dispute their position in it by adopting several attributes of proper "Hindu behaviour" and attempting thereby to have achieved substitute for heredity as a basis of rank.

K.L. Sharma points out that the most crucial point of consideration is that classes "are not found as a system of stratification in the same way as castes are entrenched in Indian society, and that most of the "problems created by the caste system are still of class nature, related to economic domination and subjugation, privileges and deprivations, and "conspicuous waste" and bare survival. These problems are essentially those of the "Haves' and the "havenots', and one cannot locate these as concrete groupings in a strictly Marxian sense, as class-antagonism, class consciousness and class unity are not present.

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Thus, India's situation is very different from other societies in the sense that the problems are of a class, as divisions of society are not found as concrete functioning units.⁴

Caste and class, therefore, Ghanshyam Shah points out, are neither distinctively separate categories, nor are they one and the same. First, caste or jati is essentially a localised social groups where members share common socio-cultural bonds. Despite several efforts, no all India caste organisation has so far come into existence. Second, caste does not just form a social group. The caste-based social system originated with the development of economic surplus. Production and distribution systems have remained caste-based for centuries, notwithstanding intra and intercaste mobility and regional variations in social hierarchy. With the introduction of the capitalist system and the consequent penetration of capital, as well as the competitive political system, certain changes have taken place in the features characterising the caste system. Production is no longer based on caste thereby weakening the rigid hierarchy of the system.

Also, caste no longer plays a multiple role everywhere. Economic differentiations within each caste have thus become sharp. Except for a few castes which are economically homogeneous, especially in the case of lower castes, caste members do not necessarily have common economic interests. Different strata of the same caste pursue different and at time opposite economic interests.

Nonetheless, social bond perpetuates caste consciousness and consequently divisions among the subordinate classes. It is not, however, a major stumbling block in the unity of the upper caste-class in the economic sphere. Such a situation works to the advantage of upper caste/class entrepreneurs who can seek the support and mobilise their poor caste brethren in their intra-class faction, fight. Whenever needed such support also legitimises the dominance of the haves over the havenots. This does not, however, prevent the former from ignoring the caste bond when it hinders their economic and political activities.⁵ The reality of the caste in a democratic system was both considered as a stumbling block as also important mean for political mobilisation in the absence of other types of political consciousness.

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Caste and Politics : Colonial Period

Caste has always been a potential and actual weapon in keeping the people divided and weak in the face of any challenge. More than a hundred and fifty years back Marx remarked, "How came it that English supremacy was established in India ? ...A country not only divided between the Mohammedon and Hindu, but between tribe and tribe, between caste and caste, a society whose framework was based on a sort of equilibrium, resulting from a general repulsion and constitutional exclusiveness between all its members. Such a country and such a society, were they not the predestined prey of conquest ?"⁶ British rulers, themselves, commonly argued that caste Hindus and untouchables and other low castes could hardly be expected to work together as equals in a democratic political order, that the former would maintain the rigidity of traditional hierarchies and caste discriminations which would prevent the poor and disadvantaged low castes, from participating effectively in politics.⁷ Nevertheless, during the colonial period itself the existential realities of cast system began to be different from its typical ideal form.

A number of changes brought by the British rulers in Indian economy and administration significantly affected the "essence" of caste system. The introduction of liberal education, new modes of recruitment in factories and offices, creation of legal rights underlined the individual aspect of man rather than the "jati" or "community". There also were emerging concepts like secularism, liberty, equality and democracy which challenged the principle of inequality. These new ethos also found reflection in social and religious reform movements which deprecated the caste system and ideals of purity and pollution. The new economic opportunities that the British government opened through industrialization and jobs in the government disturbed to some extent the association between caste and traditional occupation.

While on the one hand, the traditional aspects of the caste were getting changed, on the other hand caste was acquiring new dimension and functions - political. For administrative purposes, the British government had brought a good deal of improvement in communication. The immediate affect of this, writes Srinivas, was that it increased caste consciousness and inter-caste competition. This happened because now it was possible for (the caste relations to outgrow its regional constraints

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and develop caste association so as to bargain for some concessions from the British government on the plea of backwardness in order to catch up with the advanced castes. At the same time the caste associations worked for elevation of social status. This backwardness was claimed in the secular context and a high status in a ritual context. This was a new dimension and function of caste, unknown before.

