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The Role of Government Policies in Creating Communal Divide: Contrasting the Colonial Era with the Present Times

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ABSTRACT

Indian is one of the biggest democracies with possibly the most diversified population. Thus, it becomes almost conspicuous for there to arise communalism within the subcontinent. Contrary to other nations, in India, communalism has come to be more widely associated with the state and religion than anything else. It is not a new phenomenon in India but has in fact, always been a part of the socio-economic structure of the country. However, the magnitude of the problem cannot be said to be as extreme under certain rulers as against others. The roots of the phenomenon can be traced to the ethnic and cultural diversity prevalent in the nation but predominantly to the politically charged groups with personal gains from the resulting consequences. This, although detrimental to the peaceful continuity of the nation, more often than not is espoused due to certain political ideologies which owing to the phenomenon, more often than not continue to flourish. It further also brings about a fundamental change in the ways of the country, which can be felt around in every dimension of the nation, including the social, political, and economic arena, and go on to induce complications in the intricate structure upon which our nation is built. This paper makes an attempt to analyse Indian history to bring forth these very political ideologies and their impacts on India, both before and after independence. The paper is divided into subparts the rule of the Mughals, the colonial government, and the post-independence period. Through this paper, I seek to argue and showcase the interrelatedness of the present regime to that of the past. Moreover, how under the garb of modernity, development, advancement, and so forth, the different governments always have and continue to make religion their stepping stone to establish the ideologies that best suit their interests.

Keywords: *Communalism, Ideologies, Nationalism, Colonialism, Hinduism, Violence, Islam, Partition.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Communalism, is an ideology, a belief system or inter-related assumption through which polity or societies are viewed.[2] It attempts to construct identities on religious grounds which can sometimes prove to be detrimental to the secular democratic societies of today, often leading to communal violence. The communal ideology assumes that Indian society is fundamentally divided into religious communities, whose interests not only differ but may often be opposed to each other.[3] In India, Hinduism and Islam dominate the communal sphere wherein this distinction is more stressed, specified and articulated.[4] Through a thorough analysis of Indian history, this paper deliberates to draw a parallel between India under the colonial-British government and the present regime with respect to the policies they framed that intentionally or otherwise gave birth to instances of communal tensions, thus widening the divide.

II. THE MUGHALS AND THEREAFTER

The glorious Mughal empire is deemed to have contributed immensely to the societal balance created by their policies of tolerance and recognition of merit over religion. However, the fanaticism of few later rulers such as Aurangzeb who in order to promote the tenets of his religion, demolished temples, imposed Jizya, put restrictions on Hindu educational institutions and adopted the policy of conversion among others already managed to create disharmony amongst Hindus and Muslims to some extent.

The advent of the British saw a slow but steady consolidation of the Indian subcontinent but this conquest was not devoid of rebellions, protests and uprisings against their rule. In the Revolt of 1857, when both Hindus and Mohammedans fought shoulder to shoulder, the British realized that the easiest way to rule India was to ensure that the population kept fighting amongst themselves. For a country as diverse as India, it was easy for Britishers to sow seeds of dissent amongst the citizens. They recognised the inequality of the caste system and religious structure prevalent in the country and worked it to their advantage. They came up with policies where they pitched interests of zamindars against that of the peasants and those of ryots against rajas, often instigating the parties on communal and caste lines.

III. THE BRITISH MODE OF ADMINISTRATION

Since the battle of Buxar of 1765, Bengal was under British rule. Bengal was partitioned in 1905

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[2] Chandra, Bipan. *Communalism: A primer*. Anamika Pub & Distributors, 2004.
[3] Dr. Omparkash. 2022. "Nationalism in India." Zakir Husain College, University of Delhi., https://www.shivajicollege.ac.in/sPanel/uploads/econtent/eab84aa3f9a055caa1c8a8e9efa 0edb9.pdf
[4] ibid.

by Lord Curzon citing administrative reasons, owing to the difficulty of managing its increasing population. However what came to be for administrative purposes soon became a political tool to draw a communal divide between the Hindu majority in the western part of Bengal and the

Muslim dominated East Bengal. The result was widespread political unrest in the region. Anti-British movements like the Swadeshi and Boycott movements had started taking place. The people saw through the ulterior motives of the government to create communal disharmony in the nation. However these movements were supported by mostly Hindus and not the Muslims. Most Bengalis in the western part believed that the step would make them a linguistic minority in their own province whereas many Muslims in the eastern part welcomed the partition believing it to bring development in the region. Owing to the mass protests, the partition was finally annulled in 1911 and new provinces were created on linguistic lines rather than religious ones. However the partition had already succeeded in creating a rift in the country. A separate political party called The Muslim League had been formed by the community in 1906 as against the Indian National Congress (INC).

As Indians started lobbying for more reforms, putting pressure on the British to grant them more autonomy, the government was forced to bring in new policies. However, these policies were not want of diplomacy and tact as could be seen through the enactment of the Indian Council Act of 1909 also known as the Morley-Minto Reform. The British introduced Separate electorates on the basis of religion as a part of these reforms at the same time disclaiming arguments favouring self-government while deeply embedding the thought that differences existed for those in minority.[5] Then ensued events like the communal awards (1932) and the Quadrangular Cricket Tournaments.

