

## COMMUNALISM: CHALLENGING SECULARISM AND UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

---

**Udisha Barolia\***

### INTRODUCTION

Communalism thrives on the fundamentalist notion that "only one's own belief is true" while considering "others as incomplete or untrue".<sup>1</sup> However, India, as a democratic and secular country, cherishes the principles of tolerance and acceptance, which contradict the foundations of communalism. Sadly, India has witnessed several instances of communal violence, fueled by factors like colonial-era policies, the spread of rumors, socioeconomic disparities, minority-majority divides, poverty, and lack of education.

To counteract communalism and preserve peace and harmony in a nation as diverse as India, it is imperative to adhere to secularism. The essence of secularism lies in separating state and religion, with the state focusing on mediating conflicts between individuals rather than involving matters between people and their gods. By embracing secularism, India can nurture an environment that respects the coexistence of various religions, cultures, and languages. It fosters social cohesion, ensures equal treatment, and upholds the values of diversity and inclusivity. Secularism acts as a unifying force, enabling India to celebrate its religious pluralism and protect the rights and freedoms of all citizens. By promoting mutual respect, understanding, and equality, India can overcome communalism's divisive tendencies and foster an atmosphere of peace, harmony, and national unity<sup>2</sup>

### METHODOLOGY

The paper is descriptive and the research is based on secondary sources for the analysis of how communalism challenges secularism and undermines the core values of democracy in a welfare state. secondary sources such as articles, research papers of other students, newspapers, and webpages.

---

\*BA LLB, SECOND YEAR, UNIVERSITY OF ALLAHABAD.

<sup>1</sup> Insights / communalism ,meaning and issues / [www.insightsonindia.com](http://www.insightsonindia.com) /november 7 ,2014 / <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2014/11/07/communalism-meaning-and-issues/>

<sup>2</sup> Unacademy/communalism/unacademy.com/ <https://unacademy.com/content/karnataka-psc/study-material/polity/communalism/>

## THE OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH PAPER

This research paper aims to elucidate the concept of communalism and explore how secularism can effectively control it. Furthermore, it examines the significance of maintaining secularism in a diverse country like India to uphold democratic principles and ensure harmonious coexistence.

## WHAT IS COMMUNALISM?

"Communalism is a poison that threatens the secular fabric of our nation. We must strive for harmony and unity among all communities, for that is the true essence of our democracy."

- Jawaharlal Nehru.

Defining communalism, In simple terms it is when people are divided based on their ethnicity or religion leading to violence and social disharmony in the nation. It was During the British colonial rule, India witnessed a surge in communalism as a direct consequence of the policies that were implemented by the Britishers.<sup>3</sup>

These policies not only caused divisions based on ethnicity and religion but also widened the socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor, further exacerbating the tensions within society. Its roots are in the partition of Bengal in 1905, and features of a separate electorate for Hindus and Muslims in the Government of India Act 1909. The British introduced several policies, one of the most famous, the policy of "divide and rule" was implemented that exploited existing fault lines, pitting different communities against each other.<sup>4</sup>

By favoring certain groups and implementing divisive strategies, they sowed the seeds of communal disharmony, leading to violence and discord among the people of the nation.

Furthermore, the colonial economic policies exacerbated the socioeconomic differences in India. The exploitative economic policies implemented by the British resulted in the concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of a privileged few, while the majority of the population perished in poverty. According to Asghar Ali Engineer "Fundamentalism has its roots in Jawaharlal Nehru's mechanics of education and science being less effective than

---

<sup>3</sup> lawyered /Importance of secularism in a democracy /[www.lawyered.in](http://www.lawyered.in) / June 24,2022/  
<https://www.lawyered.in/legal-disrupt/articles/importance-secularism-democracy/>

