

# Caste and Religion: The Conclusive Factor in Indian Politics

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**Abstract:** This Article Concerns cast influences politics in India. Specialty state politics in Republic of India has been significantly the new bed of political castes. Caste enter rather More directly into the composition of political elites at the state level. Caste is the Most ancient feature of Indian social system and it is a major factor in the structures and functions of the Indian political system. "Jaati na Poocho Sadhu Ki, Pooch lijiye Gyan" is a part of a Doha (couplet) by an Indian mystic, poet saint Kabir Das, which directly translates to – 'Do not judge a saint by their caste, but ask for their knowledge'. Yet, this Doha is categorically ignored in Indian elections, when the most-asked question during an election is about the candidate's surname, caste or religion and not what they have to offer or the values they will bring to the table. From political analysts to voters, everyone has this question on their mind, which is why the candidates standing in an election want to play their caste game right.

**Keywords:** *Cast, Social stratification, Indian Politics and Society, Religion, Politics, Factor, Represent, Predominant, Functions.*

## Introduction

The word 'caste' is derived from the Spanish word 'casta' which means race. People born in particular race have their separate caste. It defines all social, economic and political relationships for the individual. Caste is a notable foundation of social stratification in India. Indian politics is caste-ridden politics. Caste determines the nature, organization, and working of political parties, interest groups, and all political structures and their function. Indian society has been highly segmented along the lines of castes, religion, class, etc. it eventually prevents the true working of parliamentary democracy. The basic objective of this paper is to analyse the role of caste in Indian politics and how it becomes a major cause of serious concern and become an obstacle to the national integration. This paper concludes with a suggestion to overcome these challenges. In India, communities form along a variety of affiliations and social ascriptions such as caste, class, religion, language and religion. Often an individual affiliates himself or herself to many groups. "Having more than one set of identities, an individual can belong to several communities at the same time and may be mobilised along different, mutually exclusive lines of communal identity" (Alevi and Harris 1989: 223; Shah 1994: 1133 quoted in Kooyman 1995: 2123). Mahmood asserts, "While scholars working in other parts of the world argue over whether particular movements are linguistic, ethnic, religious, regional or any other wide variety of adjectives, Indians have solved the problem nicely by thinking in terms of 'communities' whose identity may be defined in diverse ways" (1993:722).

Scholars in India have designated specific concepts for community formations and conflicts between caste, region and language as casteism, regionalism and linguism respectively. In fact, a few scholars have designated very specific terms even for caste movements—for example, "social communalism" (Jones 1968) and "social revolution" (Omvedt 1972). However, if the literature makes a distinction between communalism, on the one hand, and linguistic, regionalism and casteism, on the other, it would be interesting if future researchers could expound on how community formation at a religious level is different from caste, region or language. What set of questions differentiate religious communalism from clashes of other social ascriptions?

Communalism, in the current discourse, includes distinct religious consciousness and expansion of an understanding of a homogeneous religious identity. It has been argued that homogeneous religious identity, as we find it today, was not present in the precolonial period. As Thapar asserts, "In the precolonial period the recognition of a religious community was more limited since language, ethnicity, caste and region are more apparent bonds. Religious perceptions and hostilities were more localised" (1990: 17-18). The extension of the idea of homogeneous religious consciousness and its politicisation has grown over a period of time and depends on available means of communication; for example, print technology was in considerable use by the Arya Samaj in the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The involvement of technology increases the process of homogenisation among Hindus. The current possibility of the politicisation of the global Hindu community that draws support from Hindus across the globe was

not present 50 years ago. It has largely been achievable because of the internet and digital technology. Localised communities may have had distinct identities but technology and politicisation have connected and homogenised the discrete and localised identities. Politicisation and connection are possible only when similar situations are faced by various similar communities. Religious identity in the precolonial period was differentiated along territorial, ethnic, sectarian and cultic identities.

Chattopadhyay (2005) looks at the notions of “other” and “others” and how these were constructed and understood at the time people from west and central Asia started arriving in the Indian subcontinent. Chattopadhyay (2005) tells of many differentiations at various levels. The “other”, as we see in contemporary times, was not marked. Rather, there were many “others”. The components of a culture and society in terms of...many identities. The many identities, implying varieties of difference rather than ‘big otherness, have a space for confrontation as well, but at the same time, of varieties of negotiation’ (Chattopadhyay 200: 195).

