India: Conflict with Minorities in the Conventional Political System. The Status of Muslims

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Abstract: Hindu-Muslim conflict and riots in India are enduring intergroup conflicts in south Asia, destabilizing the region for a long time. Despite having federal democracy and secular nationalism in the political system of India, the state and its various technology of power take sides with religious groups abetting the persecution of minority Muslims as religious or ethnic groups. Among the various ethnic groups and communities living in India, Muslims are among the most deprived communities in contemporary times. In the issue of minority conflict, a permanent solution in the federal system of government has become a dream. This paper analyses India's divergent political systems and state ideology and its failure and success in respective cases to counter communal and ethnic violence. We argue that, rather than focusing on the weakness of the existing political systems of India, the common failure to adequate power sharing can better explain these conflicts and successive persecution of minority Muslims.

Keywords: Minority, Conflict, India, Political System, Muslim, Community.

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Introduction

Regarding intergroup violence within the national territory, India is a very complex case drawing the enormous attention of academics to study and analyze. India possesses enormous multiplicity in terms of ethnic and religious diversity, creating much tension across the groups and leading to enduring hostilities. In our current time, communal and ethnic violence between Hindus and Muslims in India has become an issue of global and regional discussion, which makes them exciting subjects to compare and contrast.

We will analyze the situation in neighboring Myanmar better to understand the situation of India's Muslim minority. Amid the overwhelming overlapping of religious and other ethnic elements, conflict in Myanmar occurs on the line of cultural and ethnic categories; similarly, India experiences religious and ethnic identity as a dominant demarcating line for constituting violence. There are numerous similarities and parallels between these two cases regarding context, history, and group characteristics; especially one significant similarity is that both oppressed groups in their respective cases are Muslims. In Myanmar, Rohingya are one of the minor minority groups, and their sufferings are disproportionately large in terms of substantial external displacement and disproportionate killing relative to their demography (Kipgen, 2014). In India, in terms of the number of casualties and several incidences of communal violence, Muslim suffering surpasses all other religious groups (Majid, 2020). While the political systems of these two countries are different, they are both not only non-functioning but rather ill-functioning and flawed as far as communal or ethnic violence is concerned, which contributes to, sometimes shapes, and ignites hostilities in the respective countries.

In this article, we would like to analyze India's divergent political systems and state ideology and its failure and success in respective cases to counter communal and ethnic violence. In this regard, our quest will be to understand, despite the democratic system and secular state ideology, why India failed to contain communal violence. Is it the problem in the nature of the system or due to inadequacy in the development of the system? Is the system immature or inherently flawed?

Literature Review

In the case of India, the regularity in the literature regarding communal violence bears enormous diversity both at the level of issues and causes. Literature that is relevant to our analysis could be divided into two categories. Some relevant literature ascribes the reason for communal violence to the complex material and immaterial social and political reality and denies any single cause to be the dominant factor for this hostility. So, their approach is a case-by-case analysis of riots and figuring out the reason in that existing context. In this type of literature, historians and political scientists, such as Basu (1995), Brass (1998), Ludden (1996), Raychaudhuri (2000), Heehs (1996), and

Thapar (1989) examined specific cases. They crystallized the complex structural and material bases of communal conflict.

On the other hand, some literature tried to figure out specific and dominant causes that might explain the communal conflict across India, in general. In this type of literature, some tried to use the Rational Choice Theory, ascribing different incentives regarding power and resources as the primal cause of conflict. Steven Wilkinson (2006) and Anjan Bose (2009) identify electoral incentives as a significant cause of communal violence. In some other literature, Khaliq Hasan (1982) stressed the economic completion and resultant discord as the most interpretative single variable behind the ethnic conflict. Apart from the Rational Choice Theory, some authors, such as Baber (2004), emphasize that the racialization process consummated through history was the principal cause, while others, like Beteille (1994), Engineer (1989), Ganguly (1996), and Tambiah (1997) focused on the identity consciousness crystallized in the colonial and post-colonial period. Besides, some other literature, like Ashish Nandy (1997) and Madan (1987), focused on the state institutions and claimed their weakness as a fundamental reason.

An analysis of this category of the literature shows that no literature attempts to analyze Muslims as a distinct ethnic entity and make a case study. Why has India failed to control ethnic or communal violence despite being a federal system of government and a secular state? Whether the Indian state, with its existing political system and state ideology, is capable or will be capable of solving this problem is not dealt with much considering its long history of failure.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study will use qualitative case study methodology with the different theoretical frameworks needed to understand different aspects of the conflict. In our analysis, conflict mapping frameworks generated by Shay Bright (2001) will be used to an extent. In understanding genealogical similarities and dissimilarities, colonial history will be examined. The issue of comparative political institutions and their success or failures in their respective context will be examined using a qualitative framework. At the same time, some discourse analysis framework will be used to understand the underlying causes of failure or success. In this regard, the theory of nationalism by Anderson (1983) and the nature of Indian secularism articulated by Ashish Nandy (1997) will be used.

