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RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AS POLITICAL WEAPON: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Religious Fundamentalism as a popular phenomenon is of recent origin. It is particularly evident in societies which are not only economically backward but are also going through a serious political crisis. The nature of the economic, political crisis is such that the dominant ruling classes are not able to solve it through strictly economic or political means. Yet, the urgency of the crisis calls for immediate action, and if it is not forthcoming, the very position of the dominant class as the ruling class will be in jeopardy. Hence the necessity to contain the economic and political upheavals by promoting fundamentalist meanings, practices and traditions among the aggrieved masses. When popular religions are used for this purpose, it is religious fundamentalism. Religious Fundamentalism, therefore, is a political weapon in the hands of the dominant ruling class of the society.

My effort in the following pages will be to focus on the Indian situation today, point out the nature of the economic, political crisis, and then bring out the fundamentalist manner in which the Indian ruling class is using religion for containing the economic and political crisis. This will be exemplified in the context of Hinduism, which is the majority religion, and Islam, which is the largest minority religion, in the country.

1. Crisis in the Indian Economy

Although the Indian Capitalist class is in control of the industrial production in the country, it is in the process of being absorbed by International Capital, particularly falling a prey to the Multi-National Corporations. While the smaller industrialists are falling by the wayside, the bigger ones are competing with each other to enter into partnerships with foreign companies.

2. Crisis in the Economy

In spite of the process of modernization, India's position in the world economy has deteriorated. A few statistical details will make this clear. The figures compare India's position in 1950 with 1980.

1950	1980
2% of the World GNP	1%
12% of the Third World GNP	5.4%
2% of World Foreign Trade	0.5%
2% of Industrial Production	0.7%
14% of Industrial Production in the Third World	4.6%

Not only is India being pushed back in terms of the world economy, but because of the deteriorating condition of the masses there is greater ferment within the country and larger numbers are involved in the struggles. Unfortunately, because of a lack of leadership, the economic struggle is not properly channeled. It often takes negative forms. Mass discontent takes various forms. Sometimes it expresses itself in class struggle, sometimes in class mixed with caste struggle, and sometimes in crude communalism.

Gradual Disintegration of the Political System

- The Parliamentary system has been reduced to an empty shell.
- The Congress which has existed for a century, has been reduced to a rubber stamp with no democratic functioning.
- Violence has increased. There is political and criminal gangsterism which act together specially at the time of elections. Booths are captured and the offenders do not even mind being photographed. After Indira Gandhi's death, a Congress Minister joined in organising the violence against the Sikhs in New Delhi.
- Corruption has become a way of life.
- Syncophancy has become a profession, and anything which pays immediate dividends is considered desirable.¹

1. Roy, Ajit. "India After Indira," lecture given at the Indian Social Institute, Bangalore, on 23-4-1985, mimeo pp. 4-6.

3. The Use of Religion

A crisis-ridden economy gives birth to increasing unrest among the masses of people, growth in unemployment especially among the youth, protest movements among the more enlightened, organized sectors of the working class.

It then becomes the urgent task for the capitalist class to forestall anything that may jeopardize its control over the production process. This it does by effectively exploiting the communal sentiments based on religion, caste and language and thus dividing the masses and pitching them, one against the other.

We will reflect briefly on (1) the causes, manifestations and various responses of Communalism, (2) the growth of Hindu religious fundamentalism through the R.S.S., (3) the boosting of fundamentalist attitudes in the Muslim community as exemplified in the enactment of legislation on the Muslim Personal Law.

A. COMMUNALISM

Causes

While recognizing the complexity of the communal question and acknowledging its ethnic, caste, regional, linguistic and religious dimensions, let us limit our discussion to tensions and conflicts between religious communities. Though these conflicts between religious communities are marked by psychological, cultural, economic, political and historical factors, they fundamentally result in dominance-subordination relationships.