There were clashes, though sporadic, between cultic and sectarian groups in the precolonial period (Bayly 1985; Hasan 1982; Thapar 1990; Von Stietencron 2007). Taking a cue from writings on the first millennium, it appears that identities were based more on territorial demarcations or case differences rather than religious differences (for instance, see Chattopadhyay 2005). However, Lorenzen (2005) contests the absence of religious categories in the precolonial period and argues that by the turn of 1200 AD, there were clear differentiations among religious groups. Here we are not concerned with the existence or non-existence of religious categories. Rather our concern is that people had sectarian, cultic, ethnic and regional consciousness and this consciousness differentiated them from others. These cults and sects were more homogeneous, maintained an exclusive nature and fought over the division of political and economic power and royal patronage (Von Stietencron 2007: 52).

According to Chattopadhyay, there were at least two spheres of conflict in the precolonial period- (i) conflict over political supremacy; and (ii) conflicts over the assertion of doctrinal and sectarian supremacy. “In the Indian world of 1000 AD, political hegemony was both a matter of ideology as well as material gain” (2005: 198). As Thapar (1990) has also shown, rival kingdoms were perpetually engaged in fights for territorial supremacy. Rather “assertions of doctrinal supremacy were socially more pervasive” (Chattopadhyay 2005: 199). As Mukhiya asserts, “The exclusiveness in the distant past was confined generally to the sphere of religion and some religious ceremonies” (1972: 46).

Wherever possible, communities fought over available resources; for example, the land wars during the Mughal period. “In the Punjab there are cases of the obliteration of the old Muslim towns and their replacement by totally new semi-urban settlements under the complete control of the local Sikh warrior lineages” (Bayly 1985: 192). Bayly asserts these land wars were the result of the Mughal policy of land grant, *madad-i-maash*, to Muslims or Islamised Hindus and these groups were locally competed against by Hindu agricultural castes such as Jats, Bhumihars or Rajputs (1985: 192). He further argues that communal conflict, though mediated by religious symbols, was rooted in contestations around land or over political authority.

On the other hand, some scholars have argued that there were instances of communal strife in the precolonial period that display many features of communal conflicts of more recent times. For example, Rizvi notes, “In the riot at Ahmedabad in the second year of Farrukhsiyar’s reign [1714, as Farrukhsiyar reigned between 1713 and 1719]’ for instance, when rioting broke out against Muslim cow-slaughter, it was Afghan soldiers of the Mughal governor [brought from outside] of the city who took a leading part in the attack on the Hindu quarters of the city” (quoted in Bayly 1985: 194). Some of the important aspects of communalism that are seen today can be traced in this narrative.

It has been shown that the crystallisation of religious identities took place around specific issues and occasions at the local level in colonial India. Freitag (1990) and Bayly (1985) view communalism in terms of new arenas of local power in which local social conflicts could be played out. Freitag (1990) looked at the conflicts and cultural innovations and showed how a sense of community and communalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century north India grew around the cow protection movement. She brings to the discussion how people divided by caste and occupational backgrounds came together around the cow riots. “But Freitag is unable to offer a convincing reason why some lower castes (shudras) and Untouchables (the latter often consumers of beef) consented to join up. For her, it is simply enough that they participated in such communal identities. He emphasises the importance of precolonial modes of religious communication, such as saintly networks, rituals and pilgrimages.

It has been argued by scholars that the nature and form of religious strife changed immensely during and after the colonial period. All these theories rest to some extent on assumptions about the nature of, often the absence of, communal conflict before 1860. It is true that communal violence did not operate on a massive scale in precolonial times. Conflicts were localising their production as well as execution. However, it can be convincingly argued that there were several local and regional conflicts that provided fertile grounds to various agents to unify various localised feelings. The point that may be brought out is not of the presence or absence of conflict in the precolonial period but of how the idea of domination has spread from local regions and religious domains to other areas of social living. If one

focuses on how one community differentiates and constructs the other community and why they are involved in violent acts, perhaps one can arrive at a convincing answer to the sustained presence of communalism and fundamentalism in India. With the advent of British rule in India, localise conflicts enlarged and new areas of contestation emerged.