The biggest challenge facing Muslims in India at present is the Citizenship Act. Through the National Register of Citizens (NRC) Act, the current government of India decriminalized a large section of Muslims in the state of Assam (Saberin, 2017). Many Bengali Muslims in Assam live in anxiety and fear and are deprived of their fundamental rights. Muslims face similar problems in Myanmar regarding structural discrimination; apparently, Muslims in India and Rohingya in Rakhine are on equal footing. Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar were coercively stripped of citizenship through the citizenship

law in 1982. Questions remain as to whether the Indian government has taken inspiration from neighboring Myanmar for its de-citizenship approach. Since 1947, there have been many riots in India among the Hindu Muslim community, which have been accused of incitement by Indian state institutions.

Similarly, Myanmar's state apparatus was directly involved in suppressing the Rohingyas of Arakan (Mahmudul, 2017). Besides, due to ethnic conflict in Rakhine, Rohingya are faced with large-scale expulsion and ethnic cleansing attempts in their habitat (Wade, 2017); in terms of absolute condition, Muslims are not better off in India compared with the Rohingya plight. If we look at them in their respective national boundary, Muslims in India and Rohingya in Myanmar are on an equal footing.

Muslims in India face policies regarding their economic, social, and political participation; Indian Muslims are the worst-off groups in Indian societies. In fact, Muslims are faced with a coercive policy with systemic deprivation of jobs, education, and health, resulting in being the most marginalized and impoverished group. Muslims are the poorest of all religious groups in India, with 32 rupees daily income, which is even worse than the income of a person of a scheduled caste group (Basant, 2007). Muslims' proportionate participation in a government job in terms of demographic ratio is also the poorest. Even in terms of education, they are the least advantaged group in India. According to the Government of India (2014), while Muslims comprise 14% of the total population, their enrollment in a Government job is 3.45%, and in higher education, 4.4%. If we consider the riots and casualties, Muslims are the most affected groups in India. According to the Minority Commission Report 2013, the average loss of life of Muslims in Hindu-Muslim riots is markedly higher than in communal conflict with other sets of identity groups (Graff & Galonnier, 2013).

History and Sources of Conflict:
Divisive Identity Constructions in Colonial Time

Sources of conflict can be traced back in India to the colonial period when the country was colonized between the 18th and 19th centuries. A similar picture can be found in the case of Myanmar, where the conflict started during the colonial period. Tony Ballantyn (2001) shows that, before colonial rule, communal violence in India or ethnic violence in Myanmar did not exist. So, the origin of the conflict is deeply rooted in how the British ruled these two countries using divide and rule policy and crystalizing identity consciousness. The British tried to heighten communal consciousness and gave credence to many stereotyped notions. They emphasized medieval division in Indian and Burmese society in order to lay the foundation for the unifying and centralizing impact of British rule and prevent any unifying claim from natives (Hasan, 1982). Tony Ballantyn (2001) documented how orientalists in British colonial rule of South Asia tried to conjure up the idea of the original race, namely Aryan vs Arab or Burmans vs

Indians, contributing to differing communal consciousness in both India and Myanmar. Apart from race, the British divided society into religious categories and discriminated based on it.

Before the advent of the British, Muslims were the ruling class, and British colonizers stripped Muslims of their status quo position and empowered the Hindu community (Ahmed, 1981). The Muslim community was marginalized economically and socially, but on the other hand, the Hindus were economically powerful enough to create an imbalance in society. The Hindu community tried to influence the Muslims in various ways by being allies of the ruling class, which was one of the causes of communal conflict. Communal riots that started in colonial times have become a daily occurrence in India today, where the Muslim community is suffering the most victims.

Similarly, in Myanmar, the British divided the country through ethnic categories. They deprived and divested the majority ethnic group of their power and status and replaced it with minority groups. Nevertheless, when the British left Myanmar, they gave power to the majority Burman who had been discriminated against by another competing minority group. After this transition, grievances created in the colonial period and the power gap in the nation produced fertile ground for ethnic conflict.

The Transition of Power and Sustenance of Animosity

India experienced a complex process of divide-and-rule policy and devolution of power. In India, the division was perpetrated based on religion, and the majority of Hindus were empowered. After the departure of the British, the power remained in the hand of Hindus as they were a majority. Basically, as a result of this, there was a terrible conflict in India. Especially when India and Pakistan were partitioned in 1947 based on religious identity, great communal riots took place across India, with more than 100.000 casualties in both cases (Talbot, 1995). The same happened to the Muslims of Myanmar, where minority ethnic groups were empowered against the majority of Burman, and division was accomplished based on ethnic track. However, they handed power to the majority of Burman when they left. As a result, significant riots also took place in the 40s, a decade of transition for both countries. In 1942, a great massacre occurred in Rakhine state, where the Rakhine ethnic group killed 100.000 Rohingya (Wade, 2017).