Economic planning since Independence has led to considerable inequalities between regions and communities. The inequalities are reflected in the distribution of occupation and income, in discrimination in employment and services and the concentration of sections of certain religious communities in agricultural labour and low-income self-employment. Particularly in the small towns, which tend to have a stagnant economy, there is a concentration of craftsmen and producers of one religious community who are exploited by members of the other community who are middlemen and traders.

Manifestations

Thus, at the present stage of social and economic development, the struggles for economic and political power are assuming greater importance than the apparent, religious differences and inter-community prejudices. Within the democratic set-up, numbers have assumed importance and elections have become an instrument for perpetuating the communal character of our polity. In the struggle for power, the elites of the dominant and subordinate communities use religion, religious symbols, sentiments and prejudices to mobilize the masses.

The dominant-subordinate character of different religious communities changes according to their proportional distribution in the various regions. Further, to understand the complex features of communal tensions and conflicts, it is necessary to study more deeply the dynamics of each local situation.

Thus understood as a social process, communal conflict must be situated within the context of the historical impact of colonialism, the change it brought in the feudal economic and political power structures, and the subsequent neo-colonial economy. In general it can be said that responses to communal problems deal rather with the symptoms than with the causes. Measures are taken which create the illusion that problems are solved, but the tensions remain strong and dormant till new incidents provoke new outbreaks and riots.

Various Responses

The remedies chosen depend on the way communalism is perceived. The remedies suggested by the Gandhian tradition are peace marches and fasts that deal with the issue as a moral problem requiring moral pressures. Some believe that modernization and a revitalized economy will automatically solve the communal problem. Some perceive it exclusively as a psychological issue. They insist that the government should be able to assure minorities and give them a sense of security. Others believe that such tensions and conflicts are needed by those in power to maintain their position. Among the minorities themselves the experience of the past has led them to rely increasingly on their own resources and to strengthen their communal links to promote their interests and to build up their communities.

Communities have become more articulate, more self-conscious and self-assertive. They seek within the community the strength to determine their own future. Today the tendency of the communities is to position themselves firmly on a regional basis.

The revival of religious fundamentalism leads to increased isolation and an attitude of aggression.

The ideological factor plays an important role in providing an overall view of the community's relationship with other communities perceived as a threat. This ideology interacts with the historical reality of the concrete need of facing competition and fosters negative attitudes and prejudices. Such religious ideologies prevent critical self-examination and put into a negative light other communities as well as their religions. The younger generation is less affected by this growing religious fundamentalism and religious ideology. Their quest is for social promotion and they react strongly to what appears to them as discrimination with regard to educational and job opportunities. They have no illusions about secularism in the context of religious pluralism and see that the solution for this in acquiring greater political power for their community.

Briefly, therefore, then when we consider the response of society to the communal question – government, political parties, religious communities and scholars – we find a general tendency to deal with the symptoms and not with the real, underlying causes. Government tends to treat communal violence primarily as a law and order problem. As a result the government, in its role as arbiter in a pluralistic society, has not been able to establish credibility in reassuring the victims of communal riots. Political parties appear to view communal tension and violence as opportunities to gain electoral advantage without taking into account the human and social costs. In general, the community-based support which is sought by politicians results in widening, further the social and cultural cleavages between the different religious communities. The present-day relations between religious communities and their reactions to communal conflict have been conditioned by fear psychosis and mutual suspicion developed through an historical process, particularly during the colonial rule.

In this atmosphere of fear and suspicion, religious leaders make polemic use of religious symbols, language and festivals to mobilize popular sentiments for narrow political purposes instead of articulating their deep

significance for religious growth, justice and social transformation. Social scientists and other scholars too have been largely content with giving just descriptive accounts of discrete events of communal conflict and have more or less failed to develop a systematic analysis of communal relations within an economic and political framework. Further, patterns of socialization, school text-books and the media of communication, instead of promoting the spirit of fellowship and religious tolerance, reinforce communal stereotypes and inter-community prejudices.