Muslims resisted taking up instruments for upward mobility; for example, Persian was given importance over English. Muslims were viewed as the main opponents by the British. Their expectation of regaining political power someday deteriorated their socio-economic position. The official views of the revolt of 1857 and later the Wahabi Movement's challenge to the British made them see Muslims as their main opponents. The British deliberately repressed and systematically kept them out from various fields of activity. A new class – the educated middle class – primarily composed of upper-caste Hindus was emerging during this period and had its own stake in strengthening the British administration. In Mahatma Gandhi's view, communal tension was also to a certain extent the product of rivalries between the Hindu and Muslim middle classes for government jobs and seats in elected bodies such as municipal corporations and legislatures (Chandra 2004).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Hindu elites consolidated their position while Muslims became marginalised and the Muslim threat to British power completely faded. "What is clear is that the Hindu elite was getting depoliticised while the Muslim elite's obsession with political power was complete" (Shakir 1979: 470). The British were faced with new challenges from the Indian National Congress (INC). The members of the INC mobilised around the deteriorating economic and social conditions of Indian society. Questions of representation and the determination of rights.

Often, as the literature shows, a relatively small issue became the spark setting off violence. The Sadar Bazar communal riot in 1974 in Delhi started with the supposed eve-teasing of a Hindu girl by a few Muslim Boys (Krishna 1985). In Malegaon in 1983, fire crackers burst in front of the Jama Masjid were the starting point; on another occasion, there was a controversy around a memorial called the Shahid Smarak on Kidwai road in Malegaon. In 1978, in Hyderabad, violence erupted over the rape of Rameeza Bee by a Hindu sub-inspector and two Muslim constables and the subsequent murder of her husband. In 1981, in Meenakshipuram, religious conversion provided the spark, while in other cases it was marriages between a Hindu girl and a Muslim boy. On the basis of such incidents, it is clear that communalism draws energy not merely from religious sources, but from every aspect of social living. Any such issue can be communalised and politicised.

Communalism feeds into and is fed by competitive politics, which is not located only in the formal political sphere. In independent India, Muslims have been reduced on all fronts and have a low political, economic and social status. However, images of Muslims created during the colonial times, the experiences of partition and contradictions in the political system supplied energy in the creation of new reasons for communalism in independent India. In the colonial period, Muslims were economically marginalised and did not gain much from the modernisation process. "Their hardship was caused by the general decline of feudalism, the decay of traditional crafts, and steady erosion in their landed status. Besides, the very basis of landed status was continuously eroded by the rise of the powerful commercial classes (mostly Hindus) who besides achieving status were buying up their land" (Hasan 1982: 29-30).

In independent India, many of the privileges that Muslims had benefited from during the colonial period, including separate electorates, reservation in services and weightage for both employment and election, were dismantled (Engineer 1984: 753). There were deliberate efforts by the administration to displace Muslims from opportunities that were available in independent India. M S Sathya's film *Gram Haza* (Scorching Wind) shows how the economic and following Partition. Cultural elements of the Muslims also but it is not an official Language in any state (Engineer 1984). Nevertheless, Muslims are still considered the most powerful opponents of Hindus and a "fifth column" in the Indian nation. This image of the powerful opponent is drawn from various developments in the political and economic spheres in post-Independence India.

In independent India. The slow rate of growth and of economic development, along with the political mobilisation of communities, has been seen as reasons for communalism. Muslim communalism has been on the politics has increased in leaps and bounds and poses challenges to constitutional provisions; for example, the demand for the abolition of Muslim Personal Law or Article 370 on Jammu and Kashmir. There are interconnected issues around which communalism has developed. The rise in the economic power of the Muslim community due to migration to Arabian Gulf countries, mobilisation by political parties, and a new political leadership among Muslims are a few other reasons around which communalism has grown in contemporary India.

The Muslims felt alienated and insecure after a chain of riots broke out in the 1960s. The Majlis-e-Mushawarat, a consultative body of various Muslim groups and political parties, began a debate about the plight of Muslims in Independent India but could not succeed in bringing peace (Engineer 1992). Regional parties such as the Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (MIM), founded in 1927, were propagating the idea of an Islamic polity in the wake of the frightening prospect of a Hindu upheaval and majority rule. During the integration of Hyderabad into the Indian Union, the Raza Kars played an aggressive role, committing arson and loot against Hindus, which fed the aggressive



politics of the Sangh parivar (Bakshi 1984). The Muslim community, virtually leaderless till the 1960s, saw the emergence of a few aggressive leaders in the early 1980s, such as Syed Shahabuddin and Salman Khurshid, after the Moradabad riot of 1980 and the Bihar Sharif violence of 1981.