From the above discussion, it is clear that the British divide-and-rule policy in colonial times initiated and developed antagonistic identity consciousness in both countries; the transition process and concurrent bloody incidences created a permanent mark on the animosity. Although the experiences of other colonial regions in Asia are almost similar, the colonial lesson marks have not yet completely dried up. In both cases, Muslims were adversely affected, but the suffering is more due to a large number of Muslims in India than Rakhine's Muslim population.

Sides and Opponents in the Conflict: Factors and Procedural Mechanism

In some states, security forces are not primarily involved in the conflicts but should be regarded as intervening parties. Sometimes they are found complicit with the mob, and sometimes they are found blind and other times, they successfully stop the conflict. The primary parties in conflict in India are Hindu and Muslim, two religious communities as secondary parties, much like Myanmar, political parties, religious groups, and authority from both sides' functions. Third parties, domestic and international media, Indian civil society, and intellectuals are active and interested. However, the overall situation of all the provinces of India shows that security forces mostly failed to take a neutral stance at the time of the Riots. Some key findings are frustrating to scrutinize national commission reports done in a different period. Commission reports in different periods identify that Police are biased and prejudiced in handling riots. The Report of the Srikrishna Commission (1998) accuses the Mumbai police of 'built-in bias' against Muslims (Sabrang, nd.). The Report of Srikrishna Commission (1998) described Police as highly communalized and sometimes actively participated in the riots.

The same picture is noticeable in the case of Myanmar, where Rakhine and Rohingya, two religious and ethnic groups, are the primary parties. At the same time, Myanmar security forces also play a primary role in the conflict (HRW, 2013). As secondary parties, Rakhine political parties, Rakhine monks, and local Buddhist authorities, on the one side, and the Rohingya diaspora, on the other, play their roles on their respective sides. As tertiary parties, domestic media, and international media, regional countries like China and India, and international NGOs and UN intuitions are active. In the case of Myanmar, security forces or the army is involved in killing, burning houses and flagrant human rights abuses as part of military regimes' strategy of divide and rule (HRW, 2017). Burmese army forces, locally called *Tatmadaw*, are actively conducting an ethnic cleansing mission in Rakhine state (Zarni & Cowley, 2014). So, putting the two events side by side in the same table, we can clearly understand that the Indian and Myanmar security forces are involved in persecuting minorities.

Politically, Muslims in India and Myanmar are facing similar problems. The role of political parties in India is more central than in Myanmar, as it is a multi-party democratic country. However, the political parties in Rakhine mainly work as a puppet of the regime and are thus highly involved in the riots. However, Political parties in India is central as the army in Myanmar. In several cases, political parties in India are found to conspire, plan and implement communal violence (Wilkinson, 2006, Hasan, 1982). Though all political parties are not complicit in it, the pernicious role of some political parties while the silence of others proves to be vital behind the communal violence in different studies. According to the study of Corbridge *et al*. (2005), right-wing political parties directly inspire communal violence, while secular parties do it indirectly.

Contemporary Conflict Context: Rise of Religious Nationalism

Among various ingredients that have contributed to creating the current hostile situation for Muslims in India, one significant element is the rise of religious nationalism. The rise of religious nationalism is deeply rooted in the politics of elites in India. How this rise of religious nationalism has left the Muslim group in the most hostile situation must be described. In India's rise of Hindu nationalism based on Hindutva ideology, an exclusivist explanation of Hinduism relates to the political process. The ruling party in India, BJP, came to power playing the card of religious nationalism. If we consider the discourse of Hindutva, and the most active group, RSS, Islam is portrayed as non-Indian religion, and Muslims are deemed aliens and invaders. Surprisingly, they do not portray Christianity as foreign religion as they claimed it did not expand in India through coercion. However, the sword brought Islam to India (Bose, 2009).

The same incident has been repeated in the case of Myanmar's Rohingyas. Among the factors that have contributed to the current context of hostilities, a significant factor is the rise of religious nationalism. In Myanmar, after 1988, the previous military Government stepped down due to protests. A new junta took power which emphasized Buddhist identity rather than Burman identity to diminish ethnic conflict in on hand and attract limited foreign investment. However, this policy and its empowerment of Buddhist monks and eulogizing Buddhism as a national identity gave rise to radical religious nationalism. So, the rise of religious nationalism is intricately related to the state policy of Myanmar. In this Buddhist nationalism, Muslims are portrayed as others and invaders.