**B. R.S.S. (RASHTRIYA SWAYAMSEVAK SANGH) –
A POLITICAL TOOL IN THE HANDS OF THE MAJORITY
(HINDU) COMMUNITY'S CAPITALIST CLASS.**

Before analysing the RSS as a political force, it would be interesting to study the composition of RSS. The great majority of the activists of RSS are young men with some education, usually of high-school level. With the rampant unemployment even among the educated that is now the reality in our society, these high-school educated young men do not have much of a chance as far as jobs are concerned. The resultant outcome of such a situation is a disenchantment with the society at large which, if left unchecked, could lead these young men to grow bitter towards the society in general and the ruling class in particular. To add to this ferment is the fact that most of these young men hail from semi-urban situations where the economy is a dormant one and where the law and order machinery is often incompetent and weak, and religious and linguistic community-sentiments are strong. Also, given the fact that 86% of the Indian society is Hindu by religious affiliation, the great majority of these young men are Hindus. Such is the composition of the 'militant base' which must by all means be distracted from its economic, social disenchantment. If not, the control and domination the Indian capitalist class – most of them are also Hindus – wield over the Indian polity, can be greatly impaired, and their profit considerably reduced. Besides, if this bitterness of the youth towards the Indian capitalist society is allowed to grow, the youth may sooner or later turn to the socialist forces in the country and could one day even demand a structural change in society. And, that is the last thing that the Indian capitalist class would ever want to be faced with! Therefore, it is important to divert the attention of this 'angry generation' from its socio-economic plight to a Hindu religious fervour and make these young men feel that they have to assume a historical liberating role.

To be able to achieve the above goal, these young men need to be provided a particular type of education and motivation. This is done through systematic indoctrination of how the Hindu society has had its glorious past, which is now being affected by the coming of the Muslims and Christians into the country from outside. As such Hinduism is India's real religion and culture, and no other alien religion or culture should be allowed to function in the country. In fact, Nanaji Deshmukh, one of the promoters of the RSS, went to the extent of saying that the objective of the RSS is to realize the India of the 12th century A.D., when neither Islam nor Christianity had penetrated the Indian society! As an end result, the activists of the RSS are made to feel that they have a 'religious mission' to carry out.

The *social acceptance* of the existence and activities of the RSS by the society at large comes from the sense of discipline that the activists manifest in their activities. In a society where discipline in any walk of life is significantly absent, to see a group of young men conducting themselves in a strikingly disciplined fashion, is itself a source of attraction for the general public. Added to this is the Hindu religious character of the RSS which can be quite appealing to the majority Hindu population. The upper classes among the Hindu population spontaneously express an open sympathy and extend an implicit support towards the existence and functioning of the RSS, although they themselves may not actively participate in its activities. Finance is no problem because generous contributions are easily forthcoming from the upper class Hindus and particularly the capitalists from the Hindu community. Thus, the RSS not only enjoys the support of the Indian ruling class but also the ruling Congress party and all the other political parties for the simple reason that if they denounce RSS openly, it will certainly affect the Hindu vote bank. They may generally condemn communalism and the communal violence taking place in the country, but would rarely single out the RSS as the communal force responsible for most of the communal violence. The two Communist parties have been the only honourable exceptions, because their denunciation of both communalism and the RSS as a communal force has been quite consistent. Again, in keeping with the trend established by the ruling class and the political parties, the government bureaucracy, especially at lower levels, is quite sympathetic towards the RSS and its activities as is evident from its silent collaboration. The law-and-order enforcing machinery such as the police also look the other way when communal violence takes place in which the RSS members are involved, and come to the scene well after the damage has been done, and "restore

law and order." In this way, the RSS gets the silent sympathy and indirect collaboration of the capitalist ruling class, the political parties, the government's administrative and law and order enforcing machinery.

Finally, those political forces, organizations and individuals who really believe in democratic and secular values, are reduced to the position of silent witnesses to the growing communal violence in the country and are rendered helpless to do anything effective to stop the damage done to the society.

Thus we see how the Indian capitalist class is able to exploit a basically disgruntled section of society by converting the latter's socio-economic disenchantment into religious fanaticism. Consequently the capitalist ruling class is able to maintain and stabilize its economic domination and continue to reap huge profits. Verily, a fine example of how religion, in this case Hindu religion, is used as a political weapon.