<sup>4</sup> Insights / communalism ,meaning and issues / [www.insightsonindia.com](http://www.insightsonindia.com) /november 7 ,2014 /  
<https://www.insightsonindia.com/2014/11/07/communalism-meaning-and-issues/>

he wanted them to be. Firstly, the partition deeply wounded the Hindu psyche. Secondly, the resurgence of Hindu-Muslim economic competition fuelled a communal ideology. Third, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), formed by Hedgewar in 1925 began to flourish. Since then, a systematic process of historical distortion has sought to perpetuate a demonized Hindu-Muslim history through school textbooks and academic treatises."<sup>5</sup>

One of the most prominent factors for the growth of communalism was Rumors, often fueled by the media, which significantly contributed to nearly every major communal riot. Many vernacular newspapers, due to their proximity to the source, propagate rumors under the guise of "news."

Understanding this legacy is crucial for addressing the lingering effects of communalism and striving toward a more equitable and harmonious society.

## FEATURES OF COMMUNALISM

The following can be stated as the key characteristics of communalism:

**Ideological Concept:** Communalism is an ideology that guides people's beliefs and actions.

**Orthodoxy:** It is rooted in orthodox principles, often adhering strictly to traditional religious doctrines.

**Intolerance:** Communalism promotes an atmosphere of intolerance, breeding animosity towards other religions.

**Sense of Superiority and Unity:** Communalism fosters a belief in the superiority of one's religion over others and it asserts that followers of the same religious group share the same political, economic, and social interests that are distinct from other communities.

**Extremist Tactics:** Communalism resorts to extreme methods like riots, affrays, violence, acid attacks, and arson, causing harm and using harmful substances to promote its divisive agenda.

---

<sup>5</sup> Hindustan time / factors responsible for growth of communalism / february 11 , 2004  
/hindustantimes.com/<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/factors-responsible-for-the-growth-of-communalism/story-vf3JoUr2TLd2qxXlxkjuBP.html>

**Incompatibility and Hostility:** It views followers of other religions as entirely incompatible, antagonistic, and hostile. They also believe in the termination of members of varied groups or sects.

**Separate Identity for Promotion:** Communalism advocates maintaining a separate identity to promote the specific interests of a particular community and it places communities interests over national interests.

**Religious Identity over Citizenship:** Communalism regards citizens not as individuals but as members of particular religious communities.

**Abuse of Power:** Communalism often leads to the abuse of power by those who exploit communal identities for their gain such as political parties and religious entities.<sup>6</sup>

**Exploitation by Elites:** Opportunistic political and economic interests within political parties often manipulate communal identities, exploiting the poorer sections of their religious community.

## TYPES OF COMMUNALISM

**1: Economic Communalism:**<sup>7</sup> That is when different communities are formed due to the socioeconomic gap. It is also when one community is given more preference over other minority communities in several economic activities such as employment, resources, and policies, as in regressive taxation where weaker sections of society are charged more in comparison to the richer section of the society.

It contributes to several issues such as:

Division and polarization: the gap created by the state by giving preference to a certain community leads to division and conflict among communities often leading to polarization of the minority community.

---

<sup>6</sup> Gk today/communalism definition types and charecteristics /[www.gktoday.in/6 december 2017/](http://www.gktoday.in/6-december-2017/)  
<https://www.gktoday.in/communalism-definitions-types-characteristics/>

<sup>7</sup>Ms. Shruti Khandelwal and Sparsh aggarwal/communalism in secular india : threat to minorities  
[www.legalserviceindia.com/https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1970-communalism-in-secular-india-threat-to-minorities.html](http://www.legalserviceindia.com/https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1970-communalism-in-secular-india-threat-to-minorities.html)

Limited growth: due to the collection of resources being accumulated by a limited portion of society there is only limited growth also increasing fragmentation and marginalization of communities.

## **2: Political communalism** <sup>8</sup>

Political communalism involves the exploitation of communal divisions and sentiments to mobilize support and consolidate political power for example when a political party uses rhetoric signs and symbols to target a specific religious group and create a sense of unity and solidarity for political gain.