IV. THE HEINOUS PARTITION

The British weakness was exposed after the first world war where the British appointed unelected members of the Muslim League in place of the elected ministries of the Indian National Congress who had quit office in protest of the British declaring war against Germany on India's behalf without consulting them. The Muslim League was allowed to take advantage of this unexpected opportunity and exercise the influence and patronage which their electoral support had not earned them. Thus, when independence became inevitable the Muslim League had been strengthened enough to sustain demand for a separate homeland. The colonial project of "divide et impera" had been successful. Furthermore, the task of dividing the two countries

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[5] Jaffrelot, Christophe. "India: The politics of (re) conversion to hinduism of christian aboriginals." *Annual review of the sociology of religion* (2011): 195-215.

was assigned to a Britisher (Sir Cyril Radcliff) who drew up his maps in less than five weeks being completely ignorant of India's history, society, traditions or the essence behind its geography. Such was the haphazard partition that widespread violence was sparked. During riots, ethnic cleansings, and cross-border migrations, hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Muslims were killed.

V. THE GOVERNMENT REMODELING OF EXISTING IDEOLOGIES

Nationalist thoughts and propaganda had a Hindu tinge to it which emphasized ancient Indian culture to the exclusion of medieval Indian culture. Tilak used Ganesh puja and Shivaji festival to propagate nationalism; and the anti-partition Bengal agitation was started with dips in the Ganges. Many prominent writers including Bankim Chandra Chatterjee often referred Muslims as foreigners in their writings. The British moulded these incidents to suit their intentions by inciting the minority based Muslims. In the matter of writings, reflections and the projection of history, a distorted views were presented such as that by the British historian James Mill in early 19th century describing the ancient period of Indian history as the Hindu period and the medieval period as the Muslim period.

VI. POST INDEPENDENCE COMMUNAL UNREST

The scuttle created by the partition was lesson enough for our national leaders to realize the need to maintain harmony between different communities in a democracy as vast and diverse as ours but not for long. The state of Kashmir witnessed wide unrest with the execution of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits as well as liberal Muslims in 1989 in the quest for the demand of a separate homeland based on religious grounds. This was an indirect consequence of the faltered government policies that could neither meet the demands nor pacify the needs of the region. Similarly, the abrogation of Article 370 was a reminiscence of the British way of thoughtlessly implementing policies with non-regulated harsh measures that even snatched away basic fundamental rights of speech and expression through the banning of the internet and snapping communication lines.

Prompted by political considerations, political parties have been unable to take decisive decisions essential to maintain harmony in the long run. The landmark judgment of Shah Bano was overturned by the then central government due to uprising by the vocal sections of the community in early 1986 by passing the Muslim Women's Act. The Mandal commission report was implemented in the 1990s to grant job reservations to the SC/ST/OBC groups by the V.P. Singh government. In order to avoid the apprehended split in the Hindu vote bank, a "Rath

Yatra" was announced by the rightist President with his communal odyssey meandering from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya in UP, leaving a rash of riots in its wake. The Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 was the direct result of this campaign. Indian secularism was shaken with the rise of minority communalists and violent riots hinted with acts of terrorism. The

Gujarat-Godhra massacre, similarly, was a result of this incident.

The CAA 2019 amended the Indian Citizenship Act, specifically the provision that defines illegal migrants and their ability to apply for citizenship by naturalization (Malik 2020, 2455-2437).[6] Under the act, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Parsis, and Sikhs who had migrated from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan to India prior to 2014 were to no longer be considered illegal immigrants and could easily achieve citizenship.[7] Further, the purpose of NRC was to identify the illegal immigrants from the bonafide citizens of India and to deport them. However, both the acts particularly discriminated against Muslim refugees by leaving them out of the acts' purview. Protests erupted in the streets as opponents of the Citizenship Amendment Act branded it anti-Muslim.

VII. CONCLUSION

Similar to the British regime, the current ruling party, after coming to power in 2014, also seems to have adopted a similar strategy of divide and rule to exercise power by promoting "hindutva". Rightist ideologies leading to laws and policies like renaming of cities, beef ban, sedition laws, love jihad, hijab controversy etc. to widen the communal divide within the country. A systematic process of historical distortion has sought to perpetuate a demonised Hindu-Muslim history through school textbooks and academic treatises. The effects of British rule in India continues to impact the nation even in the 21st century. Especially with the current right wing government following the steps of colonial rule. The future bears a resemblance to our colonial past. India is on the path of becoming unrecognizable without its democracy or secularism.

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[6] Malik, Dr, and Shahnawaz Ahmed. "Future of Citizenship Laws in India With Special Reference to Implementation of NRC in Assam." *Journal of Legal Studies and Research* 6 (2020): 2455-2437. https://thelawbrigade.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Dr.-Shahnawaz-Dr.-Shaharyar-JL SR.pdf.

[7] Hausman, Gary. 2020. "Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) – Global Studies Blog". Columbia University Libraries. https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/globalstudies/2020/12/10/citizenship-amendment-act-caa-and-national-register-of-citizens-nrc/