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COMMUNALISM and the HISTORICAL LEGACY: Some Facets

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Preface

Communalism has recently emerged as a major factor in political mobilisation in South Asian societies. Often associated with Right-wing political agendas, communalist ideologies and arguments have, quite ironically and perhaps understandably, become attractive to a wide spectrum of social classes and groups, thereby giving a mass and popular character to Right-wing political movements of ethnic, religious and caste interests.

However, communalist ideologies are by no means collections of ad hoc slogans and programmes put together by politicians who manipulate primordial sentiments and identities associated with ethnicity and religion etc. A closer examination of the evolution of such political movements--from Nazism in Germany of the 1930s and the BJP in India and Jathika Chinthanaya in Sri Lanka today--would demonstrate that communalist arguments have been legitimized and provided with conceptual grounding by traditions of scholarship as well. As much as the 19th century German Romantic tradition had helped in the construction of the intellectual, cultural and philosophical foundations of Nazi racism, the late 19th century Orientalist tradition of historiography, linguistics, philology and cultural theory concerning South Asia has been the intellectual harbinger of modern day ethno-cultural chauvinist movements in India and Sri Lanka.

Critical social science scholarship is an area which can, and should, engage itself with the ideologies as well as the intellectual bases of communalism. It is in this context that we consider Professor Romila Thapar's essay on "Communalism and the Historical Legacy: Some Facets" as an important intervention in critiquing communalist constructions of history, society and ethnic relations in India--an intervention profoundly relevant to Sri Lanka as well.

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Communalism and the Historical Legacy: Some Facets

The link between communalism and the interpretation of Indian history assumes significance because of the many occasions when communal organisations have sought the legitimacy of history in defence of their views. This is not however a one-sided process, for, interpretations of Indian history, some of which are either no longer tenable or else are limited, are still adhered to by historians who are influenced by communal politics. I would like in this paper to touch on a few examples of the interlinking of communal ideologies and the interpretation of history.

The historian's relevance to the analysis of communalism begins with indicating the way in which history is distorted by communal propaganda. Thus, when it is argued that because certain events took place in the past (such as the destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim rulers), and it is required that these actions be avenged in the present, the point has to be made that the politics of the past, whatever form they may have taken, should be confined to the past. The present cannot in any way redress the politics of the past and those who would argue that this is possible are exploiting the past for purposes of the present. When there is a distortion of history, as for example that the Taj Mahal was originally a Rajput palace, such distortions have to be corrected for they percolate down to the popular perceptions of history and feed communal emotions. When a deliberate selection is made from the past of particular personalities who are then projected as heroes, such as Rana Pratap, Shivaji and Guru Govind Singh, all of whom belonged to the Hindu fold and were known to be hostile to the Muslims, the intention is to propagate antagonism against the Muslims in the present day. There are other personalities historically far more important such as Asoka and Akbar whose message to Indian society was different and they are therefore ignored in communal propaganda. These are all very obvious levels of the abuse of history and the abuse has to be countered. But there are also many more subtle levels at which legitimacy from history is sought by communal ideologies.

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Communal ideology perceives Indian society as constituted of a number of religious communities and the identity of Indian society is seen essentially in these terms. Attempts are also made to see the reality of Indian politics in terms of such religious communities. Politics is seen as the interaction of religious communities, and political allegiance relates to the same identity. Political action is designed to further the interests of a particular religious community. The notion of the religious community claims a historical basis and takes the identity of the community as far back in time as possible, so as to add to the legitimacy of the identity. Such identities are aimed at drawing in numbers of people.

This is therefore also an attempt to maintain the status quo in society and not allow the kind of change which will accommodate the aspirations of those who are deprived of resources and status, namely, the lower castes and the lower classes. Communal ideology is a diversion attempting to prevent radical movements. It ties in conveniently with a post-nationalist phase where the middle-class does not wish to see the widening of the social base providing access to power and resources. Communal ideology is antithetical to liberal and radical thought and action. Where it sees itself thwarted it does not hesitate to recruit the urban underclass or the lumpens in an effort at criminalising activities and thereby holding society to ransom.

