Globalization and Politics of Identity in India:
An Overview

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Abstract

In a certain sense, the present human world is more tightly integrated than at any earlier point in history. In the age of the jet plane and satellite dish, the age of global capitalism, the age of ubiquitous markets and global mass media, various commentators have claimed that the world is rapidly becoming a single place. Although this slightly exaggerated description has an important point to make, a perhaps even more striking aspect of the post-cold war world is the emergence -- seemingly everywhere -- of identity politics whose explicit aim is the restoration of rooted tradition, religious fervour and/or commitment to ethnic or national identities. The paper is a modest attempt to find the impact of globalization on identity politics in India. Have religious and caste identity politics been influenced by globalization?

Introduction

Globalization refers to the process by which different economies and societies become more closely integrated.[1] Covering a wide range of distinct political, economic, and cultural trends, the term —globalization has quickly become one of the most fashionable buzzwords of contemporary political and academic debate. In popular discourse, globalization often functions as little more than a synonym for one or more of the following phenomena: the pursuit of classical liberal policies in the world economy, the growing dominance of western forms of political, economic, and cultural life, the proliferation of new information technologies, as well as the notion that humanity stands at the threshold of realizing one single unified community in which major sources of social conflict have vanished.

In the present age of globalization the world is called a global village. From the time immemorial, humans have either inherited identity or are bound to adopt one. Language and religion based ethnic identities are the dominant issues in the history and evolution of multi-ethnic countries like India.[2] In recent decades two parallel processes have coexisted at a world level: globalization, on the one hand, and the reaffirmation of different cultural identities, on the other. Both processes are interrelated, as the cultural homogenization which is usually linked to globalization involves a threat to local cultures, to specific identities. Thus the fear emerges of losing the cultural references that define people and hence the conflicts and demands around local or regional identities.[3]

In many countries, the last century has seen determined efforts to make inscriptive identities politically salient, even when those identities were previously unimportant. In much of the post-colonial world, the decades before independence saw a rapid increase in the political importance of inscriptive identities among nascent political elites, with groups' large and small forming organizations, petitioning government bodies and distributing propaganda, all in an attempt to improve the political and social position of the groups they represented.[4] Even more interesting than the general rise in ethnic consciousness was its uneven distribution across groups, with many elite

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members disdaining narrow ethnic appeals in favor of the broader rhetoric of class, religion or nation.

Identity Politics in India

India is multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual society like most of the developing countries in South Asia.[5] The Indian society is a plural society in terms of caste, class, religion, region, etc. In a country like India where there are vast diversities based on caste, religion, language, race and community and a range of social oppressions, identity politics finds fertile ground. India is among the most diverse societies in the world. The people of India are said to have had a continuous civilization since 2500 B.C.E. It has people from all the major religion in the world – Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhist, Jains and Parsis. Hindus constitute about 82 percent of the populations, but India also has the second largest population of Muslims in the world, an estimated 149 million. Religious diversity is coupled with enormous linguistic and cultural diversity. India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. According to the 2001 Indian Census, There are total of 122 languages and 234 mother tongues. There are many ethnic groups and communities living here. The main ethnic groups are Indo- Aryan (72%), Dravidian (25%), Mongoloid and others (3%). The people from northern India belong to the Indo-Aryan groups, who were descendants of the Aryans who first entered the subcontinent around 1500 B.C.[6]

Those from the northeast of the country are usually from the Mongoloid groups and the south Indians, especially people from the southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu, are generally of Dravidian origin, probably among the oldest inhabitants of the land. There are also many tribal communities in India known as the Adivasis –the original inhabitants of this ancient country. They fall under the category of Scheduled Tribes. Numerous tribal communities can be found in different regions of India. In the northeast, there are tribes like the Khasis, the Mizos, the Nagas and the Tripuries. Central India has the largest number of tribal groups. The island off the mainland such as Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep have their own tribal groups as well. While the national Census does not recognize racial or ethnic groups, it is estimated that there are more than 2,000 ethnic groups in India.[7] The Hindus, the religious community in majority, follow a caste system that is a four-fold classification into *Varnas*, viz. *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. The Varnas are further sub divided into numerous Castes many of which are often found only in specific areas. Caste is one identity on the basis of which identity politics flourishes in India. As there is caste oppression and discrimination in society, those belonging to such communities and castes who suffer the oppression are sought to be mobilised on the basis of their identity and perceived oppression. Dalit groups, OBC movements which sprang up on the question of reservations etc indulge in competitive politics for reservation, allocation of resources, against discrimination and so on. However, such groups do not take forward the struggle to change the basic social structure and class exploitation nor are they interested in combining with other oppressed groups to build a united movement.