Thus we find that the caste system began to acquire new functions and dimensions in the changing social, economic and political ambience of the pre-Independence period. It undermined the vocational basis of caste, its economic rationality, its interactional restrictions and its spatial and political isolation. However, changes in the caste system notwithstanding, the grip of this institution on the social matrix didn't loosen to any appreciable extent. Caste continued to persist, albeit in a different form — from its feudal embodiment'.

In the nationalist movement the modernists led by Jawaharlal Nehru saw the caste system as an unmitigated evil, the main source of India's social, political and even moral degeneration. The critical traditionalist led by Tilak, Vivekananda and Gandhi pleaded for its reform. While acknowledging that castes had divided the Hindus and degraded large sections of them, they insisted that they had also held Hindu society together, preserved some of its central value and been a source of moral, social and emotional support. What was more, an institution that had lasted so long and struck such deep roots in the Hindu way of life and in which the Hindus had invested so much of their moral and emotional energy simply could not be "abolished". It has to be approached gently and reformed from within. Nevertheless there also emerged strong and some very effective anti-caste movements, particularly in South India. The national liberation movement, in general, by mobilising the forces of the Indian people against the alien rulers, by focusing their anti-imperialist consciousness was able to relegate caste divisiveness into the background for a time, though even then a good deal of controversy was generated over the question, whether the struggle for social reform took precedence over the political struggle, or vice versa. After achievement of independence and introduction of electoral politics in a traditional society caste gained a new role for itself.

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Caste and Independent India

After independence many qualitative changes were introduced in the political system. Democratic polity based on the principle of adult franchise was perhaps most crucial factor which reinforced caste with a lot of vigour. According to Moin Shakir there is dual role of caste in the Post-Independence era, that is democratising system and hampering the rise of evolutionary class organizations. The type of mass politics operating after independence is radically different from that of British India. The compulsions of the democratic system, to mobilize the illiterate people, who cannot understand politics in terms of class interests, make it imperative appeal to the caste sentiment because it pays dividends. In the absence of clear-cut class based parties or because of weak communist and socialist movements in the country factors other than ideology and class are bound to be more effective. It activates primordial institutions. Thus caste, religion etc. become relevant inputs in the mass politics of India.

As regards the mobilization of the people on the basis of castes, Rudolph and Rudolph say that there are three types of mobilization : vertical, horizontal and differential. Vertical mobilization is the marshalling of the political support by traditional notables in local societies that are organized and integrated by rank, mutual dependence and the legitimacy of traditional authority. Horizontal mobilization involves the marshalling of political support by class or community leaders and their specialized organizations. Differential mobilization involves the marshalling of direct or indirect political support by political parties (and other integrative structures) from viable but internally differentiated communities through parallel appeals to ideology, sentiment and interest. Political implications of this development are recruitment of leaders, provision for political personnel, legitimization of the traditional authority pattern and creation of group consciousness and divisions along narrow sectarian lines.⁹

The primary function of caste politics, suggests Moin Shakir had been to transfer authority from the higher to the middle castes. Those who were the lowest of the low-untouchables, landless peasants, rural poor—were not benefited by this new political arrangement. The class interests of the emerging rural

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elite could best be protected through an alliance with the urban bourgeoisie. Thus adult franchise democratic decentralization, Panchayati Raj institutions have, in practice, helped the ruling classes in consolidating their rule by using caste in Politics. The new rural and urban elites have developed vested interest in the perpetuation of 'caste in politics. Irawati Karve rightly points out that politicians who enjoy privileged position aimed at perpetuating the operation of caste to seek sanction for their power in social system which possess a great inequality in status, worldly goods and opportunities. In the rural context, 'caste in politics' has been the instrument of mobilization, a channel of communication, representation and leadership which links the electorate to the new democratic process. This inter-relationship frees the lower castes from exploitation and victimisation by other castes.¹⁰

To what extent caste has become a means to level the old order, inequality is, of course, highly debatable issue. But there cannot be gain saying the fact that caste has provided 'substance to politics'. Be that politics bourgeoisie or revolutionary, at the present it does not matter because both lines of politics have used the caste factor for its political purposes. It will be proper to recall here that even the communists in India used caste idioms for mobilising the class of agricultural labourers in Andhra election in 1950s and elsewhere also, on the ground of caste-class correspondence. And later on, Congress used the same caste idiom to arrest influence from the hands of the Communists. The point that is to be noted is, that in caste one finds an extremely well articulated and flexible basis for organisation — something that is also available for political manipulation and one that has a basis in consciousness. The style of functioning of the various political parties proves the validity of the caste factor in the selection of the candidates at the time of elections, formulation of campaign strategies and manipulation of votes show that they are not interested in banishing casteism but are pragmatic enough to make the political processes intelligible to the over-whelming majority of the electorate. They are realistic to accept that the stress on caste should be more at the Gram Panchayat level and less on the state level and negligible at the national level.