The communalisation of Indian society has changed from the kind of communalism prevailing in the period prior to 1947 which was essentially a mechanism of political mobilisation. In the period since 1947 it is not only a mechanism for political mobilisation but has also come to pervade all aspects of life, particularly areas which are the most sensitive, such as education, the media, the forces of law and order and even contemporary culture in all its facets. Today the most evident communalism is that of what is called 'the majority community'. This does not preclude 'minority communalism', but because the numbers involved in the 'majority communalism' are so overwhel-ming, it is the most alarming. It is the communal ideology of the majority community which makes the maximum claim to Indian history legitimising communalism. However, historical analyses would question such a claim.

In looking at the past there are two perspectives which are interwined. One is the question of which theories of historical interpretation have encouraged a communal view of Indian society. The other question is what is the evidence or the historical perspectives which historians have ignored or neglected and which might provide a different view, and which might in turn have discouraged the claim to the historical legitimisation of communalism. Within this context and given the dominance of Hindu communalism today, I would like to examine two connected concepts: the notion of the Hindu religion and the notion of a Hindu community going back to earliest times.

Any discussion on the historical legacy and communalism inevitably begins with the question of periodisation. The widely used periodisation which has been current in historical writing since the early nineteenth century is that of dividing Indian history into the Hindu, Muslim and British periods. This is a reflection of a British perception of Indian history and has its genesis in the writing of James Mill who in his *History of British India*, periodised Indian history in terms of the Hindu civilisation, the Muslim civilisation and the British period This periodisation was based on a very superficial knowledge of Indian history. It is interesting that it was never seriously questioned by historians until, in recent years, Marxist historians argued that it was both incorrect and inadequate. Nationalist historians earlier in this century, when they saw that this periodisation was providing a base for a communal interpretation of history, sought to change it. But all that they did was to change the nomenclature to Ancient, Medieval and Modern (borrowed entirely from European history). The crucial fact of periodisation, namely the reason why a certain period ends and a new one begins, was left unchanged. Thus the Ancient period ended with the coming of the Muslims and the Medieval period with the coming of the British.

In this kind of periodisation, colonial historiography emphasised the separateness of each period based on dynastic change. It came in very useful to communal ideologies arguing that this separateness was innate to Indian society and that it began with the coming of the Muslims to India, terminating the 'glorious' earlier period of Hindu rule. Separateness also encouraged the notion of distinct religious communities which were projected as the units of Indian society for political and socio-legal purposes. This resulted in monocausal explanations of medieval history, where the relations between the Hindus and the Muslims, assumed to be generally hostile, were seen as the dominant factor.

The Hindu community was said to include the Buddhists, the Jainas and the Sikhs, as does the definition of Hindu in the Indian Constitution. That these latter groups had different belief systems and a distinctly different ecclesiastical structure did not come in the way of their being labelled as Hindu. All pre-Islamic indigenous religious movements were seen as part of Hinduism. Interestingly this was virtually the same definition as that given many centuries ago by Arab writers who referred to *al-hind*, and to the people living there, i.e., beyond the Indus, as Hindus. Later the term came to be extended to religious usage and was used for all those who were not either Muslims or Christians.

The notion of majority and minority communities is of course a modern, nineteenth century notion, based on the idea of numbers and of representation. The majority and minority character is with reference to the numbers following a particular religion. The notion of a religious community as the primary social unit prevents the possibility of other

kinds of classification and of identities, by emphasising the religious identity alone. The question then is how was the notion of a religious community constituted from history or, alternatively, what were the features drawn from the past, which went into the making of a religious community?

Among these an important component was the theory of the Aryan race. The theory gained popularity in mid-nineteenth century Europe, and was readily applied to India wherever the sources mentioned *aryas*. Its application had a definitive impact because it was argued that there was a racial segregation which was seen as biological and therefore innate.[1]

The separateness was of two kinds: one between Aryan and non-Aryan, which has been widely used in analysing Indian history, and the other was the European concern to separate the Aryan from the Semitic. It was argued that there was an invasion by the Aryans who easily conquered the existing indigenous non-Aryans, frequently equated with Dravidians. Invasion became the explanation for the introduction of what was seen as an Aryan culture. The distancing of the Aryan from the non-Aryan led to the idea that the cultural history of India was the Aryanising of the non-Aryan, where there was little scope for seeing the reverse process. The separating of the Aryan from the Semitic may well have reinforced, even at the sub-conscious level, colonial historiography segregating the Hindu/Aryan from the Muslim/Semitic, even though the racial category would be inapplicable in either case. Even in terms of the theory, not all Hindus were Aryans, and certainly the Iranian, Afghan and Turkish Muslims who constituted the majority of Muslims from outside India, were not Semites.