### **This contributes to several issues, such as:**

Vote bank politics: Formation of different communities leading to politics in an election where one party is given more preference than the other due to the community the leaders belong to or the communal agenda they are propagating this also leads to under-representation and discrimination of minority sects.

Change in ideology: Due to political parties using the communal card leads to division and fragmentation in society which leads to a change in the ideologies of people and now people see everything through the colored lens of communalism and not as a secular entity.

## **3: Religion communalism** <sup>9</sup>

Communalism based on religion is when people belonging to a certain religious group are given more preference or when the religious sentiments of the people are manipulated to seek political or social gain. This form of communalism often manifests in the context of interreligious tensions, where individuals or groups prioritize their religious community over others and seek to assert dominance.

### **It contributes to several issues such as:**

---

<sup>8</sup> Ms. Shruti Khandelwal and Sparsh aggarwal/communalism in secular india : threat to minorities  
[/www.legalserviceindia.com/https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1970-communalism-in-secular-india-threat-to-minorities.html](https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1970-communalism-in-secular-india-threat-to-minorities.html)

<sup>9</sup> Ms. Shruti Khandelwal and Sparsh aggarwal/communalism in secular india : threat to minorities  
[/www.legalserviceindia.com/https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1970-communalism-in-secular-india-threat-to-minorities.html](https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1970-communalism-in-secular-india-threat-to-minorities.html)

Division and conflict: Due to the preferential treatment of one religious group over other minorities divisions and conflicts happen within the social groups. This also leads to fragmentation and polarization of minority communities

Inequality and hate crimes: When one religious group is given preferential treatment over the other minority groups it leads to hate crimes where acts are committed solely based on religion, the inequality broadens the gap and leads to various forms of crimes.

**Communalism has historically been a catalyst for riots, triggering social unrest and conflict in the past. Examples are :**

**Partition of India, 1947:** The partition of India in 1947 resulted in the forced displacement of millions of people on both sides of the border. Mass killings, rapes, and orphaned children plagued Hindus in Pakistan and Muslims in India. Hatred prevailed, and violence unleashed a relentless cycle of bloodshed. The rehabilitation of refugees emerged as an immense challenge for independent India.

**Anti-Sikh riots, 1984:** One of India's most brutal incidents, the anti-Sikh riots, witnessed the massacre of numerous Sikhs by anti-Sikh mobs. The violence was a response to the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard, triggered by her actions authorizing a military operation.

**Ethnic Cleansing of Kashmiri Hindu Pandits in 1989:** Kashmir, known as India's paradise, once reflected love, peace, and harmony among Hindus, Muslims, and other communities. However, extremist Islamic terrorism shattered this brotherhood, leading to mass killings and the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. They became refugees in their own country. Communal violence has since gripped the valley, hindering its development and perpetuating ongoing unrest.

**Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya, 1992:** Ayodhya, revered as Lord Rama's birthplace, holds great significance for Hindus. In medieval times, Mughal general Mir Baqi constructed a mosque there named after Mughal ruler Babur. Disputes and riots persisted, but in 1990, intensified protests by Hindu religious groups attracted numerous "kar sevaks" from across India, advocating for the demolition of Babri Masjid and the construction of a Ram temple. This movement resulted in substantial bloodshed, leaving the matter embroiled in a long-standing dispute.

**The Godhra incident in 2002 and subsequent violence:** The Godhra incident in 2002, where a fire engulfed coaches of the Sabarmati Express carrying "kar sevaks" returning from Ayodhya, was followed by extensive communal violence in Gujarat. The violence, marked by merciless killings, became a dark chapter in Gujarat's history and the nation as a whole. Hindu and Muslim communities became antagonistic towards each other. The pursuit of justice continues in the Supreme Court, offering hope for resolution through the Indian judiciary.