In India we find a large number of NGOs and voluntary organizations whose outlook is based on identity politics who are working among dalits, adivasis, women and minority groups. The spread of identity politics and its influence is seen in various political parties and formations. A striking example is that of the Bahujan Samaj Party. The other example is of the many parties which are based on the appeal to the OBC community. This type of identity politics is also not confined to dalit and backward class organisations alone. Other dominant caste and upper caste groups also resort to identity politics. Parties are adept at utilising identity politics to mobilize support and enhance their electoral strength. In UP for instance, all the parties like the BJP, SP and Congress hold caste and sub-

caste conferences to garner support. They pander to identity politics and strengthen the process of caste fragmentation. The fragmentation process which takes place can be seen in the competition and conflicts which develops within the sub-categories of the scheduled castes. Like the Mala-Madiga conflict in Andhra Pradesh. The rise of new identities also can be seen as in the case ofthe Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.Now that we have outlined our understanding of identity politics in India. Let us return to the question of how it is being impacted by the globalization.[8]

Impact of Globalization

Globalization has wider impact on its economy and consumption patterns, but the basic determinants of changes in India's identity, politics largely remain domestic.[9] It is quite clear that during the present century, identity politics is influenced by international developments. It is quite apt to discuss on how to understand identity politics in a plural or multicultural society and what the enduring features of India's identity politics are during the 21st century. At the macro-level identity politics in India remains largely a debate internal to India with a limited influence of the non-resident Indian community (NRIs). Identity politics in India is not moving ahead similar with that of identity politics charted elsewhere in the globe. It is quite different with Islamic fundamentalism in northern Nigeria and Christian fundamentalism in Latin America or the Philippines. The religiously motivated politics in India (both Hindu and Muslim) have focused on micro issues alike gender roles, marriage, divorce, etc. India's popular politics has concentrated on the issues of group identity and not with the question of economic development.

Another way to understand the impact of globalization in identity politics us to analyses the implication of the withdrawal of the developmental state in India. In the globalized era, two kind of unitary nationalism competed for the political mind space in India. One the one hand, there were the 'Cultural Nationalism' who had always wanted the Hindu world view to core of India's national political culture. It was argued that the unity of India is derived from the cementing force of Hinduism. They have pushed aggressively for a uniform civil code and abolition of special status to Jammu and Kashmir in the Indian Union. In India, globalization has played an important role in the emergence of Hindi Cultural Nationalism propagated by right wing nationalists. The aim is to create a unified and homogenized Hindu political entity. Hindu nationalists maintain that the word of the majority community should prevail over the others in a modern democratic state. To elaborate, further, colonial thinkers like Savarkar and members of the right wing organizations like the RSS maintain that Hinduism is a religion of tolerance and allows minority groups to flourish and hence, constitutes an integral part of Indian national culture. In fact, the country's right wing political party, The BJP, in its election manifesto, refers to India's 'unique cultural and social diversity' which it believes is necessary to weave into a larger fabric by thousands of years of common living .[10]

According to Gurpreet Mahajan , Hindu majoritarianism rests on two basic assumptions: (i)They work on the belief that nation-states can be built successfully only if there is a shared cultural identity. (ii) Hinduism is not just a religion but also a way of life.[11] Thus, by secularising Hinduism, nationalists claim that it is the shared identity of the entire population, no matter which religion one belongs to. Not surprisingly, the rise of a radical form of Hindu nationalism directly coincided with India's integration into global systems of production and consumption. The demolition of the famous Babri Masjid led to the erasare of an important symbol of cultural diversity in India. For Hindu Nationalists, this diversity is a huge obstacle for India to emerge as a strong nation the modern world. The idea of modernity to most people around the world today is linked to the notions of power, economic prosperities and not to forget, "full an unequivocal cultural and national identities".[12]

Economic liberalization in India led to the simultaneous existence of extreme wealth and poverty. This undoubtedly had an important role in creating communal tensions as it reinforced the religious divide. Although Hindus are an overwhelming majority in India, the country also has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world.

In the discourse of Hindu Nationalism, Muslims are perceived to be foreign invaders even though historically, a vast majority of Muslims are converts from lower-caste Hindu backgrounds. Even after five decades of state sponsored secularism, minority communities continue to be underrepresented in both, the political and social sector. For example, in the National Parliamentary Elections of 2014, only 22 Muslims were elected in the lower house. In fact, they represent a large section of the population in terms of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. Although one has to agree that disproportionate wealth has always been a source of concern in India, the problem did not improve as it was hoped post economic liberalization. Although the increase in the GDP of the country did reflect employment generation, especially in the IT sector, it did not prove to be an adequate representation in terms of uplifting the population from poverty. This can be proven by the fact that a very small section of the Indian population was contributing to the total revenue. According to NDTV profit (2013), a popular business channel, only 3 per cent (about 36 million) of the country pays tax. Hence, the feeling of discontent among the general population began to rise. The Hindutva ideology played on these emotions to encourage a uni-cultural society in India.[14] However, these cultural nationalist were vastly outnumbered by the economic nationalists of Nehruvian mould, who preferred a secularized cultural environment but nonetheless sought to build a 'well integrated' India as the pre-condition of its economic and technological development. Cultural nationalists were hostile to the assertion of minority identities, whereas the economic nationalists were simply insensitive to their need for self-expression. Globalization and Hindutva are both exclusionary, but they create different kind of exclusions.[15]

Conclusion

Globalization therefore has both direct and indirect bearings for the identities of religion and cultural minorities. However, it is also creating new sections of marginalized economic groups. A market-driven economy is bound to eat into the domains earlier left untouched, like the customary community rights of the tribals. The future of identity in India will depend on how the excluded define themselves vis-à-vis both globalization and Hindutva. In turn, such definitions will determine whether the two kinds of excluded and marginalized sections see one another as allies or competitors for the same shrinking space.

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