Another aspect of the theory of the Aryan race is of course the superiority of the upper castes who were believed to be the pure Aryans or the relatively pure. They were the ones that observed the cultural forms of essential to this identity and used an exclusive religion, that Brahmanism, which was seen as the dominant religion. The religion of the upper castes becomes the framework for the construction of Hinduism.

The theory has been seriously questioned in recent years both by archaeologists[2] and by those working in linguistics.[3] This has raised a new set of questions as to how historians now view the evolution of a society and its culture using indices such as ecology, demography, settlement patterns, language change among diverse groups and the interaction of belief systems.[4] Aryan is no longer seen as a term referring to biological race. The only identification is that of language, and therefore the correct form would be to refer to the Aryan-speaking people arriving in India, whether through migration or trade or as pastoral groups, and the evolution of a society and culture with elements taken from both the Aryan-speaking groups and others.

The substantial use of a language dominated by Indo-Aryan is the major identity of north-western India at that time. Nevertheless the theory of an Aryan race continues to dominate historical thinking and popular views of early Indian civilisation. Possibly one reason for this is that it was well-suited to the middle-class which in the nineteenth century was drawn from the upper castes and saw itself therefore as distinct and superior. Its continuation lay in what was seen as the appreciation of Indian culture by Orientalist scholarship and by the continuing belief in certain circles that such scholarship was not biased, in spite of demonstrations to the contrary.[5]

Orientalist interests in early Indian history were partly due to intellectual curiosity and partly to the idea that in India's present lay the past of Europe. The rediscovery of India's past through a careful deciphering of the sources, established the bonafides of Orientalist scholarship among most Indian historians. The study of the past being essential to nationalist ideology, there was a tendency to rely on Orientalist scholarship for the reconstruction of the ancient period in particular. Orientalism had to grapple with a religion which was unfamiliar, and therefore had to be set up in familiar terms in order to be understood by European scholars.

Orientalism encouraged a brahmanical view of early Indian society and even anthropologists, who more often work on the ground as it were, have tended to see Indian society and religion from the perspective of brahmanical texts.[6] Histories of Hinduism tend to be largely histories of the texts, and attempts to relate the text, the ritual and the belief to a historical context are far fewer.

The Orientalist attempt at integrating religious belief and practice into a coherent religion and a rational faith known as Hinduism,[7] was from the perspective of Semitic religions since these were more familiar to such scholarship. These views had an influence to a greater or lesser extent on the socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the projections of the Hindu religion today are also derived from treating it as parallel to some vaguely understood Semitic form. This is rather different from what the indigenous sources suggest.

The nature of Indian religion as indicated from early sources, indicates a different system from that of Islam or Christianity. There appear to be a series of parallel systems which go into the making of what has been called Hinduism,[8] but what may perhaps be more correctly called, Hindu religions. These parallel systems have a basic structure which is different from that of the Semetic religions. The major religious groups referred to in the early sources, are two: Brahmanism and Sramanism, and these are clearly differentiated.[9] Sramanism included the Buddhists, Jainas and other sects which were distinct from Vedic Brahmanism. In some Buddhist texts, which are naturally expressions of Sramanism, the brahmanas are referred to as heretics. Patanjali the grammarian, refers to the hostility between

brahmanas and sramanas as that between the snake and the mongoose.[10]

Sramanism in most cases, was an institutionalised religion, which was not the case with Brahmanism. The two were organisationally separate, had a different set of beliefs and rituals, and had different social norms. Sramanic sects early on established an order of monks, a *sangha*. Such orders came much later to Brahmanism, generally towards the end of the first millennium AD, and almost coinciding with the decline of Sramanic sects in many parts of India. Brahmanism assumed the precondition of a caste society, whereas this was not required of Buddhism or Jainism. Brahmanism emphasised the separate observances, rituals and practices of each caste, and made a sharp distinction between the *dvija*/twice-born and the rest. Sramanism tried to build a congregation of believers irrespective of caste.

Distinct from Brahmanism there also emerged at the turn of the Christian era, the Bhagavata sects and later the Sakta sects. These were manifestations of a variety of popular cults. Many evolved into a religious form which has come to be called the Puranic religion. This became dominant in many parts of India in the first millennium AD.[11] It was significantly different from both Brahmanism and Sramanism, although it can be argued that it borrowed some deities from the former and some notions from the latter, especially the emphasis on individual salvation. The intensity of the idea of *bhakti* or devotion as a form of religious expression in some Puranic sects, was a departure from the earlier religious manifestations and particularly from the sacrificial ritual of Vedic Brahmanism.