**Assam communal violence, 2012:** The northeastern states, renowned for their tribal populations and ethnic diversity, experienced significant clashes due to the demographic changes resulting from large-scale Bangladeshi immigration. In 2012, ethnic tensions between Bodos (tribal Christians and Hindus) and Muslims escalated into riots in Kokrajhar. Unidentified miscreants killed four Bodo youths in Joypur, exacerbating the existing conflict.

**Muzaffarnagar violence, 2013:** The exact cause of the ethnic clash between the Jat and Muslim communities in Muzaffarnagar remains disputed and has multiple versions. Some attribute it to suspicious social media posts, while others mention an incident of eve teasing in Shamli. Regardless of the reasons, what matters is the immense loss of human resources and peace experienced by the country.<sup>10</sup>

### LEGISLATIVE MEASURES TO PREVENT COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

The Indian law defines communal violence as, "any act or series of acts, whether spontaneous or planned, resulting in injury or harm to the person and or property, knowingly directed against any person by his or her membership of any religious or linguistic minority, in any State in the Union of India, or Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes within the meaning of clauses (24) and (25) of Article 366 of the Constitution of India"<sup>11</sup>

The Nanavati-Mehta Commission, established by the Gujarat government in 2002, aimed to investigate the Gujarat violence. The Sachar Committee, appointed in 2005, proposed the establishment of an Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) in 2010.<sup>12</sup>The EOC was intended

<sup>10</sup> Insights / communalism ,meaning and issues / [www.insightsonindia.com](http://www.insightsonindia.com) /november 7 ,2014 / <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2014/11/07/communalism-meaning-and-issues/>

<sup>11</sup> Insights / communalism ,meaning and issues / [www.insightsonindia.com](http://www.insightsonindia.com) /november 7 ,2014 / <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2014/11/07/communalism-meaning-and-issues/>

<sup>12</sup> Insights / communalism ,meaning and issues / [www.insightsonindia.com](http://www.insightsonindia.com) /november 7 ,2014 / <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2014/11/07/communalism-meaning-and-issues/>



to address individual cases of discrimination based on religion, caste, gender, physical ability, and other factors through a grievance redressal mechanism.

The Indian government tasked the Ranganath Misra Commission to suggest practical measures for the upliftment of socially and economically backward sections among religious and linguistic minorities. The commission's report recommended reserving 10% of central and state government jobs for Muslims and 5% for other minority groups across all ranks and grades.

The "Prevention of Communal and Targeted Violence (Access to Justice and Reparations) Bill, 2011" lapsed in parliament. This bill proposed the establishment of a National Authority for communal harmony, justice, and reparations, comprising seven members. It sought to protect minority sections and ensure the accountability of district administrations, aligning with recommendations made by the Sachar Committee and Ranganath Misra Commission.<sup>13</sup>

These committees aim to identify the causes of minority backwardness and suggest steps to improve their conditions. However, despite the prevalence of communal violence in India, there is currently no comprehensive legislation to punish those responsible for such violence. There is a lack of clear policies for the relief and rehabilitation of victims, inadequate regulations for witness protection, and insufficient mechanisms for holding public servants accountable.

### **SECULARISM: A CRUCIAL PILLAR FOR SUSTAINING HARMONY AND SOCIAL COHESION**

The Indian constitution mandates that the State does not discriminate based on religion, as India is a diverse nation with people following various religions like Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, and Islam. The Constitution upholds religious tolerance and ensures fundamental rights for citizens, including the freedom to practice, propagate, and manage their religious affairs. It explicitly prohibits the imposition of taxes for the promotion of any particular religion or denomination.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Insights / communalism ,meaning and issues / [www.insightsonindia.com](http://www.insightsonindia.com) /november 7 ,2014 / <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2014/11/07/communalism-meaning-and-issues/>

<sup>14</sup> Neera Chandhoke/Why secularism is central to a democratic nation (and India is no exception)/www.scroll.in/Dec 17, 2019 07:30 /<https://scroll.in/article/946954/why-secularism-is-central-to-a-democratic-nation-and-india-is-no-exception>