The above discussion shows the dire plight of Muslims in both countries with an ocean of disparities. Here, the similarities in the historical process of identification, the hostile role of the state, and the rise of religious nationalism can account for such devastating situations faced by these two communities. In both cases rise of religious nationalism, and its politicization with their hostile narratives showed striking similarities behind the sorrowful plight of these two groups.

Functioning Democracy & Well-Functioning Autocracy: A Story of Birds of a Same Feather

In India, religious identity is politicized because it is politically helpful to achieve power. The democratic system that remains there, in fact, helps with this politicization. So, the existing political system has assisted and inspired the emergence of Hindu nationalist political parties that can come to power by politicizing religious identity (Bose, 2009).

This politicization of identity through a democratic system in India will be more evident if we look at the relationship between election time and communal violence. It

is shown by Steven Wilkinson (2006) that there is a high electoral incentive to ignite communal violence. Thus, it occurs in the electoral period or when right-wing political parties feel jeopardized. Through communal violence, they polarized the voters and won the election. In their studies, Iyer and Srivastava (2015) show that riots occurring in the year preceding an election increase the vote share of the Bharatiya Janata Party by 5 to 7 percent. However, that does not mean that secular political parties like the Congress party, the leading oppositional political party in the current parliament, are immune to this process. According to Khaleq Hasan (1982), not only BJP make alliances with communal organizations, but instead Congress party also, from time to time, did compromise its secular ideology. Kothari (1988) argues that the Communal face of Indian democracy "is not an aberration but something that is part of the system, a direct outcome of its inherent logic".

The flaw in the Indian democracy becomes more apparent if we consider that this right-wing political party, BJP came to power not the reason that the majority support them; rather, the majority of the voters are divided, and a substantial minority are mobilized and made united based on the politicization of identity (Nandy, 1996). It would be apparent if the current BJP came to power based on 31% of total voters. So, the Indian democracy is ill-functioning and thus deeply flawed at two levels. First, it encourages the politicization of religious identity (Bose, 2009), and second, a vote of a minority of the population is enough to come to power exploiting different identity groups' compliance to their political parties.

While in Myanmar, the politicization of identity is done by the state through its imposed policies, in India it is done through the political process. From the discussion, it is evident that identity politicization has enough space in both systems, and both systems are complicit in conflict, either directly or indirectly. Despite some differences in the political systems of these two countries, that both countries have failed miserably to counter adverse violent situations is puzzling. So, the question is why the Indian political system, which is democratic, and its state ideology, secularism, failed to counter communal violence. Our answer to this question is that both the political process and state ideology are not only failed but also flawed. We can say they are non-functioning and ill-functioning in containing diversity and multiplicity.

Secular Nationalism in India: Exclusivist Ideology in Disguise

Indian democratic failure to contain diversity is intricately related to its secular state ideology, which is exclusivist as the Buddhist ideology in Myanmar though. We stipulate that Indian secular nationalism and its imagined community are exclusivists in nature (Anderson, 1983). To understand that, we must understand the role of religion in Indian society, which differs from that of European society (Nandy, 1996).

Ashish Nandy (1996) shows that the prime mistake that is accomplished in the first place is assuming Indian and European reality as similar. In fact, Unlike in Europe, there was no competing relation between religion and politics in Indian history, and the role of religion is always public in Indian society. So, banning religion in the public sphere and making it an issue of the private realm results in the return of majority religion in the public sphere and the alienation and exclusion of minority religions. As banning religion in the public sphere is incompatible with societal aspiration, the majority's aspiration is reflected in the electoral process, while minority groups' aspiration gets excluded both through the electoral process and through the legal process. However, rather than secular ideology, if the state allowed religion in the public sphere, there might arise a possibility of learning to coexist as it did in the precolonial period. In fact, by restricting religion in the private sphere, India halted the possibility of communicative action between different religious groups, as articulated by Habermas (1984).

Conclusion

The current federal system in India has failed to solve the problem, as within this system, communal violence can easily breed and multiply. In the issue of minority conflict, a permanent solution in the federal system of government has become a dream. So, it is necessary first to establish a consociation system where every religious group will be empowered. Power sharing aims to bring about a religious multi-culturalism instead of secularism. Without proper power sharing, state secularism or mere electoral democracy cannot solve the conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India.

Along with administrative and political reforms, it is also essential to take appropriate steps to establish communal harmony; in this regard, political, social and religious leaders should play a key role. In the case of Myanmar, we can similarly say that installing electoral democracy instead of the current military autocracy might not change the situation unless various ethnic groups were awarded their fair share of power in the political system. Otherwise, electoral democracy will only lead to majoritarianism, as we are currently experiencing in India.

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