Many authors suggest that these developments are not

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simply to be deplored as the deterioration of party or politics, but if anything to be hailed as the adaptation of caste to the modern bargaining democracy. According to them, the caste associations, representing the adaptive response of caste to modern social economic and political changes combine the traditional and the modern. As various caste communities have sought social uplift and economic advancement, they have organized themselves to secure more effective political access. The caste association, according to Lloyd I and Susanne H. Rudolphs "provide the channels of communication and bases of leadership and organization which enables

those still submerged in the traditional society and culture to transcend the technical political literacy which would otherwise handicap their ability to participate in democratic politics.

The meaning of caste itself has changed in the encounter between tradition and modernity. But creating conditions in which a caste's significance and power is beginning to depend on its numbers rather than on its ritual and social status, and by encouraging egalitarian aspirations among its members, the caste association is exerting a liberating influence. Writing about Kerala, even the Marxist leader, E.M.S. Namboodiripad argues that the caste association was "the first form in which the peasant masses rose in struggle against feudalism." As he rightly suggests, however, such associations consolidate community separatism and must be transcended if the peasantry is to be organized as a class". For quite often the caste dilutes the programmatic and ideological aspects of the parties. More importantly it does reduce the strength and impede the activities of the business, kisan workers and other types of interest groups.

In this context an important development is that lower castes have become significant in elections. Leaders of all the major parties and formations agree that the crucial Dalit vote can make or break their fortunes. In fact a new phase of Dalit assertion had begun in states such as UP, Punjab, and M.P. The Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS-4) was set up by Kanshi Ram in 1982. In 1984 Bahu Jan Samaj Party (BSP) was formed by him. Since then BSP has emerged a significant force. The various Republican Party of India (RPI) groups in Maharashtra have also recently united. The RPI, formed in 1956 by B.R. Ambedkar was a larger experience and a richer intellectual tradition to

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draw from. It has witnessed radical militancy under the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s producing an inspiring and vigorous Dalit literature¹¹

It is also important to understand that it is the persistence of feudal relations and the very retarded growth of capitalism that is responsible for close caste-class relations being obtained still in India rather than any ritual or numerical status. Working within the framework of direct, personal subservience, often the villagers vote as a near unity irrespective of higher/lower caste divisions. This is where the caste affiliation of the rich and medium land owners become important, though numerically they form only a small percentage of the total rural population or even among the agricultural population. The concentration of specific castes in specific regions helps them to carry more weight with the lower castes in the villages. Equally the coming together of various middle and lower castes on the basis of the common interest of the peasantry class, has helped this groups to further consolidate themselves.

Caste and Elections

In view to the above the caste has started playing very significant role in electoral politics for two reasons. One back in 1950s, India's newly franchised were not aware of the power of their numbers, although they made up majority. That is changing and ever more rapidly. Now the under-class knows that vote is the most potent weapon of all in its hands. Over the past few years, India's low placed have made their influence felt in organized politics as never before. In

fact there has emerged a cognitive revolution in the minds of the untouchable and the lower castes. With government having failed to ameliorate their conditions, the deprived are taking matters into their own hands, armed with the realization that only their own activities will undo injustice. They, therefore, no longer allow landed elites to tell them how to vote, as they often did in the 1950s. Their protest, of course, also invites individual and groups atrocities perpetrated by higher castes and classes.

Second, there is also emerging conflicts within ruling classes particularly between the rich peasantry and urban industrial classes. In this for gaining hegemony within ruling bloc political competition based on issues and ideological considerations has been eschewed to a process of an ethnic game replete with "vote

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banks." Parties of all hues cultivate their socio-economic constituencies and nurse their vote banks. Vote banks are sought to be created through regional, linguistic, religious and above all caste appeals. The phenomenon particularly gained importance in mid-1960s. Charan Singh was among the first leaders to recognise the electoral potential of peasant castes and worked assiduously towards consolidating it. Karpooi Thakur in Bihar was another leader to articulate the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in particular. After 1969 Congress split Mrs. Gandhi also tried to rely upon the support of backward caste leaders. The Janata Party victory in 1977 elections, apart from slogan of restoration of democracy, was built principally upon a coalition of three major social forces—the middle and rich peasant castes, the Muslims and the Scheduled Castes.

