
UNIT 12 RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNAL MOVEMENTS

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

Religious and communal movements have been the glaring feature of Indian sub-continent in general and India in particular. Whether it is an issue of social reforms, issue of national awakening, formation of a state or coming to power, the religion has played a decisive role in shaping the destiny of this country and its people. Social movements of varied nature have played an important role in different spheres of life, primarily relating to religion. In South Asia in general and India in Particular, the religious fundamentalist movements have been pivotal in bringing about the socio-political change. Their influence could be inferred from the fact that even they have been successful in drawing the boundaries of nation state and are constant in such efforts by leading secessionist moments. In addition to this, many of them are quite radical since they even demand a structural change in the system itself from a secular state to a state based on a particular religion. Consequently, such movements indulge in promoting enmity, hostility and violence amongst people of different religions, which raises the question about their legitimacy in the public domain. But in reality, the extent of penetration within the society and linkages with state politics these movements can not be simply dismissed, particularly in the present day India. This unit deals with social movements in India with a focus on movements related to communal frenzies which have marred the community life of the people of India on religious lines.

12.2 WHAT IS COMMUNAL?

In both political parlance and academic discussion, the ‘communal’ is used in a derogatory sense representing narrow sectarian interests. In pre-independence India, political leaders described the Indian Muslim League a communal organisation. However, for many Marxist and European scholars it represented Muslim nationalism. And in 1946

overwhelming majority of Indian Muslims voted for the Muslim Home Land in the belief that the creation of Pakistan would fulfil Muslim nationalist aspirations in the sub-continent.

Here it is worth pointing out that Communal identities can be formed on territorial, cultural, ethnic, or religious bases or on a combination of these all too, depending upon the emotional intensity that the people attach to a particular aspect of a nation. Both Hindus and Muslims have been mobilised on communal lines. India is not only their motherland, it is also their sacred land. What they claim that it is the land of their saints and sages; it is where their sacred rivers flow and where their history was created and they have full claim over their territory. In order to achieve geographical unity, places of pilgrimage located in the four corners of the country are often cited and refuge is sought in creating common cultural and religious bonds among the Hindus despite their regional and linguistic differences.

Hindu nationalists emphasise this common cultural and religious bond creating an emotional attachment to this land and its people. The anti-Sikh riots following Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Bhagalpur massacres in 1989, the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, attacks on missionaries in late nineties and the havoc caused due to the communal riots after the incidence of Godra in 2002 are some of the manifestations of majoritarian communal movements organised on religious lines.

12.3 COMMUNAL AND RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN RETROSPECT

The seeds of communalism on religious lines were sown in the early British period. The 'divide and rule policy' followed by the British Government was largely responsible for the communal hatred amongst the different communities in India. In the census they categorised people according to religion and viewed and treated them as different from each other. They tried to decipher the Indian communities on the knowledge of basic religious texts and they found intrinsic differences in them instead of the way they coexisted in the present. The British remained fearful of the potential threat from the Muslims, who were the former rulers of the subcontinent, ruling India for over 300 years under the Mughal Empire. In order to win them over to their side, the British helped establish the M.A.O. College at Aligarh and supported the All-India Muslim Conference, both of which became the forerunner institutions from which leaders of the Muslim League and the ideology of Pakistan emerged. The social reformer and educator, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who founded M.A.O. College, taught the Muslims that education and cooperation with the British was vital for their survival in the society. Tied to all the movements of Muslim revival was the opposition to assimilation and submergence in Hindu society. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was also the first to conceive of a separate Muslim homeland. The idea of the separateness of Muslims in India was built into the electoral process of India following the introduction of separate electorate which culminated in ideological schism between the Muslims and the Hindus in time to come. While there were strong feelings of nationalism in India against the British, by the late 19th century there were also communal conflicts and movements in the country that were based on religious communities rather than class or region.

Along with Muslim communalism, Hindu communal sentiments were also fanned on the issues of 'cow slaughter', conversion by Christians and Muslims. Shuddhi Movement was launched to reconvert the Hindus, who embraced Islam or Christianity, by the Hindu revivalists like Arya Samaj and other Hindu orthodox organisations. The dissention between the two communities also arose on account of language and its script, as Hindus wanted to change the official script from the Persian to the Hindu Devanagiri script, effectively making Hindi rather than Urdu the main candidate for the national language.