Syed Shahabuddin achieved prominence in the early 1980s when he made a few aggressive statements on the Bihar Sharif riots and also on the issue of conversion of Dalits to Islam, popularly known as the Meenakshipuram conversions (Engineer 1992). The Meenakshipuram issue was highly politicised by the Sangh parivar. "It was this leadership which led two major movements, that is the Shah Bano case and the Babri Masjid

The issues of refugees who came from erstwhile East Pakistan and the plight faced by Hindus in Islamic countries was enough for the Sangh Parivar to unleash a renewed movement against Muslims in India. Irrespective of nation state boundaries, religion has the power to form associations on a widescale. Transnational connections and affiliations came to the fore when Buddha statues were desecrated in Afghanistan. This gave another reason to the Hindu communalist to assault Muslims in India. Similarly, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the RSS mouthpiece, *Organiser*, published a photograph of the Pakistan flag flying at half mast at the High Commission in Delhi (Raychaudhuri 2000: 262). "On this reasoning, transnational affinities of Christians and Muslims were supposed to dilute their loyalty to the country. The Sikh urge for a distinct identity and some of its militant manifestations arouse similar apprehensions of Hindus about the patriotic credentials of the community" (Puri 1987: 1133). So, the range of issues and the extent of the issues stretch not only back into history but also across national boundaries are the primary bases on which communalism has grown in independent India. It is said that the Muslim vote Block has been opportunistically used by almost all political parties. The aggressive stances of the Sangh parivar have also Compelled Muslims to vote in masse. Their underrepresentation in politics and insecurities are a few reasons for their voting behaviour. Listen (1994) studied voting behaviour in Uttar Pradesh that rotates around steams and communalism. Similarly, Chhachhi and others look at fascist Hindutva and its implications and expose two aspects – secular farce and vote-bank politics (1993: 779). Like Ahmad (1969), Wilkinson (2004) also finds the cause of communal tension in the policies adopted by many political parties. Desai (1984) and Khatkhate (1990) find that the Congress in to blame for communal movements and argue that it has betrayed secularism.

Communal controversies emerged from the ind-1980s around the issues of Shah Bano, Roop Kunwar, the opening of the lock at Babri Mosque and later its demolition. These controversial decisions of the government did have political ramifications but they were politicised largely on the issues of minority consciousness and pseudo-secularism. A minority consciousness does not emanate only from low numerical strength of a community or the ethnic history of a community. Gupta (1985) drawing from the case of Sikhs during the 1980s, says the new phenomenon of minority consciousness should be read jointly with the alienation of minorities from the contemporary Indian political system and the judiciary. Much of the strength for communalism comes from the idea of minority consciousness. Let us take the case of the Hindus, particularly the upper caste and Middle class, and how they are sometimes able to construct themselves as a minority. The development of a minority consciousness within the majority has been a characteristic of several south Asian countries, not only India, in recent times (Pfaff-Czarnecki et al 1999). The reversal of the Supreme Court's decision in the case of Shah Bano increased the minority consciousness among Hindus because there were already problems with a certain percentage of reservation in government jobs for Muslims in Gujarat. This was followed by the Mandal Commission recommendations.

Upadhyay (1989) looking at the Bombay workers asserts that though workers participated in communal riots, communal consciousness did not develop. For him, participation in communal riots by workers was more about personal rivalries and the desire to settle scores. Ghosh (1990) argues that colonialism was the biggest determinant and the workers in the jute mills displayed two selves – the self of the peasant and the self of the worker – as many migrated from rural Bihar and had close associations with the middlemen who recruited them – "the jobbers". Banu (1994) talks about the migration of entrepreneurs and asserts that the decision-making power of migrant entrepreneurs and competition with members of the receiving society can develop into communal animosity. More elaborately, migrant labour participates in communal rioting to settle scores with the local community. Presenting the case of communal violence in Surat, Bremen (1993) says it is immigrant labour that is largely responsible for creating violence among Hindus and Muslims. It is observable from the above discussion on communalism and its various trajectories that it emerges from the competition to maximise resources to dominate the other community. Apart from direct sources, there are various indirect sources that communities may take as reasons to claim their own marginalisation, and thereby seek greater assertion or promote conflict.