Recent statements by outgoing President Hamid Ansari and Vice-President M. Venkaiah Naidu reaffirm the tolerant and inclusive nature of Indian society, emphasizing that minorities have received prominent positions and constitutional responsibilities without discrimination. The separation of religion from the State is crucial in a secular country like India, as highlighted by the Supreme Court in the case of Ahmedabad St Xavier Society College vs. the State of Gujarat.<sup>15</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi, in his article in Harijan in 1947, expressed that "religion should not determine nationality and should remain a personal matter, detached from politics and governance."

Secularism is derived from the cultural principle of tolerance and ensures the equality of religions. The cultural principle is referred to as "sarva dharma sambhava"<sup>16</sup> Secularism wasn't part of the constitution until the 1970s, it was through the 42nd Amendment act in 1976 that secularism was added to the preamble and was declared part of the basic structure under the Kesavananda Bharati case.

In simple terms, it means that the state solely governs the relationship among people and the relationship between people and the state not the relationship between god and people. It is akin to the Vedic concept "Dharma Nirapekshata" which means the state is indifferent to the religion. All in all, it tries to promote the doctrine of separation of state from religion.<sup>17</sup>

It was difficult for the leaders to unify a nation so diverse and culturally variant without secularism. Variety of communities ranging from, Tamils in the south to the Kashmiris in the north, to the Manipuri and Bengalis in the east, to the Rajasthanis living in the west where each of these groups spoke different languages, practiced faith differently, and adhered to different cultural norms to unify them and provide them with equal opportunities and status they must be seen as individuals separate from the ethnicity or religion they belong to or the god they worshiped. That is why secularism was accepted as an intricate part of the constitution as it unified and consolidated the growing nation.

---

<sup>15</sup> HRUDAYA BAIHAV DAS /comunalism:india hs enough legal safeguards /the pioneer /7 september 2017 <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2017/state-editions/comunalism-india-has-enough-legal-safeguards.html>

<sup>16</sup> Neera Chandhoke/Why secularism is central to a democratic nation (and India is no exception)/www.scroll.in/Dec 17, 2019 07:30 /<https://scroll.in/article/946954/why-secularism-is-central-to-a-democratic-nation-and-india-is-no-exception>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.lawyered.in/legal-disrupt/articles/importance-secularism-democracy/>

In the case of Sr Bommai "The Supreme Court while adjudicating that a State Government cannot follow a particular religion discussed at length the concept of Secularism. The Court held that "Secularism is one of the basic features of the Constitution. Secularism is a positive concept of equal treatment of all religions. This attitude is described by some as one of neutrality towards religion or as one of benevolent neutrality. While freedom of religion is guaranteed to all persons in India, from the point of view of the State, the religion, faith, or belief of a person is immaterial. To the state, all are equal and are entitled to be treated equally. In matters of State, religion has no place. And if the Constitution requires the State to be secular in thought and action, the same requirement attaches to political parties as well. The Constitution does not recognize, it does not permit, mixing religion and State power. Both must be kept apart. That is the constitutional injunction. None can say otherwise so long as this Constitution governs this country. Politics and religion cannot be mixed. Any State government which pursues nonsecular policies or non-secular course of action acts contrary to the constitutional mandate and renders itself amenable to action under Article 356"<sup>18</sup>

Secularism promotes equality and non-discrimination, ensuring that no religion receives preferential treatment or is imposed upon others. This principle fosters an inclusive society where individuals from different religious backgrounds can freely express their faith without fear of marginalization or persecution. By emphasizing the principles of tolerance, understanding, and respect for diverse beliefs, secularism helps to bridge religious divides. It discourages the exploitation of religious sentiments for political gains and prevents the manipulation of religious differences to incite communal tensions. It encourages a focus on common values, shared goals, and collective welfare, rather than highlighting religious differences. It creates an environment where citizens can collaborate, exchange ideas, and work toward the betterment of society as a whole.