In response to the formation of Muslim League, Hindu Right Wing political movements also started getting organised on political lines in full swing in the form of Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the beginning quarter of twentieth century, claiming for a unified Hindu-Rashtra.

The political ideology, formed on the religious sentiments, could not keep together the communities living in this sub-continent, despite strong secular nationalist sentiments reflected during the freedom struggle. The independence of India accompanied its partition on communal lines, though India altogether discarded the formation of state on religious or communal sentiments and declared itself a secular state. However, as the religious values and sentiments were integral to Indian society at large, they kept on echoing the hearts of masses in one or the other issues raised on religious lines.

Despite, having accepted the partition on communal lines the majority-minority syndromes remained intact. Numbers of Muslims inhabiting India are the same as in Pakistan making it one of the largest Muslim countries of the world. To further understand the gravity of the situation on account of its religious multiplicity where communal movements are still able to disturb the social harmony, it would be desirable to have an insight into the demographic composition as pointed out by the census of 2001.

12.4 RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The country has a total area of approximately 1.3 million square miles and a population of slightly more than one billion. According to the latest government estimates, Hindus constitute 82 per cent of the population, Muslims 12 per cent, Christians 2.3 per cent, Sikhs 2.0 percent, and others, including Buddhists, Jains, Parsis (Zoroastrians), Jews and Baha'is, less than 2 per cent. It is difficult to define Hinduism as Hindus worship many Gods and Goddesses, and rituals also vary from region to region and caste to caste. Slightly more than 90 per cent of Muslims are Sunni; the rest are Shia. Buddhists include followers of the Mahayana and Hinayana schools and there are both Catholic and Protestant Christians. Tribal groups (members of indigenous groups historically outside the caste system), which in government statistics generally are included among Hindus, often practice traditional indigenous religions. Hindus and Muslims are spread throughout the country, although large Muslim populations are found in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala, and Muslims are a majority in Jammu and Kashmir. Christian concentrations are found in the North-Eastern states, as well as in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa. Three small North-Eastern states have large Christian majorities—Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Sikhs are a majority in the state of Punjab. In the last half century or so, many lower caste Hindus, Dalits (called as 'Scheduled Castes') and other

non-Hindu tribal groups have converted to other faiths because they viewed conversion as a means to escape widespread discrimination and achieve higher social status.

According to the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India, there are approximately 1,100 registered foreign missionaries in the country representing a variety of Christian denominations which are often engaged in conversion and other social services.

With such a vast and diverse religious configuration and having the history of rich religious origins, it is but natural that people of this land are bound to get influenced in their public or private activities by religious sentiments. In order to assert their religious identity in social and political life, all the communities have tried to woo the masses by raising emotive issues more often resulting in destructive tendencies, affecting the nation building process and causing embitterment in the social harmony.

12.5 HINDU COMMUNAL AND RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

As discussed earlier, Hindu revivalists movements during the 19th century prepared the ground for right wing politics along which religious issues took the shape of Hindu communalism. The issues of conversion, ban on cow slaughter, implementation of Hindi, Hinduisation of education and asserting the claim of Hindu homeland remained vibrant even after independence. Adding further to the communal frenzy, the issues like, Uniform Civil Code, removal of Article 370 (related to Kashmir), demolition of Babri Masjid (a historical mosque) and construction of Ram Temple on the same place and subsequent attacks on Christian missionaries on account of their policy of proselytisation, remained the bone of contention on which Hindu right wing social movements thrived and tried to enchant the masses.

The issues based on identities of religion, caste and ethnicity have overshadowed the social and political processes after independence. The diversity on ascriptive denominations, on which the religious communal movements were based, attempted social transformation whereby a homogeneous polity could be established or at least, the dominance of the majority community be asserted and other religious groups are reduced to just the status of foreigners.

The Hindu Mahasabha, which was the major political force before independence and which spoke for the cause of Hindus, diminished because of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination and umbrella like domination of Indian National Congress. After independence the other Hindu outfits were also put to the test of time and got little recognition in independent India because of the ugly face of communal violence which killed millions and displaced around 15 Million people across the border. The brutal assassination of Mahatma was the single event at the time of Independence which made people indifferent towards religious sentiments in the public life.

However, the RSS continued to penetrate the masses through its social service projects and resuscitated the Hindu national spirit through a large network of tens and thousands of shakhas, engaged in its multifarious Seva projects undertaken by its various sub-organisations in the field of student, labour, farming, education and in especially Vanavasi areas.

