

# COMMUNALISM AND THE ROLE OF THE PRESS

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The response of the media - in the context of this article, the press - to the issue of secularism and the challenge of communalism has been extremely varied.

One striking feature of the response is the tendency towards superficiality. Regardless of one's perspective or standpoint on the question of secularism, the role of the media has been characterized by a great deal of froth, imprecision and dilettantism in relation to what is clearly the media's business—reporting, providing background, analysing and providing value judgements or assessments of the prevailing communal situation.

Historians have, over a period, done the intellectual and political community a distinct service by looking at the problem in rigorous social scientific terms. We in India thus have the advantage of a serious historical perspective on communalism. Unfortunately, journalists have not capitalised on this body of historical research.

To a contemporary journalist, it appears that the phenomenon of virulent, aggressive communalism—which impinges dangerously on the political process in the country—has something to do with a conservative reaction in society, a deep-seated attempt to preserve the *ancien regime* in a social sense, specifically the caste structure. Instant media analysis has linked, somewhat plausibly though not with real insight, the reaction to the Mandal development ( increased quotas for backward castes) with the mobilisation of the Ram Janmabhoomi issue. Any political journalist recognises the connection but, probing deeper, it is possible to see in both these cases, an attempt by profoundly conservative forces to preserve their privileges, resources and power.

Communalism is not a fringe phenomenon; it does not belong only to the "wild guys". This is a reality we have begun to appreciate only recently. Thus far we have tended to treat it as an extremist attitude or activity, assuming that those in the so-called mainstream have been correct on their stand on secularism and communal harmony. Thus, we have tended to underestimate the challenge and the sources from which the phenomenon has sprung and developed over time.

The press was completely unprepared in the 1980s for the rise of such novel phenomena as Bhindranwale

and armed extremism in Punjab, although it had been aware that the mixing of religion and politics, a process to which successive Central governments had contributed with policies based on opportunism, was causing problems in the Punjab. Likewise, the press was not prepared for the chain of events in which Operation Bluestar, a tremendous tragedy from the standpoint of secularism and national identity, was a vital link.

The press was also not prepared at all for developments such as the events in May 1987 in Meerut, when (by all objective accounts) the Uttar Pradesh Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) killed scores of innocent Muslims in Hashimpura and Malliana. This prompted the columnist Nikhil Chakravarty, who is invariably one of the first to speak out on issues like this, to write in *The Times of India*:

Something has happened in Meerut which has never before happened in this country. It has now come to be known that in a certain place the PAC gangs suddenly descended, knocked and burst into the hutments of poor Muslims, picked up whomever they could grab (mainly the young), packed them off into PAC trucks and lined them up. They then shot them down and threw the dead bodies into the river.

Of course, communalists would contest the truth of this indictment. The press did, to some extent, expose the injustice—although its investigative reporters and analysts did not go deep into the phenomenon and its implications.

The press was also unprepared for what happened in Bhagalpur, as late as October 1989, close to the last general election, when a section of the Bihar police matched the behaviour of Uttar Pradesh's PAC.

In other words, although the phenomenon appeared in different nooks and corners of India, it was not easily recognised as part of a mainstream social and political process. The country was being overtaken by something deeply troubling, menacing and malignant. But the media, by failing to report, analyse and assess the phenomenon in an intelligent way, let the people down.

Communalism can be derived from various sources and appears in different communities but most of us who

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consider ourselves secular and fair are prepared to state that today it is Hindu chauvinism which poses the greater danger. This is a political reality which we should come to terms with.

In assessing the performance of the press in this context, we must note that some influential or experienced analysts have highlighted the political angle, not in a democratic spirit, but in a celebratory way—particularly Girilal Jain, an influential and well-known journalist and former editor of *The Times of India*. He has attributed much importance to the Visva Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party, describing as a stroke of genius their launching of the Ayodhya offensive and the *rath yatra* at that historical juncture. Citing *real politik* as his main justification, he has shown, in his columns, an insensitivity to social, political and moral consequences. Arun Shourie and several other notable journalists, (especially in the Hindi press), can also be criticised for their role in the issue of Ayodhya.