Secularism provides a safeguard against the dominance of any particular religious group and ensures that the rights and freedoms of all individuals are protected. It upholds the principle of religious freedom, allowing individuals to practice their faith without interference or coercion. By nurturing an atmosphere of inclusivity, respect, and equal opportunity, secularism acts as a preventive measure against communalism. It promotes peaceful

---

<sup>18</sup> HRUDAYA BALLAV DAS /comunalism:india hs enough legal safeguards /the pioneer /7 september 2017 /dailypioneer.com/<https://www.dailypioneer.com/2017/state-editions/communalism-india-has-enough-legal-safeguards.html>

coexistence, social cohesion, and mutual understanding among diverse communities, fostering a society where differences are celebrated and unity prevails

Furthermore, India is a democratic state; communalism acts as a deterrent or concept against the very being of the nation therefore and secularism serves as a safeguard for democratic principles such as freedom of speech, expression, and assembly. It prevents the dominance of one religious group over others and ensures that government policies and laws are based on rational and democratic considerations rather than religious dogma.

## SUGGESTIONS <sup>19</sup>

**Media Control:** It is essential to regulate the media to prevent the dissemination of rumors or misinformation that may incite violence or promote hatred between communities. Media outlets should prioritize reporting factual information and avoid sensationalizing or distorting situations.

**Legislation on Forced Conversions:** Enacting laws against forced conversions is crucial to safeguard individuals' rights and prevent conversions without their informed consent. Such legislation should ensure that individuals have a comprehensive understanding of the consequences before making any decisions about their faith.

**Inter-Religion Marriages:** Inter-religion marriages should be facilitated through the Special Marriage Act, ensuring that couples have the freedom to marry without either party being compelled to convert against their will. This protects the rights and choices of individuals and promotes harmonious coexistence.

**Improvement of Education System:** A comprehensive revamp of the education system is necessary, focusing on providing quality education and guidance to all sections of society. Special attention should be given to underprivileged communities, equipping them with knowledge, skills, and values that foster inclusivity and understanding.

**Support for the Economically Disadvantaged:** Offering reservations or assistance to economically disadvantaged sections helps address social and economic disparities. Providing opportunities for upliftment helps prevent feelings of resentment or discrimination within communities.

---

<sup>19</sup> Nitisha /5 suggestion for eradication of communalism <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/communalism-2/5-suggestions-for-eradication-of-communalism/47350>

**Shaping Mindsets:** Education should instill in individuals, from a young age, the importance of recognizing the problems associated with communalism. This includes understanding the distinction between communal interests and national interests and promoting a sense of nationalism based on unity and inclusivity. By fostering values like secularism, tolerance, acceptance, and generosity, we can work towards eradicating communalism at its core.

It is important to note that while legislative support and administrative efforts are crucial, shaping mindsets through education is fundamental in addressing communalism effectively.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as India's population continues to grow, its diverse nature encompassing various religions poses both opportunities and challenges. With the increasing trend of nuclear families and growing intolerance, communalism has become an absolute threat to the nation's harmony, eroding its core values and undermining democracy. It is imperative to recognize that secularism is not only an integral part of our constitution and preamble but is also protected under the basic structure doctrine.

To maintain harmony and peace in the nation, it is crucial to uphold secularism, provide equal opportunities, and treat every community with fairness. This requires taking strong measures, such as eliminating religious or communalist parties and supporting free and fair elections. By embracing secularism, India can foster an environment where individuals are empowered and respected, regardless of their religious background, fostering a society that celebrates diversity and ensures equal rights for all.

In conclusion, secularism serves as a foundational principle for a democratic state like India. It guarantees impartiality, equality, and inclusivity, enabling individuals to freely practice their faith while preserving the nation's pluralistic fabric. By promoting secular values, India can progress towards growth, unity, and prosperity for all its citizens.