12.5.1 Hinduisation of Pedagogic Inculcations

The socio-economic and cultural reforms, which the RSS undertook after independence, were extensive and got a wide ranging recognition amongst the Indian masses. The RSS, in order to achieve its objectives, stroked at the roots of mass inertia. It sought to alter the social formation through pedagogic programmes, voluntary social work during natural calamities and repeated assertion for the Hindu-Rashtra for Hindus.

In line with other social reformist movements like the Arya Samaj or the Ramakrishna Mission, the RSS started its agenda of penetration through wide ranging educational institutions which inculcated pedagogic programmes on traditional Hindu lines. To this effect, the RSS started the first Saraswati Shishu Mandir in 1952 in Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh).

As the number of schools grew in different states, an all-India co-ordinating body called Vidya Bharati was set up with its headquarters in Delhi. The Vidya Bharati educational mission was founded with the objective of training children to see themselves as protectors of a Hindu nation.

The RSS practices may be seen as a reaction to the widespread Christian missionary educational practices. In their efforts to revive past culture, Sanskrit terms are used to address teachers (*Acharya*), the practice of touching their feet as a mark of respect and the naming of classrooms after Hindu sages (*'Vashisht kaksh'*, *'Vishwamitra kaksh'*), also marks out the school as a space where Hindu *Dharma* and Hindu *Sanskars* are asserted with pride, where tradition is saved and transmitted as against the 'enculturation' or 'influence of Christianity' through convent missionaries.

Not only this, to further propagate its identity of Hindu culture, the Vidya Bharati schools celebrate their own roster of special days, such as the birthdays of Shivaji and Jijabai, Vivekananda, Deendayal Upadhyay and Savarkar. Significantly, Gandhi Jayanti is not celebrated. *Shikshak diwas* or Teachers' day (celebrated by the rest of India on September 5th on the birth anniversary of the former president and educationist Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan) is celebrated on the supposed birth anniversary of the Sage Vyasa, while Krishna Janmashtami stands for children's day, normally celebrated in India on Nehru's birthday, November 14th. Myth and history, the birth and death anniversaries of actual historical figures and those of mythical characters are, thus, glorified in the child's consciousness through the aura of annual holidays, celebrations, morning prayers as well as through the content of history and cultural knowledge of text-books. The functioning of the school is primarily to keep a religious identity alive in the minds of children at the outset.

The RSS/BJP has attempted to affect a radical departure in the existing educational ethos through the use of both state power by packing state educational institutions with its own ideologues and the instruments of 'civil society', where it created its own network of schools in order to feed the well-developed cadre structure of its organisations.

Inevitably, the RSS's educational and political agenda included both: absorbing sub-altern groups into the Hindu fold to fight against 'minorities' and using violence against these same groups in order to perpetuate Hindu dominance in the existing social order. In order to justify and make their inculcations logical, the Sangh Parivar took recourse to re-write historical developments which shaped the destiny of India.

12.5.2 Rise of the VHP and the Issue of Conversion

The process of religious conversion has evoked grave concerns amongst the members of the Sangh Parivar down the century which were intensified and made to appear much more legitimate by giving the loss a 'patriotic' and 'national' colour. This phenomenon has been a key to the functioning of Hindu majoritarianism particularly after 1947. The Sangh Parivar's justifications of recent outrages against Christians are in consonance with the instances of such an equation.

It is widely assumed that Hinduism is unique among religious traditions in being non-proselytising. Conversion to other faiths, therefore, is a loss that cannot be recovered. This logic at once echoes at the hearts of most of the individuals. The common sense, which is applied here, is that one can become a Hindu by birth alone since caste (whether in the *Varna* or the *Jati* sense) is crucial to Hinduism and caste status is hereditary.

From the late 19th century onwards as the expansion directed towards marginal groups and tribals became more organised, 'reclamation', *Shuddhi* (purification), 'reconversion' (*Parivartan*, 'turning back'—the term preferred by the VHP today) became more rampant. All these terms have been coined to bring people back to their 'natural' state, presuming that all the targeted groups are Hindu in a more or less Sanskritised manner.

If we analyse the functioning of the Jana Sangh in early days, along with the promotion of highly Sanskritised Hindi and cow-protection, the fight against Christian missionaries was made an important plank of its activities. The Jan Sangh organised an Anti-Foreign Missionary Week in Madhya Pradesh in November 1954.