In the multiplicity of sects which surfaced both in the first and second millennia AD, the identity of the sect was based not only on the particular deity which was central to its worship, but also its location and the language which it used. There is a regional component which is extremely important because much of the literature came to be expressed in the regional language and not only in Sanskrit. It would be worth investigating whether the use of Sanskrit or of a regional language did not demarcate sub-sects within a particular tradition. Many of these sects gathered around them members of particular castes suggesting that perhaps their audience was constituted of a particular social class.[12]

What is interesting about the Puranic religion was its flexibility. It could therefore interact with tribal cults and forms of worship, and became an effective avenue of giving and receiving cultural forms. The worship of the icon, which became characteristic of many of these sects, and therefore believed to be essential to Hinduism by outsiders, was unknown to Vedic Brahmanism.

In addition to this there is also the importance which is given to the private domain of belief, and which is in some ways characteristic of the indigenous religions and civilisation of south Asia. The require-

ment was that rituals and social practices be recognised, and these were often tied to caste identities. Beyond this, belief was a personal matter. The ultimate in the private domain of belief was the renouncer, who was respected at one level because of his insistence on his right to his personal belief, even if this insistence required him to quit society.[13]

These religious systems are not similar to the pattern of the Semitic religions since they do not constitute a single historically evolved religion. Hinduism cannot be described as a historically evolved religion with a founder, an ecclesiastical organisation, and with sects branching off and taking positions in relation to the teachings of the founder. The sects are often in origin independent cults, and are later associated with other sects. They come together in a kind of mosaic of distinct cults, deities and sects and the juxtaposing of these are often from social needs.

There is traditionally a lack of historicity regarding those who are being worshipped. Interestingly the insistence on historicity which is emerging now as part of what is called New Hinduism (and which I have preferred to call Syndicated Hinduism[14]) comes at a recent point in the history of Hinduism. Traditionally historicity was limited to each sect, for some had founders, were institutionalised and had sub-sects branching off. But whether all these sects can be placed under one label, Hindu, and can claim that they are historically evolved from a single origin, is a debatable question. These features are however characteristic of Buddhism and Jainism which are to that extent different from Hinduism. These questions in turn relate to that of the existence of a single Hindu community which identified itself as Hindu in opposition to the Muslims.

The term 'Hindu' has its own history and it is one that should not be forgotten. It derives from primarily geographical terms, Hindush and *al-hind*, used in the Achaemenid inscriptions[15] of ancient Persia and by the later Arab writers. The terms referred to the people living in the area of the Indus river and beyond, looked at from the perspective of west Asia.

The Arabs initially used the term as a geographic and ethnic term, and by extension, it came to be used for those who practised religions indigenous to India and therefore not recognisable as any of the Semitic religions familiar to the Muslims. This bunching together of all the indigenous sects and labelling them as Hindu, is alien to the earlier tradition where religious identity was by sect, and the term Hindu had not been used.

The periodisation of Mill encouraged the reading of the Medieval/ Muslim period of Indian history as either the confrontation between, or the adjustment of, two major communities, the Hindus and the Muslims. There has been a tendency to project each as a monolith with clear-cut identities and demarcations. In this context it is interesting to examine the perceptions each may have had of the other, since these would

provide a better picture of the actuality than what the periodisation suggests.

An important question would be to ascertain the point at which people in India start calling themselves Hindus. It would seem that this came fairly late in the interaction between Islam and the existing religions of the Indian sub-continent. Similarly the currency of the term Musulman also seems late. Kabir in the fifteenth century uses both terms.

Sources of the period of early contact tend to use the traditional terms as used in the past for those coming from west Asia or those regarded as outside caste society. Thus the term *yavana* used for Greeks, Hellenistic Greeks and others from west Asia and the eastern Mediterranean, continues to be used for the Muslims.[16] Alternatively the term *mleccha* is frequently used.[17] *Mleccha* meaning impure, goes back to the Vedic texts and often referred to those who did not speak Sanskrit or observe the *varnasramadharma*, the caste ordering of society. *Mlecchas* could be foreigners even of high rank, or could be those regarded as low in the social scale. Sometimes even the term *Saka* is used[18] going back to the times of the Scythians. More specifically those coming in from the north-west, the Turks, were called by the ethnic term, *turuska*, but this in turn came to be used popularly to refer to Muslims. These varying terms, each seeped in historical meaning, do not suggest a monolithic view, but rather, a diversity of perceptions which need to be enquired into more fully.