C. MUSLIM PERSONAL LAW AND ITS MANIPULATION BY THE RULING CLASS

In India, the oppressed status of women is obvious from the fact that large numbers of them are controlled by their families and their religious leaders. In some respects, especially in matters like marriage and divorce, Muslim women are particularly discriminated. A Muslim male can have four wives, whereas a Muslim female can have only one husband. When it comes to divorce, the wife can divorce her husband only by having recourse to the judiciary under the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939. The husband on the contrary, is entitled to divorce his wife extra-judicially and unilaterally, and is under no obligation to state any reason for this. The Muslim Law empowers the husband to divorce his wife by making a formal pronouncement of his intention to divorce (*'talaq'*), and such a pronouncement has irrevocable, immediate effect. Finally, when the question of maintenance after divorce arises the Muslim Law obliges the husband to continue to maintain the wife during the period of her *'iddat'* which means (a) three menstrual courses after the date of divorce, if she is subject to menstruation, (b) three lunar months after her divorce, if she is not subject to menstruation, and (c) if she is pregnant at the time of her divorce, till the delivery of her child or the termination of her pregnancy, whichever is earlier.²

2. Mathew P.D. and Bakshi P. M. *Muslim Marriage and Divorce*, Legal Education: Personal Law-3, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 7-20.

The gross injustice inherent in the Muslim Law came to light when the Supreme Court in its judgement in 1985 on the famous 'Shah Bano Case' held that the husband must continue to maintain her until her re-marriage or death, if she is unable to maintain herself. The furore that ensued from the fundamentalist Muslim quarters was unparalleled. Those who opposed the judgement could be divided into three categories: (1) those who had no axe to grind and saw in the Supreme Court's judgement a direct threat to their religious identity; (2) those who had vested political interests and used the agitation to promote their political interests. The whole agitation was fuelled by those politically motivated with the support of those who saw a threat to the Muslims' religious identity; and (3) those whose interests coincided with a genuine feeling of threat to their identity.³

The emerging trends can be characterized as follows :

1. That fundamentalist forces are capitalizing not upon an event or two but on a persistent feature of the social system: the position of women as second-class citizens. This not only suits their interests but also strengthens their alliance with the ruling classes.
2. That fundamentalists have not only succeeded in capturing the imagination of the majority in their respective communities but have also succeeded in confusing a section of their intelligentsia.
3. That the state not only gives in to their anti-secular demands but also justifies them – and its actions – by changing the very definition of secularism. Then in the name of democratic practice it supports the majority view within religious communities.
4. That as a consequence of the above, the liberal democratic sections are becoming increasingly paralysed and marginalized.⁴

In keeping with the above-mentioned trends, the ruling Congress (I) Government passed a Bill in Parliament entitled 'The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill, in 1986, according to which, after 'iddat' the wife can get maintenance allowance from the relatives who are her potential heirs. The husband's liability ceases with the 'iddat'. Failing maintenance by the above relatives, the wife can get maintenance from

3. Engineer A.A. "Roots of Communalism" in *Seminar*, No. 322, p. 22.

4. Qudeeer Imrana. "Roop Kanwar and Shah Bano" in *Seminar*, No. 342, p. 33.

the Wakf Board.⁵ Thus, the Congress Government, confronted by the Muslim fundamentalists, decided to introduce the Bill despite protests and pleas from all quarters for at least a wider debate. The indecent rush with which the Bill was passed made it clear that the interests of destitute Muslim women were far from the central concern – this happened to be a case of electoral politics.⁶

In this whole process, a democratic, secular and socialist polity which must be vigorously promoted, and which alone can be an effective antidote to communal politics, gets left by the wayside. This, in short, is the way the ruling class promotes religious obscurantism and communalizes crimes in order to perpetuate its political control and rule of society.

5. Mathew P.D. et al., *op. cit.*, p. 20.

6. Qudeeer Imrana. *op. cit.*, p. 32.