Till the recent anti-Christian campaign, the VHP, which has been associated primarily with *Ramjanmabhumi* and the onslaught on Muslims at the time of its foundation in 1964 and in the subsequent decade, its main focus had been directed primarily against Christian proselytisation in tribal areas (the North-East, Madhya Pradesh, and South Bihar). The *Achaar Samhita* (code of conduct) drawn up by the VHP in 1968 included *Parivartan* (turning back, i.e. reconversion) among the basic *Samskaras* of the Hinduism. Here it is worth pointing out that this kind of *Parivartan* was different from its historically referred movement of *Shuddhi*, which was more reformatory and social in context, but this kind of efforts were more communal in their approach and had essentially conservative motives. The Meenakshipuram (Tirunelveli) mass conversions of thousands of Dalits to Islam in February, 1981 inaugurated an era in which Muslims were targeted for more than a decade. In the recent times Christians have been on their agenda especially after the formation of the BJP-led coalition in centre.

In addition to Pokhran blasts and swiftly accelerated 'liberalisation', the BJP-dominated coalition at centre may be remembered for the concerted campaign against Christians. The widespread revulsion evoked by the sheer horror of the Staines' killings on 23 January 1999 seemed to have produced a brief lull but then the attacks started again and came to be more and more widely distributed. By August 2000 they had spread to a very big part of the country: Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Goa. A recent Christian estimate places the number of recorded attacks since 1998 at 184, while there have been 35 incidents in the first six months of 2000 alone.

12.5.3 Babri Masjid-Ramjanm Bhoomi Issue

The resurgent spirit of Hindu communal assertion finally found a historic expression in the Ayodhya movement which Shri Girilal Jain described as the most significant event after Independence. The RSS holds the view that Ayodhya, Mathura and Kashi is not a political but a national question.

This issue further aggravated the situation. The events between 1986-92 have an interesting account to present. Though the controversy of *Ramjanm Bhoomi* has more than a century old history, yet it remained within the four walls of Ayodhya. Even on 28 December 1949 when riots broke out due to the sudden installation of *Ram Lalla's* idol over-night, the incidence could not gain much heat as the doors of the Mosque were swiftly closed for both the communities and place was kept under guard in status quo till 1985 when Rajeev Gandhi ordered the opening the Gate of controvertial Babri Masjid for Pooja by the Hindus. Adding to this, the Doordarshan serial—*Ramayana* further acted as a catalyst to this controversy. The Sangh Parivar used the actors of the serial for gaining support in the elections of 1989. The campaign was launched from the district of Faizabad in which the town of Ayodhya was located, symbolising the strong urge for a Hindu assertion.

Even Rajeev Gandhi wanted to capitalise on this issue, though in a subtle manner. He tacitly allowed the foundation stone for the proposed Ram Temple to be laid adjacent to the Mosque. Rajeev Gandhi did not hesitate to refer to this incident being similar to Mahatma Gandhi's dream for *Ram Rajya*. However, those involved directly with the movement were the real beneficiaries. The VHP was confident that the *Babri Mosque* controversy would split every party vertically. These gestures of the VHP came true to a greater extent as the BJP's electoral gains were considerable. In the 1984 parliamentary elections it had won barely two seats with 7.5 per cent votes but in 1989 it won 85 seats with 11.5 per cent of votes. Gains of the BJP were significant and unprecedented in its history since the days of the BJS. This success was attributed to its ability to project its separate identity from other parties. From this point onwards, the BJP became more vocal about its Hindu identity. The Ayodhya movement led to the demolition of Babri Mosque on 6 December 1992.

Despite its repeated threats after 1992, the VHP and other Hindu outfits have largely refrained from taking direct confrontation with the State. Now they have moderated their agenda, i.e. settling the issue through court, though there have been oscillations of their anger in repeated threats to the state time and again.

In March 2003, the VHP announced it would launch a nationwide campaign to 'reclaim' 30,000 Hindu temples that had been converted into mosques. Some Muslims fear that under this campaign, Hindus will try to claim the Gyan Vapi mosque in Varanasi, the Idgah mosque in Mathura, and the Ram temple grounds at the former Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.

The VHP continued its trident of 'trishul' distribution programme during the reporting period despite the prohibition under the Penal Code against the distribution of sharp weapons to the public. Trishuls (three-pronged tridents) are Hindu religious symbols, but they have also been used as weapons, including in the 2002 Gujarat riots.