The leads and lags of communities in the Indian economic system have been seen as part of the reasons for the rise in communalism (Dutta 1972). "The theory of Muslim backwardness regards communalism as the result of tensions between poor Muslim cultivators and Hindu landlords, or of competition for government posts between ill-educated Muslims and better-educated Hindus" (Heeds 1997: 101). Similarly, Shakir asserts, "The Muslim elite in India has been indulging in the practice of articulating its grievances, for communicating with the Muslim masses, for framing its political strategies and for maintaining a separate political status for the community" (1979: 469). Shakir's observations of political leaders could be correct but the socio-economic condition of Muslims in India is generally

poor. The Sachar Committee (2005) makes some important observations on the socio-economic situation of Muslims in contemporary India. Its examination of the social, economic and political place of Muslims in modern India shows that the community is largely backward and deprived in terms of access to education, financial services and resources and employment. Similar observations were made earlier as well, though without the support of the wealth of data the Sachar report provides. For instance, during a convention in 1986 referred to as "The Call", it was emphasised that "there was no inherent resistance to modern education among the Muslims but that severe economic, cultural and social discrimination had crippled the community" (Raman 1987 : 175).

The contemporary ideas of Hindu nationalism are not different from the founding ideas of nationalism of the Hindu Mahasabha. In fact, these are supplemented with more additions of a similar kind. Along with this, many other elements have developed. The colonialist construction of history produced Muslims as alien on Indian soil. This vision of the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS was boosted by the Muslim league's demand for a separate state statehood made Muslims an enemy of united India or Akhanda Bharat. The separatist image of Muslims has been reproduced in almost all the propaganda of the Sangh pariah in the post-Independence period. A separate Muslim identity, the apparent "growth" of the Muslim population, and the alleged affiliation of Muslims to west Asia and Pakistan have all become part of the common-sense of Hindu nationalist ideology.

Secular nationalism that largely rests on equal rights, citizenship and the separation of the state from religion has been questioned both by academics and political actors in independent India. Communities question the separation of the state from religion has been questioned both by academics and political actors in independent India. Communities question the constitutional ideal of secularism. Concessions to minority communities are considered as curbs on the freedoms and rights of the majority community. Partisan politics that began in the late 1960s have produced communal politics. Parties align with particular communities to achieve political power; for example, the Hindu card played by Indira Gandhi, the Hindutva card of the BJP. "Parliamentary parties have talked of equal respect to all religions, but in practice have fostered communal vote banks of different religions, deepening and expanding communal tension" (wan too et al 2002). At the same time, scholars argue that secular nationalism and the idea of democracy have also found acceptance in India (for instance, see Khilnani 1997). As Archer points out, "The anti-secularists are right when they say that India has a political culture which is deeply influenced by religious traditions. But they are wrong when they say that India does not have a secular political culture" (199 : 891).

### **Conclusion**

The use of caste for gaining political popularity is not a new phenomenon and pre-Independence Indian politics also involved the use of caste, in different ways. The British Imperialists used religion as well as caste for political division of the nation. Unfortunately, even after Independence, India could not stop caste from becoming a factor that would influence politics. Even though the scenario is changing in urban India as voters are becoming more educated and aware about important issues, a large part of India still resides in rural areas, where people are not so much aware; for them, caste still plays a very important role in the election processes. Now, what can be the reason that people prefer to choose someone for their representation who belongs to their own caste rather than choosing someone who guarantees good work, amenities and development? It is because of an emotion – the feeling of belongingness. People tend to have an inherent desire to belong and be an important part of something that is greater than themselves; a relationship that is greater than simple acquaintance. This is a strong and inevitable feeling that exists in human nature. And due to this feeling, people have a strange natural trust that someone from their community, from their social group would be the apt representative for them; that he/she would protect them, provide them with opportunities and take care of them because after all, they belong to one big family, right? Sadly, that is not the case. Most of the times, this trust is taken for granted. Many political parties take advantage of These sentiments and fracture the society in such a manner that they gain from the division can damage the society. Politicians appeal to the sentiments of the voters of their respective caste groups and try to mobilize votes on that basis so as to capture and retain political power. Not only this, politicians have also managed to divert the attention of voters from issues relating to jobs, development, education, etc. by portraying caste as the paramount metric they should keep in mind while voting. The biggest harms of caste being involved in India's electoral processes? There are many – incompetent leadership, ineffective governance, failed public policies, and most importantly, stagnancy. In a country where more than half of its population lives on less than Rs. 120/ day, it becomes highly important to make people realise the importance of proper representation and how it can change their lives. However, people are beginning to understand how such superficial factors are good for nothing and only poison the society at large. As is the case with any social evil, this is something which will require a lot of time and effort to be flushed out from the society, but that doesn't mean it is impossible at all.

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