

Colonialism and Community Consciousness in India

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Abstract

Identity as a composite definition of the self, it is assumed that selfhood exists prior to linguistic definition or social construction¹. When the identity addresses the spirit of community it will reflect the socio-cultural and political realm of the particular historical time. The mechanism of a colonial state has been worked out through the interconnections of knowledge and power. The colonial epistemology has made a strategic role in constructing the 'other' in a colonial state.

Identity is a contested concept. It is generally imagined and re-imagined in culturally specific terms within fluxing conceptual spaces characterized by a complex interplay of conflicting and competing forces. However, it is a commonplace of popular discourses to erroneously regard a given individual (or gender or community) as a static and passive receptive agency. In fact identity is shifting and its formation is a dialectical social process involving multiple elements and agencies. Identity, particularly, that of a community is inextricably intertwined with a vast array of external and internal social components which are often selectively appropriated from its own historical repertoire. It changes, at times unrecognizably, as and when the determining social components—economy, education, worldview—change. In other words, identity is contingent upon occupation, religion, region, language, caste and so on.

Identity as a composite definition of the self, it is assumed that selfhood exists prior to linguistic definition or social construction¹. When the identity addresses the spirit of community it will reflect the socio-cultural and political realm of the particular historical time. The study about community identity is different from that of identity of the individual. As Benedict Anderson said, the members will never know most of their fellow members, 'though in the mind of each lives the image of their communion'². In fact, the identity is attached with the roles played, physical features acquired and values and priorities followed by a person. Thus it can be defined as 'a set of meaningful definitions that are ascribed or attached to the self, including social roles, reputation, a structure of values and priorities, and a conception of one's potentiality.'³

The concept of community and their identity has become a major part of discourse in modern social sciences. They are different in view of the nature of 'community identity'. Majority of them are in a view of that 'communities and identities have emerged during colonial period. But the premordialist view is that they are the natural grouping based on their common features like language, culture etc.

The mechanism of a colonial state has been worked out through the interconnections of knowledge and power. The colonial epistemology has made a strategic role in constructing the 'other' in a colonial state. The other was constructed through the official tools of census, surveys and reporting which justified and classified the population in a colonial state into different categories and groups. Furthermore colonial modernity had become more powerful in 19th C with the wide spread usage of Print. All these together undermined the nature of their pre-modern identities in a colonial state. As Edward Said wrote that ' what gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West'⁴the community identity was constructed, designed and shaped, in tune with the western epistemology, under colonialism by the operation of certain political and discursive processes. The disciplining and authorizing practices of the state created a categorized civil society for controlling and governing a large population in a colonial state.

Community consciousness in India

The term Community is always used in different historical context and concept. Though there were many forms of community forms in pre-modern Indian society they were not received a collective and concrete consciousness which were widely used or misused for administrative cause. The policies and discourses of colonial administration constructed such communities and its categories.⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that colonial rule introduced the modern bureaucratic state into India, which employed the typical techniques of government- surveillance and control i.e. India's people were measured, classified and quantified through the census and other information gathering exercises in which invented community categories were central⁶. Eventually people began to think and organize themselves in terms of these categories, leading to the formation of new identities. Here the 'fuzzy' boundaries of pre-modern community collectiveness were replaced with concrete categories.

The modern community categories never made a complete change of consciousness for their members, but they followed multiple or overlapping ethnic identities in their everyday life. The socio-cultural differences played a strategic role in creating such community consciousness and it became a major tool for the distribution of power and representation in the administration of colonial state. The public sphere of community members was re-defined by the state in tune with their community belongingness. The heterogeneous religious and ethnic groups were addressed through the official documents prepared by the state. Castes and cultural groups were categorized through the official reports of the state. The enumerated categories became backbone of Indian society which shaped the nexus of modern India. Thus the construction of Hindu and Muslim Identities and its various manifestations restructured the Indian political scenario. According to Ashis Nandy, pre-modern

Hinduism was essentially pluralistic and non-communal. But this was transformed by modernity into a homogenous force.⁷

The community consciousness in pre-colonial society was totally different. It was the colonial experience which changed the framework of the past. The communities, particularly, religious communities became political. As the identity of a community is linked to a political religion, they try to redefine the particular religion. Here the agents of this political religion were nationalism and state.⁸They reject diverse and heterogeneous nature of earlier form of religion for their political ends. In case of Hindu community consciousness, a modern search for an imagined Hindu identity is visible, at least, for the last two centuries. 'The evolution of Hinduism is not a linear progression from a founder through an organizational system, with sects branching off. It is rather the mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas'⁹The colonial administrative mechanism, through its recruitment, education, missionary work, cartography, legal codification and ethnographic classification, contributed to the systematization of a political religion¹⁰.

In the same way, Muslim community consciousness became dominant in the political scenario of the colonial India. As Francis Robinson noted, print capitalism played a major role in fashioning Muslim identity in India¹¹.The colonial government had special concern in distributing political and economic privileges among the power seeking community leaders. Actually Muslims in India had never followed a common tradition and culture, though they professed same religion. There reflected regional and linguistic variations of south Asian Islam¹².The Muslim leaders were different in their views towards the education policies of British government. The orthodoxy was against modern education and they had pride in their past and hatred in western education. Also the British policy makers' perception was that Muslims were not interested in modern education and their officials propagated such views through their publications¹³. The Muslim intelligentsia also supported the official view and they found it as the major hindrance for getting government jobs. Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan addressed the matter in different way that without modern education, Muslims would be unable to contribute creatively to policy making at various levels of public life. Thus the Aligarh trained educated Muslims and traditional landlords played a major role in contributing community consciousness. At this stage, to counter the campaigns of Ahmed Khan, the Ula-ma founded a center for traditional education at Daueband.