12.6 ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNAL MOVEMENTS

Islam is one of the largest minority faiths in India and is perceived by Sangh Parivar as actively engaging a pan-Islamic ideology in order to recover the past glory, and constantly is the cause of the Hindu sense of insecurity.

Along with Hindu religious and social movements in the 19th century, the rising tide of Muslim politics was quite visible in the first quarter of 20th century particularly after the formation of All India Muslim League in 1906. The Muslim communalism, like other right wing organisations started acquiring colour on religio-political lines and inhibited the integration and assimilation of Muslim community in Indian society. Aligarh Muslim University fuelled the fire by giving communal colour to issues like Urdu language and separate electorates for Muslims and steadily accelerated the movement for communal politics in the name of religious brotherhood. Events like Khilafat Movement, Mopla riot in Kerala, propaganda of two-nation theory, demand for Pakistan and finally the partition of the country were the outcome of such politics fanned on religious lines.

Even after the formation of secular India, the demands for maintaining exclusive identity remained consistent. The concept of religious brotherhood was put to use for this purpose. The cry for 'Islam is in danger' caught the imaginary concept of Muslim brotherhood or the religious solidarity of the Muslims, which formed the main ingredient of Muslim politics in India. Some of the Muslim scholars have rightly pointed out this divisive communal design of the feudal section in the community. "It would seem that, in the sub-continent, Muhammad's concept of 'Umma Muslima' (Muslim Community as a homogeneous unit) is only successful in politics and as a defensive posture".

The slogan of religious brotherhood remained the main weapon for the political fight of Muslims even in post-partition India. The social elite of Muslim society also exploited the spiritual concept of Islamic brotherhood only to expand the autonomous space for Muslim politics in the country. Elitist character of Muslim politics failed to comprehend and work on the economic and social problems of Indian Muslims. Repeated slogans for a separate religious identity were basically for a separate political identity of the Muslims, which is contrary to the spirit of joint electorate system enforced in India after partition.

Such efforts to homogenise a religious group in the plurality of Indian society widened the centuries old communal mistrust between the two major religious communities of this country. The Muslim leaders, while taking advantage of the secular constitution, persisted with its divisive concept of religious solidarity, which implied communal unity in the name of minority privileges. The attempt for social integration was resisted upon under the garb of old cry of 'Islam in danger'. Consequently, self-assertion of Muslim brotherhood on communal lines pushed the Muslim community into mental and psychological ghettos.

A. Q. Ansari, a prominent Congress leader, established a Muslim Front inside the Congress, demanding that Congress party should give election tickets to Muslims on the basis of their population. Keeping the Muslim masses ignorant of the realities of modern age, their leaders continue to arouse the sentiments of internal religious unity for

maintaining a distinct communal identity. What exactly was the concept of Muslim brotherhood meant in a larger space of democracy, always remained an unanswered question. Against whom they want communal solidarity is a big question mark for even the Muslim thinkers.

12.6.1 Religio-lingual Issues

Along with the demand for separate electorate, the Urdu Language has also acquired religious colour. Muslims, irrespective of their region and Mother tongue, have constantly raised the issue of Urdu as a part of their religio-cultural heritage.

It is a general perception of the Muslims in India that Urdu can and will survive in India as a functional language only through its inclusion in the educational curriculum as a Modern Indian Language, which is the mother-tongue of more than 60 million Indians. However, due to the negligent attitude of the so called secularists and Hindu right wing ideologues, Urdu is losing its glory. Here, they generally forget that even rich language like Sanskrit could not survive despite having achieved State protection.

No one denies the glare of Urdu as one of the fabulous languages of India but here, people belonging to Islamic faith should not claim for its monopoly over this lingua franca which is even spoken by those who do not subscribe to this faith. The kind of communal colour which associates with this language, Urdu has become largely confined to Muslim minority educational institutions and religious seminaries called Madrasas. Though it has survived, yet the learners now belong to the lower strata of the Muslim community which is not only economically backward but socially fragmented too, which consequently renders it as one of the educationally backward and deprived communities in the country. Thus, the religious aspect has come to define the horizons of Urdu due to the denial of state support or rather the denial of the constitutional rights of the Urdu-speaking community. It is this situation which has misdirected the post-independence discourse on Urdu. To some extent, the preservation of Urdu is linked to the economic survival of the backward sections of the Muslim community since the Muslim elite of North India has altogether abandoned the language. No doubt Urdu is the repository of the religious heritage of Muslim Indians yet, as a spoken language, it is still lingua franca of common man of India.