The notion of confrontation requires some analyses of the nature of religious conflict not only in the period of Muslim presence in India but also in pre-Islamic times. Religious sectarian conflicts are known to earlier times. Thus both Hsuan Tsang in the *Si-yu-ki* and Kalhana in the *Rajatarangini*, refer to hostilities between the Saivas and the Buddhists where the former are described as killing Buddhist monks and destroying Buddhist monasteries.[19]

In Kashmir, the attack on religion was not restricted to inter-sectarian conflict, for in the eleventh century one of the kings, Harsa, anxious to replenish his treasury, ordered the confiscation of valuable idols and the destruction of temples.[20] There are also many references to the antoganism between Saivas and Jainas in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, an antagonism which took violent turns with the destruction of Jaina temples or their forcible conversion to Saivite shrines and the persecution of Jainas.[21] Hostilities between the Virasaivas and the Jainas seem to have been particularly acute.

There are more recently in history, references to fierce conflicts between the Sannyasi orders and the Vairagis in the latter part of the Mughal period. In each case they are competitive sects and religious concerns are not the only reason for the conflict. These tend to be sects which are highly organised and often literate. The competition is frequently for state patronage or for control over commercial rights. In the case of the Sannyasis and the Vairagis for example, they were also

traders on a large scale. Pilgrimage centres, where the takings in the way of offerings from pilgrims was lucrative, and religious belief was bent to support commercialisation, became centres of contention between religious sects. There is therefore a play of power and an element of economic competition present in religious conflict, even if the conflict is sought to be presented as a matter of religious belief.

The same is true of the many conflicts between what have been called the Hindus and the Muslims. Such conflicts first of all should not be taken as conflicts involving two monolithic communities. They were not so in the earlier period either, where sectarian identity was more crucial than a monolithic religious identity. It was not the Hindus who attacked the Buddhists and Jainas, but particular sects of Saivas.

The idea of a single Hindu community conditioned by a common religious belief, social norms and ritual practices, all extending across every region and including all castes, is not reflected in the early sources. There are references to communities, but these are communities based on location, on occupation, on caste and occasionally as a sect. These were not necessarily bound together by a common religious identity as in the case of the Buddhists, Jainas, Christians and Muslims. The *Dharmasastras* mention a variety of *dharmas*—*grama-dharma*, *sreni-dharma* and *jati-dharma*—all pointing to the customary laws and practices of each. These identities could partially have overlapped. Significantly there is no reference to Hindu *dharma*, which is a term of relatively recent origin.

If there was no over-arching Hindu community, then sectarian conflict of earlier times cannot be dismissed as merely an altercation, sometimes violent, between members of the same community. Sectarian conflict was making a number of statements: some arose out of religious concerns but were tied to matters political, some related to economic competition but were posed as matters of religion.

Conflict is a social articulation, more so when it is conflict between groups representing the state or important institutions of civil society. The breaking of idols and the destroying of temples also brings in the question of temples and icons being symbols not only of religion, but also of the culture of politics. It is in this context that we have to examine the destruction of icons and temples by various Muslim invaders or rulers during the second millennium AD.

Attempts are being made today to build up a hysteria on the issue of Hindu temples destroyed by Muslims. A mosque built on the site of a temple comes in very useful for arousing communal antagonism, since it provides a location for the confrontation, and therefore sharpens the focus. The demand that such mosques be destroyed or dismantled and new temples be erected in their place, would play havoc with historical monuments. Today it is temples and mosques, tomorrow Buddhist icons and Jaina temples may also become the subject of such restorations. This process could continue to go back endlessly in time. If mosques are threatened today there will be a demand that they be

handed back to 'the Muslim community'. Recently, as a temporary measure, prayers were permitted in mosques normally classified as protected monuments under the control of the Archaeological Survey of India. Should this concession be made to all religious monuments from the past, there would be complete confusion regarding the protection and conservation of such monuments, in addition to its being yet another issue to fan communal hostility.