The 1978-79 struggle, on the issue of reservation for the "backward" castes (which was aided by the chief ministers of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) during the Janata Party rule, opened the eyes of the middle and lower-middle castes to the realisation that until they took political power in their own hands, nothing would be done genuinely for their upliftment. Changes in the traditional power hierarchy, also brought conflict, sometimes violent, between the rising, yet so called "backward" castes and the Scheduled Castes. The latter, with marginally greater access to education and a relatively better economic situation, were now able to protest against their victimisation and exploitation by the newly dominant castes. The tensions of caste society were accentuated by the new found economic prosperity of certain groups who gave up old practices of merely imitating the upper caste culture (the process of sanskritisation) and got prepared for direct political confrontation. In response, the traditional upper castes, who continued to dominate governmental, economic, political and social resources, tried to meet the challenge of the rising middle castes.

At the same time, the upper segment of the OBCs comprising Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris have become the principal beneficiaries of the green revolution. Consequently, they have emerged as an affluent section within the OBC combine and have effectively flexed their political muscles.¹² The Yadavs, a large group in Uttar Pradesh (roughly 12 per cent of the population), had over the years so strengthened their hold on

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politics as to alarm the Jats into action. The impression of a Yadav-led backward caste revolt is further strengthened when we review the situation in Bihar, the second most populous state in north India. The Jats as a community are conspicuous by their absence in Bihar. There the Yadavs constitute the largest agricultural caste. After the Muslims and Scheduled Castes they are the largest single group in the state being around 11 per cent of the population.¹³

The Janata Dal launched in October 1988 with the merger of the Janata Party, Lok Dal and the Jan Morcha clearly showed that apart from its concern for so-called clean politics it represented essentially a bid by the OBCs for power at the Centre.

Thus, Mr. V.P. Singh decided to adopt the only readymade constituency available to him. But understandably, he had to make the right noises as regards the under-privileged groups. So while Mr. Devi Lal revived the AJGAR (Ahir, Jat, Gujar and Rajput) formulation (first propagated by the legendary pre-independence Harayanvi politician, Sir chottu Ram and latter practiced by Choudhury Charan Singh without ever using the term (AJGAR) Mr. V.P. Singh had to couch this in a different language by talking about giving 60 per cent of Janata Dal tickets to SCs, STs, and OBCs.¹⁴ Statistically speaking, the AJGAR alliance is about as numerous as the Congress's traditional base of the Brahmins, Harijans and Muslims. But while Charan Singh, a Jat never succeeded in attracting significant Rajput (Thakur) following, with V.P. Singh at the helm of affairs and restless because they had not been content with the share in power, they had enjoyed in recent years under the Congress dispensation, substantial number to Thakurs also started rallying under Janata Dal.

The Congress's response to V.P. Singh's AJGAR was to float a parallel AJGAR. The induction to Mr. Satyendra Narain Sinha (a Rajput) as Bihar Chief Minister, the importance lavished on Bir Bahadur Singh's progeny in Uttar Pradesh, the crucial role played by Mr. Rajesh Pilot (a Gujar) and the wooing of Yadav leaders like Mr. Ram Naresh Yadav, all pointed to the efforts at setting up a rival AJGAR. But as pointed out earlier these sections had deserted the Congress long ago.

Thus the Janata Dal in 1989, by and large, gathered the support of non-Brahmin upper castes and newly awakened

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middle castes like the Rajputs, the Jats, the Yadavs, the Kurmies, etc.

The Janata Dal in order to convert its large social base to be converted into an electorally available political base produced a more pronounced sectarian image, defined by its position on the Mandal Report and on the Mandir-Masjid issue. In the process the issue of reservations, a principle that was meant to be a part of the social engineering to restructure the Indian society, was reduced to mere political gimmickry. By doing so the Janata Dal, together with its allies, had hoped to win a secure majority on the strength of its belief that the OBCs, the Scheduled Castes and the Muslims would firmly rally behind it (the OBCs, the Harijans and the Muslims form nearly 44 per cent, 16 per cent and 11 per cent of the total electorate). It therefore expressed its willingness to force the mid-term elections more than any other party.