From community to communal consciousness

Scholars are in different opinion about the origin and growth of communalism in India. Majority views it as a product of colonialism. Others see this as a carryover of medieval Hindu-Muslim conflicts. The sophisticated version of this argument can be seen in the views of the New Cambridge Historiography. To them communalism will tend to disappear with the spread of modernity¹⁴. Marxist scholarship like Bipan Chandra and Sumit Sarkar locate its origin in modern India. To Sumit Sarkar the religious division - the Hindu and Muslim-led to the sectional consciousness bred and directly fostered by colonialism¹⁵. It could be traced to the 1880's with the Urdu-Devanagiri controversy, cow protection riots and the age of consent debates¹⁶.

Colonialism through its classificatory procedures, categorized Indian people along religious lines. Signals of community identities became more visible in all aspects of public life during late nineteenth century.

The major reason for this was, as Bipan Chandra noted, the formation of new social classes and strata and the impact of imperialism on the people which lead to the emergence of a varied relationship between imperialism and the different sections of the Indian society¹⁷. He finds, in Indian history, a new phase of mass mobilization based on communal identities during 1920s which played a strategic role in the history of communalism.

The major task of the national leadership was to unite the different section of the people against imperialism. Actually the origin and growth of nationalism took place along with the origin and growth of different community identities. The middle and upper class people were considered as the leaders of their respective community. The economic and political interests of the elites determined the agenda of the community programmes. The economic and political powers and privileges exercised and distributed by the colonial state and their policy of 'balancing communities' designed the political agenda of each community. A central feature of this movement was the notion of giving protection and providing safeguards to the interests of the middle and upper class leaders. They never raised the issues of peasants or down-trodden people. Thus the community consciousness became a reality in the social and political scenario even before founding a nationwide political organization like Indian National Congress in 1880s.

The religious communities created by colonial state in India operated as power seeking pressure groups to fulfill economic and political interests of its upper class leadership. The criticism on modernity professed by the West is relevant here. The so called 'modernity' was totally failure in upholding secular nature of a state. The Hindu and Muslim upper class leadership stood in favour of British raj in its initial stage. The separatism was highly entertained by the colonial authority. The paradox of Indian Nationalism was that both nationalism and communal identities emerged and expanded in a same historical stage. The state never promises to erase traditional way of thinking and identities, constructed and popularized by its leadership. Instead it facilitated their programmes of re-fashioning tradition and reimagining history in tune with the changing interests of dominant sections of community.

The periodisation of history in the name of religion by James Mill was a form of reimagining Indian History. It was so poisonous in the politics of Indian communalism. The Hindu sectarian groups argued that the ancient India had the potential of modernity but could not achieve it because of medievalism imported into India by Islam¹⁸. The colonial historical episteme reproduced both community and community based nation in nineteenth century India. To justify the British rule in India, they projected some communities as 'problematic' and others as 'victim' of that problem. Thus the colonial modernity manufactured an 'other' to justify and sustain the communitarian imagination in the communitarian project of upper class leadership. The colonial historiography and ideology divided and defined the boundaries between majority and minority/mainstream and marginal¹⁹.

Conclusion

The community consciousness and its transformation into communal consciousness have long term impact in the politics of India. The land was divided and the independent India has to afford the burden of colonial modernity. Major section of Indian intelligentsia's agenda was shaped and designed by the trap of the

capitalism and they concentrated over the matters related to the communitarian project even after the India's independence. The presence of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru created the major challenge in materializing their communitarian project in India. The other nation, Pakistan, has been still struggling for their existence facing the contradictions from a religious state. The Indian politics changed after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru and the extremist element of cultural nationalism became more dominant in the socio-political life. The ideological implication of colonialism, thus, made a serious attack to the dream of great national leaders for a secular India.

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2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, page 6
3. Roy F. Baumeister And Mark Muraven *Journal of Adolescence* 1996, 19, 405–416
4. Edward W Said, *Orientalism*, p 40.
5. For further reading; Nicholas B Dirks, *The invention of caste: Civil society in colonial India*. In H L Seneviratne (ed), *Identity, Consciousness and the past; Forging of caste and community in India and Srilanka*, Oxford University Press, Delhi
6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Modernity and ethnicity in India: A history for the present*, EPW 30-3373-75(1995)
7. Muralidharan M, *Hindu community formation in Kerala: Process and structures under colonial modernity*, South Indian Studies 2, July-December 1996, p.238
8. For Ashis Nandy the modernity transformed pre-modern Hinduism into a homogenous faith that is antagonistic to other faiths through the agents of nationalism and state.
9. Romila Thapar, *Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity*, Modern Asian Studies 23,2(1989) p 216.
10. For further reading see, Laura Dudley Jenkins, *Identity and Identification in India; Defining the Disadvantaged* (special Indian edition) Routledge Newyork (2016)
11. Dr.P P Abdul Razak, *Colonialism and Community Formation in Malabar:A Study of Muslims of Malabar* 'unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to Calicut University 2007.
12. Ibid, p 8
13. Hunter, W.W. (1871/1969 reprint) *The Indian Muslims*, p 172
14. See Chris Bailey, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazars, North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983
15. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, p 50
16. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, 1983, pp 59-61
17. Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, p 257
18. Anirudh Deshpande, *Colonial Modernity and Historical Imagination in India* , Indian History Congress: Proceedings, 72nd session, 2011, p 1312
19. For further reading see, Suhash Chakravarty, *The Raj Syndrome: A study in imperial perceptions*, Penguin, 1991