Every temple which lies in a state of disrepair is popularly believed to be so because of Muslim vandalism. But we know there are some temples which fell into disrepair because they lost royal patronage.[22] Given the ecology and climate of India, buildings require continual maintenance if they are to survive, and any shortfall in this creates havoc. This has happened not only to temples but even to mosques built in the last three hundred years. It is necessary therefore to clarify which temples had fallen into disuse and therefore decay, and which were wilfully damaged or destroyed.

In the case of temples known to have been damaged and then re-used for other religious purposes as in the case of Jaina temples damaged by the Virasaivas, or the temple at Qila Rai Pithor in Delhi converted into the Quwat-ul-Islam mosque, another set of questions have to be asked. If the reason was religious fanaticism, then surely the monument would have been totally dismantled and destroyed rather than being converted to the use of another religion.

Is the vandalism then just pure vandalism motivated by a religious factor, or does it symbolise an act of conquest outside the battlefield and the assertion of political power? Or is it an act of incorporation, an attempt to somehow keep the earlier tradition alive in the newer tradition? Were grants made to temples revoked when they were converted into mosques, or was the control over cultivated land and other sources of revenue diverted into the hands of the caretakers of the mosque? If the grants continued then there would be a rather mundane reason for converting a wealthy temple into a mosque.

When religious monuments such as temples and mosques are built through State patronage, or the patronage of those who are powerful and wealthy, then they are also part of the politics of their time, and there has to be a political reading of both the building and the destroying of such monuments. The politics of the past belong to the past and to try and reverse their role today, is to attempt the impossible. Nor does it solve present-day problems for it only increases communal confrontation.

Religious fanaticism is also not always the full answer. Aurangzeb's destruction of the temple to Krishna at Mathura is often explained as fanaticism. Yet there is another aspect. The temple was built by Bir Singh Bundela who was also organising political opposition to Aurangzeb. The temple was an act of defiance, a symbol of defiance: a situation where the religious and the political interlocked.[23] Both the

building and the destroying of the temple are part of a political struggle involving the assertion of power.

There is a tendency to view the destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim rulers from the point of view of court chronicles which underplay the political factor and emphasise the religious. It might be more salutary to enquire as to what the local people thought of the act. Did they see it as an act of sacrilege or as an act of political conquest? As far as the court chronicle is concerned the temple is a metaphor of power. Was it viewed similarly at different levels? Curiously there is little reference in local sources to the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni against the major temples of north-western India and virtually nothing in contemporary sources from further afield.

If the destruction of temples or their conversion into mosques was purely an act of religious fanaticism, then it is curious that those who built temples did not hesitate to become the builders of mosques as well. A text in Sanskrit, the *Rehamana-prasada,* is part of a treatise on the building of a large range of temples and palaces. Visvakarma, the divine architect and also associated with artisans and builders, discusses in this text, a range of temple types pertaining to every sect. Among these is the mosque—the temple built for Muslims who build under the emotion of divine adoration or *sattvik-bhava.*[24] Clearly the guilds of craftsmen had a practical approach to constructing religious buildings whether of the various Hindu sects or of the Muslims.

Professional groups, whether of Hindu sectarian persuasion or Muslim, would tend to have common interests. This also relates to the question of conversion which is of central importance. The popular theory is that the local population was presented with the alternative of forcible conversion or else death. The fact that political power lay in the hands of Muslim dynasties and yet the Muslims were always a minority in India, lends little credence to this theory. Nor does the totality of the Muslim population in India owe its origin to foreigners who settled in India. A small percentage came from outside. That many among them married and merged with the indigenous population precludes them from being called foreigners.

The majority of Muslims in Indian society were those who had converted from indigenous groups. The nature of this conversion has also to be analysed. Barring the few at the elite levels who were individual converts, the larger numbers tended to belong to castes which were converted.

At one level conversion from one religion to another is an intensely personal and private experience; it is an emotional experience where the converted person can take on a new personality and a new life-style. This process is reflected in the conversion of individuals. Where a caste, a *jati,* an occupational group is being converted, the earlier customs and memories of the group are not forgotten. This is not the case of a total change but of what has been called a cultural translation,

where for example, the prophet becomes the *avatara* or the *avatara* is seen in the light of the prophet.

Such cultural translations would be particularly noticeable in a society based on caste, where the earlier religious belief and observances also had a strong caste association. It is not surprising therefore that caste retained a hold on Muslim society, when it came to marriage and occupation, in spite of the egalitarianism of Islam in theory.