12.6.2 Communal and Terrorist Activities and Use of Islam

Apart from these issues which have largely dominated the mind set of Muslim population of India to a larger extent, the Islamisation of communal violence, separatism and terrorism have too come up as the special feature of religious communalism of Muslims in India, especially in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The Government officially banned the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) in September 2001 under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act for 'fomenting communal tension' and actions 'prejudicial to India's security.' The Government alleged that the SIMI had links with terrorist groups such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba and the Hizbul Mujahideen. The police in three different states arrested eight of its members, including former president of the SIMI Bhopal district unit, Khalid Naeem.

On May 3, 2001, likewise government banned the Muslim group Deendar Anjuman for 'fomenting communal tension' and actions 'prejudicial to India's security'. State

prosecutors alleged that some members of the tiny Muslim group called Deendar Channabasaveshwara Siddique (DCS) and its parent organisation, Deendar Anjuman, were responsible for the Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh church bombings in 2000.

Given the terrorist insurgency throughout the globe, the Islamic groups are the easy target of state in most of the non-Islamic countries.

12.7 CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNAL MOVEMENTS

Today Christianity is generally perceived to be associated with a legacy of Western rule which forced its religion upon Indians during the colonial period. However, the fact should be noted that Indian Christians are as old as Christianity itself. St. Thomas, the direct disciple of Jesus Christ, came to India and preached Christianity here soon after the death of Christ, i.e. in 52 A.D. After that many missionaries from different parts of the world preached Christian faith in India. The English missionaries came to India very late. In general, it is believed that 'A missionary is a person for others, one who stands for Justice, spreads the message of equality and love, and cares for the down trodden. But some authors describe Christianity in India as an offshoot of British rule and relate it with the religion of the oppressive and immoral whites and the missionaries being their representatives. However, Christianity, with its charitable, educational and medical institutions, has been able to woo the masses to a greater extent. The issues of discord between Christians and Hindus or Christians and Muslims have been the issues related to conversion.

Christians have been target of attacks by Hindutva forces especially the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal. The Hindutva forces argue that the Christians have to "Indianise" themselves. In March 2001, K.S. Sudarshan, the head of the RSS stated that Muslims and Christians 'should sever their links with the Mecca and the Pope and instead become Swadeshi.' He also stated that Christians should 'reinterpret their scriptures' in a manner more in keeping with Hindu cultural norms. Catholics strongly reacted to these kind of statements, the Archbishop of Delhi pointed out that the Indian Christian church is 2,000 years old (traditionally dating from the Apostle Thomas), and that although the spiritual head was the Pope, the day-to-day administration of the church was entirely in Indian hands.

Along with the issues of discord, there have been some attempts to resolve the differences between the Hindutva forces and Christians. On September 1, 2003, the *Times of India* reported about the talk which took place between the RSS and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. The two met in Nagpur on August 22, 2003, and further talks were scheduled. But the attempts to lessen tensions between Christians and the RSS took a turn for the worse when RSS chief K.S. Sudarshan called on Muslims and Christians to reinterpret their scriptures and change their leadership. The Catholic bishops' conference expressed 'shock and surprise' at the statement made by Sudarshan in Nagpur, according to the October 31, 2003 online edition of *The Hindu*. The Church was also offended by Sudarshan's observation that the leadership of the Christian and Muslim communities has remained in the hands of 'conflict-mongers.' In the opinion of the bishops' conference Secretary-general, Archbishop Oswald Gracias, these observations only strengthen the hands of forces opposed to dialogue.

12.8 SIKH RELIGION AND COMMUNAL MOVEMENTS

Founded on the traditions of Bhakti movement of the 15th and 16th centuries, the Sikh religion became a powerful source of the mobilisation of the Sikh Community in the 20th century. The Shiromani Akali Dal and Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) were two principal organisations which mobilised Sikhs on the religious lines during the first of the 20th century. The Shiromani Akali Dal launched socio-religious movement in the 1920s to liberate the Gurudwaras from the control of Mahants and landed aristocracy. As a result, the British government gave the SGPC a statutory status.