The analysis of 1991 and 1996 elections point out that the loss of seats not with standing and in spite of distortions because of high pitched Mandir campaign and sympathy factor the social base of the Janata Dal among the rising peasant and artisan classes has proven quite stable. Of course it is true that at national level Janata Dal has as yet not been able to consolidate the OBC vote. There are various factors for that.

First there is no single backward caste which has an all-India presence. Like the professional diversities in their fields, backwards have different hues in different regions. Sharply different demographic patterns—like the Marathas in Maharashtra and the Jats in Uttar Pradesh — along with the varying levels of "caste consciousness" block the growth of a Pan-India OBC Movement.

Second, there is the factor of division between OBCs and Jats and Rajputs on the one hand and within OBCs between Yadavas, Ahirs and Kurmis on the one side and poorer castes among OBCs on the other. It is well known that Yadav-Ahirs and Kurmis are economically the most powerful among the OBCs. Whatever differentiation emerged among the OBCs it was largely because 10 per cent or so of the Yadava and Kurmis have been upwardly mobile and have succeeded in making it to the class of rich peasants. However there are not many landlords among them also—certainly statistically negligible. In this sense, even

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the most prosperous of the OBCs are quite unlike Jats.¹⁵

In spite of all this the Janata Dal is the first centrist party to commit itself to the backward castes and classes entry into the power structure and to make equity and social justice its main political planks. Since caste and class mean in India almost the same thing, the Janata Dal might have broken the resistance of the power structure to significant social change. It is because of this that in the post-election meetings of the national executive of the party it decided not to depart from its basic political ideology but to make additional efforts to win the confidence of the middle and lower middle class.¹⁶

Caste and Politics : The Trends

From the above discussion it becomes clear that caste is an important factor in Indian Politics. Within the new context of political democracy caste remains a central element of Indian society while adopting itself to the values and methods of democratic politics. Thus, while the form of our politics is secular, the style is essentially casteist. In a wide range of social and economic activity in admission to the schools and colleges, in student politics, in employment opportunities, in private houses as also in certain categories of employees in the services, in the recruitment pattern of autonomous institutions, in the distribution of benefits based on discretionary power in the three tier Panchayati Raj and over bureaucratic decisions caste considerations play more than a marginal part.

Rasheeduddin Khan points out that some who hold that caste system is growing more powerful advance the thesis that modern means of communications the spread of education, increased

prosperity, expanding political opportunities and above all the formation of caste associations, have strengthened the bonds of caste with greater vigour. They argue that with the adoption of universal franchise, tremendous possibility as opened to the majority of middle castes who were hitherto denied their legitimate share of power. There were the caste groups which had captured the Congress during the liberation struggle agency has aligned itself with the modern integrative agency — Political Parties and by this fusion gained new strength. The emerging power-structure of the Panchayati-raj reveals the entrenchment of the rural caste elite in the vital sector of the political process. Through the working of welfare politics concerned as it is with

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the distribution of benefits, they have dislodged the urban elite, by casting wide their net of patronage and power.¹⁷

There is also a point of view that it is not caste alone which influences the politics. Politics also transforms the caste and affects its solidarity and hierarchy. A caste conscious of its social stratification strives to better its position for the sake of modernising the life of its members and thereby saving itself from the onslaught of social injustice. Believing that, it is quite eligible for participation in a representative democracy like other advanced castes, it asks even for representation in the government through membership of a political party irrespective of its position in the traditional stratification. The association of politics with caste has led to an injection of greater rationality into the caste system. According to Rajni Kothari, the process of politics is one of identifying and manipulating existing structure in order to mobilize support and consolidate positions. When the caste structure provides one of the most important organisation clusters in which the population is found to live, politics must strive to organise through such a structure. The alleged casteism in politics is thus no less than politicisation of caste.¹⁸

In this sense politicisation of caste is creating a new cohesion which is making caste perform roles which are new and secular, based not an ascription but community of out look and aggregation of interest. The apparent resurgence of the caste therefore, it is argued, is a false manifestation. One need not confuse the form with the content.¹⁹ If it is so, it is possible that over the next few years the caste consciousness will further rise and political process will be called upon to take note of the aspirations of newly mobilised caste groups and issues of social justice on the one hand and maintenance of balance and formation of coalitions of different interests on the other.