The Indian situation must also have puzzled Islamic theologians. This was the first society where there was an absence of a massive conversion of almost the entire population, and it was therefore different from Persia, Afghanistan and central Asia, of which they had had an earlier experience. What must have been even more bewildering was the fact that conversion is alien to the indigenous religions, where what was important to one's religious identity was the *jati* into which one was born, and from which one sought one's religious identity. Conversion is more specific to Semitic religions where the identity is clearly demarcated. This was not so with the indigenous religions of India where such identities could even be multiple or overlapping or ambiguous, depending on the social role of the identity. Thus a king such as Harsavardhana is claimed by both the Saivas and the Buddhists.[25]

The treatment of Hindu and Muslim society as monoliths by historians has tended to ignore the more important questions about these societies such as, how do various religious groups perceive each other? And do groups on conversion incorporate the myths and beliefs of earlier times into their newly acquired mythology? Texts in Sanskrit suggest that there was little dialogue with Islam but the literature in regional languages provides a different picture. Popular religion outside the circle of the Muslim courts and the concerns of the chroniclers of these courts, points to different perceptions. Ekanatha one of the most influential Marathi Bhaktas of the sixteenth century, composed a Hindu-Turka debate, in which there is at first a heated confrontation on religious issues and polemics with image worship as a key point of contention.[26] Ultimately there is a consensus and accord between them.

However idealised such documents may be they are invaluable for ascertaining the focal points in the perceptions of various groups. Some of the Marathi *bakhar* literature, legitimises Maratha rule by first legitimising the preceding rulers including the Mughals.[27] The *guru-sisya* relationship in the *bhakti* tradition of Maharashtra allowed *brahmanas* and Muslims to play the role of either *guru* or *sisya* in the same tradition, as is evident in the training of Shekh Mahammad.[28] The eighteenth century Muslim *sant*, Shah Muni, wrote the *Siddhanta Bodha* during the period of the Peshwa *brahmana* rule, after Maharashtra had experienced the so-called Hindu revivalism under

Shivaji. He uses a Puranic style myth to explain the origins of the Muslims.[29]

We are told that from Mahavishnu, the supreme ruler of the earth, sprang Paigambar-pir who descended to earth. From Paigambar, the Yavanas spread all over the world. A number of Paigambars established the *mleccha-dharma*. Narayana created the four *sastras* which the Yavanas call the Quran. The Yavanas call Narayana, Allah and worship Mahavishnu with great devotion. It is interesting that even as late as the eighteenth century the term Yavana is being used for the Muslims and *mleccha-dharma* for Islam although the term Musalman is also used.

These are not isolated examples. Some of the *mangala-kabyas* of Bengal are other examples of such interlinks in the creation of what might be seen as a new mythology where Puranic deities intermingled with the personalities of the Quran.[30] What have been referred to as Bengali Muslim 'cultural mediators' were concerned that the local converts to Islam should not lose their earlier moorings and were willing to create such a new mythology. This is equally evident in the folk literature of other regions with large Muslim populations. In Tamil Nadu for instance, the guardian figures in one of the cults of Draupadi are invariably Muslim.[31] This is not to suggest that the picture should be seen as an idealistic representation of harmony and peaceful co-existence. On the contrary even these attempts at a new mythology suggest a certain kind of disjuncture. But the study of this literature is likely to move closer to the reality of how people perceived each other than the study of only the literature of elite groups. The monolithic nature of interpreting these relationships needs to be examined afresh.

The relation between religion and power is more evident at the level of court circles and elites, but it is not absent at other levels as well. When large state systems collapse into smaller ones then these links seem to become more apparent. Thus the eighteenth century provides many examples both of connections between religious sects and power groups or the use of the identity of a religious sect to wield power. The politics of the state of Orccha are a case in point.

Bir Singh Deo built a fort at Jhansi and garrisoned it with a military order of Sannyasis. The *mahant* Indergir Gosain was the governor and in 1735 he revolted and in the subsequent decade set up a principality at Moth. He too built a fort and annexed villages from Datia and Orccha. In 1755 he was dislodged by the Marathas, but his disciple, Himmat Bahadur Gosain, regained the territory.

Such a mix of religion and politics was not new to the Indian polity for it can be noticed whenever religious sects become wealthy or come close to power. But the political role of such sects is more crucial in times and places of uncertain governance. The intervention of colonial authority in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century has tended to blur our view of such activities. Some of the groups involved

seem to be reasserting themselves in contemporary times with the resurgence of the Gosains, the Mahantas and such others in contemporary politics.