Even after, the independence the Akali Dal continued to mix religion with politics. In order to maintain separate Sikh Identity and to make the community powerful in the political arena, Master Tara Singh, the most prominent leader of the Akali Dal up to 1962, viewed it exclusively in terms of political interest of the community. He described the then existing situation as a serious threat to the existence of Sikh community. In a statement he maintained, “Now the circumstances have so altered that we have been saved from Muslim domination. But we have been absolutely trapped under Hindu domination... We can not survive under Hindu domination”.

In 1967, the Congress was defeated in the elections and the Akali Dal formed the government in coalition with the BJS and the Communist parties. But during 1967-1971, the Akali Dal ministry fell thrice and there was constant instability due to the intra-factionalism in the Akali Dal.

Intense factional feuds in the Dal manifested in the increasing pressure for reversion to politics of religion and culture during this period, but the ruling leadership, however, managed to maintain ascendancy of secular material consensus and considerations of power in the secular political domain of the state. Even in that process it had to reconcile with Tara Singh faction. The Batala Resolution of 1968, and the Anandpur Sahib Resolution of 1973, which meant in substance the adoption of Master Tara Singh's groups 'Sikh Homeland' thesis as the goal of Akali Dal, proves this point. From 1977-80, the Akali Dal enjoyed effective power in the secular political domain of the state along with control over the SGPC.

In the 1970s the Akali Dal challenged the dominance of Congress in Punjab politics. In order to meet this challenge the Congress used the services of Sikh religious leaders, including Sant Jarnail Singh Bhinderanwale in 1980 assembly elections. Realising their political significance the Sikh religious leaders asserted their autonomy and demanded their share in arena of political power. This gave rise to the competitive politics among political parties Congress, Akali and religious and militant leaders to use religion on the one hand, and movement for Khalistan, a Sikh homeland, on the other. The changing religious, cultural and economic situation and involvement of the people settled in other countries provided fillip to this movement. The large scale violence which included terrorism operation, Blue Star, assassination of political leaders and activists, anti-sikh riots in Delhi in 1984 were some of the repercussions of use of Sikh religion in politics. This set a new trend in Indian politics.

12.9 SUMMARY

To sum up, the discussion in this unit clearly points out that India which has been a land of religions, is bound to be influenced by religious practices, beliefs and rituals. Religions being integral to culture in general else where in the world and India in particular have been instrumental in moulding the socio-political processes to a considerable extent. The socio-religious movements have proved to be instruments of national consciousness in the 19th and early 20th century. However, with the passage of time due to one or the other reason they have acquired communal and political colour. The religious rivalries within and between the communities have roots that are centuries old, and these tensions at times are exacerbated by poverty, class, and ethnic differences, which have erupted into periodic violence throughout the country's 57-year history. The Government has made some effort, not always successfully, to prevent these incidents and to restore communal harmony when they do occur. However, tensions between Muslims and Hindus, and between Hindus and Christians, continue to pose a challenge to the concepts of secularism, tolerance, and diversity on which the Indian state was founded.

Despite the incidents of violence and discord, relations between various religious groups generally are amicable among the substantial majority of people. The general perception about the plurality of Indian society is that it brings religious leaders together to defuse religious tensions. The annual *Sarva Dharma Sammelan* (All Religious Convention) and the frequently held *Mushairas* (Hindi-Urdu poetry sessions) are some events that help improve inter community relations. Prominent secularists of all religions make public efforts to show respect for other religions by celebrating their holidays and attending social events such as weddings and other functions. Institutions, like bureaucracy and army consciously forge loyalties that transcend religious beliefs. After episodes of violence against Christians, Muslim groups have protested against the mistreatment of Christians by Hindu extremists and in 2001 prominent Catholics spoke out against the killings of six Sikhs in Kashmir. Christian clergy and spokespersons for Christian organisations issued public statements condemning the violence in Gujarat, and the Archbishop of Gandhinagar, the capital of Gujarat, participated in a peace march in April 2003. These small incidences of communal harmony clearly pronounce that India is too diverse and pluralistic for any extremist ideology to entrench itself for long. But it is usage of religious by leaders which disturbs the communal harmony among people following different faiths.

12.10 EXERCISES

- 1) What do you understand by the phenomenon of communalism? How far religions have contributed to its growth in India?
- 2) Do you think religious and communal movements have contributed to social growth in any way?
- 3) "Majority communalism is more dangerous than minority communalism." Comment.
- 4) "Religious movements often have become a spring board for grabbing political power." In the light of this statement elaborate your views.