Implicit in communal motivation is also the search for power by those who have lost power, and who now regard communal organisations as a mechanism for attaining power. Apart from the *mahants* and *sadhus* who are in the forefront of organisations such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad, there is also a substantial Rajput lobby which feels that it should be the real inheritor of power on the assumption that prior to the coming of Muslim rulers the Rajputs were in power. In many of the lesser states during these centuries dynasties claiming Rajput origins continued to rule. It is not altogether accidental that communal politics is at a premium in the ex-princely states of central and northern India.

The politics of religion invariably changes the nature of religion as well. Since a religion or a religious sect has a public following and a public face, its form has to be remoulded to enable it to play a political role. There is therefore a constant redefinition of these in history, an evolution which historians need to analyse.

In the case of the parallel Hindu traditions, the last two centuries have witnessed the emergence of the idea of a single Hindu religion, similar in some forms to the Semitic religions, which have been the model. Teachers or founders are sought in the absence of prophets. Certain religious texts, such as the *Bhagavadgita*, have come to be regarded as sacred books in the Semitic sense, switching from the religion of ritual and practice to the religion of the book.[32]

Attempts are made to suggest the existence of ecclesiastical institutions commonly acceptable to all Hindus and which can therefore proclaim on problems of religion—the building up of the institution of Sankaracharyas is now being used for defining, as it were, the identity of Hindus on a much larger scale than before.

The importance of missionary activities and conversions, as becomes noticeable on a visit to tribal areas in particular, is in direct imitation of Christian missions and contrary to the practices and precepts of Hindu religious sects of earlier times. The need to have a single uniform Hindu community is born out of the politics of the last two centuries as well as the changes in society under colonialism. The use of religious identities for purposes of political mobilisation grew from issues such as the notion of religious communities constituting the units of Indian society, from the question of separate electorates and from the system of quotas which focussed on the notion of representation.

The increasing involvement of religion in politics has resulted in the communalisation of Indian society. In this, the particular construction of the Indian reality of the past, during the colonial period, has been influential and therefore the significance of historical interpretations becomes central. It is perhaps possible now to see a typology of communalism. In the pre-colonial period the recognition of a religious commu-

nity was more limited since language, ethnicity, caste and region are more apparent bonds. Religious perceptions and hostilities were more localised. It was difficult to use a religious identity for political mobilisation on a large scale.

The periodisation of Indian history in the colonial period encouraged the two-nation theory in which the Hindus and the Muslims were presented as communities generally antagonistic to each other. Muslim communalism was encouraged and used by the colonial power, and its counterpart in Hindu communalism became more articulate in the period preceding 1947. The national movement drew on religious symbols to foster national unity, but these tended to remain distinctive symbols, a tendency which has been intensified in the post-1947 years.

The qualitative change between this situation and the communalism of today is not only the increase of communal ideology among all religious groups, but also the militancy and aggressiveness with which communal groups take public positions. In the past, where there were clashes between those who identified themselves as Hindus or Muslims, and the root of the confrontation lay in what was believed to be differences over religious practice, the initial attempt could be to sort it out through a dialogue to prevent violence. This was inherent in popular religious articulation, for it affected closely the people whose religious affiliations were at issue.

Today the question of dialogue does not arise. The Vishva Hindu Parishad has not called for a dialogue: it has only called for the destruction of mosques. Its cadres, and particularly its subsidiary, the Bajrang Dal, cannot be called a collection of devout worshippers, given that the prime function of the latter is to wield the stick whenever called upon to do so. The Vishva Hindu Parishad has to be recognised for what it actually is—not a religious movement but a political organisation using the front of religion.

Riding on the back of communalisation is also the criminalisation of society which this militancy has encouraged. That this is as true of the overwhelmingly large 'majority community' as it is of the 'minority communities', creates a different kind of discourse on the question of communalism. Political fire-fighting is being directed towards communal issues and other more basic concerns remain neglected.

Since communal ideologies draw on history, the past requires to be analysed in sufficient detail, and from a variety of perspectives, to counter the supposed legitimacy of that which is being sought to be propagated by communal ideology. The communal distortion of history, when it is widely propagated, percolates into the popular consciousness and the dislodging of this distortion becomes a Herculean task. The analysis of popular perceptions of the past, therefore, also enters the historian's agenda.

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