Indeed, the performance of the press in the most recent period, with respect to understanding and responding positively to the communal challenge, must be criticised and exposed. My deep disappointment with this coverage is not just an individual reaction; it appears to be fairly widely shared, even within the journalistic fraternity. For example, the press reported that in a seminar on “Communalism - A Challenge Before the Nation and The Role of the Press”, held recently in Delhi, almost everyone expressed disapproval of the press performance in relation to both Mandal and Ayodhya. People like Rajinder Mathur, Nihal Singh, B.G. Verghese, Kuldeep Nayar and Nikhil Chakravarty made the point that the press had disappointed the public with respect to these questions. Nihal Singh deplored, the fact that news had been devalued and the concept of news so altered as to sanction and legitimise, bringing in charged viewpoints into news reports.

For those seriously interested in such questions, there are two detailed and critical exercises which have come up with revealing findings. The first is the very useful investigation undertaken under the auspices of the Press Council of India. In the wake of the events in Ayodhya and elsewhere connected with the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid crisis, the Press Council considered allegations regarding the conduct of certain sections of the press in reporting and commenting on the issue. On November 8, 1990, the Chairman set up a six-member Committee under the Press Council Act, 1978.

A majority and minority report, which did involve some overlap in the findings, expressed some basic differences in emphasis and standpoint on secularism and the roles of the press and the State Government. I regard the minority report as much the better document. (It became

a minority report only because the progressive writer, Raghubir Sahay, who participated in the exercise, died before the report could be completed).

As a result, the Press Council of India, at its meeting held at Thiruvananthapuram on January 21-22, 1991, issued a censure on four Hindi dailies, *Aaj*, *Dainik Jagran*, *Swatantra Chetna* and *Swatantra Bharat*. Its resolution stated: “There is little doubt that some influential sections of the Hindi Press in U.P. and Bihar were guilty of gross irresponsibility and impropriety, offending the canons of journalistic ethics in promoting mass hysteria on the basis of rumours and speculation, through exaggeration and distortion, all of this proclaimed under screaming, banner headlines. They were guilty, in a few instances, of doctoring pictures (such as drawing prison bars on the photograph of an arrested Mahant), fabricating casualty figures (adding 1 before 15 to make 115 deaths)’ incitement of violence and spreading disaffection among members of the armed forces and police, engendering communal hatred.” The Council also expressed “serious concern over the authorities taking recourse to punitive and preventive action in excess of the demands of the situation.” In some respects, it was a balancing job—although if you read the proceedings, the press comes out in an incomparably worse light than the State Government involved.

The Press Council’s resolution records the following verdict:

Whatever the default on the part of the Administration, nothing extenuates the conduct of that section of the press which threw all discretion and journalistic standards and norms to the winds through competitive sensationalism...It is to be strongly deplored that some errant newspapers showed scarce understanding of or regard for the higher values underlying the concept of freedom of the Press and misused this freedom for partisan ends at grievous cost to public order, tranquility and social harmony without thought to the consequences of their actions. In so doing, they gravely compromised the credibility of the media as a whole...

There is also a very useful study by Sukumaran Muralidharan of PTI of the coverage by certain national newspapers of the Mandal, Mandir and Masjid issues. It was published in *Mainstream*, *People’s Democracy*, *Social Scientist* and perhaps a few other publications— it has unfortunately been sidelined by the so-called mainstream press.

Looking at what happened during a very sensitive phase in 1990 and comparing it with the coverage of the communal violence in late 1989, the study establishes that



the press is clearly not objective; the columns devoted to the glorification of the anti-Mandal actions, especially the episodes of self-immolation — the visual coverage and space taken up on the front page as distinct from the inside pages and so on — make it very clear that the journalist is not at all playing a detached reporter's role. What stands out sharply in the content analysis is that when communal violence took place on a frightening scale in 1989, the press played it down and gave it very little detailed attention, although as many as 400 people died in that violence. The young journalist and scholar has even compiled a relative scale of values—the press' valuation of lives lost during the anti-Mandal stir compared with the lives lost during the 1989 communal violence. The findings are not at all flattering to the vaunted secularism of the national press.

There are no scholarly studies yet which rigorously go into the press coverage of late 1990 developments in Ayodhya. However, looking at the sample available, virtually every newspaper sinned— from my kind of standpoint — by publishing such headlines and stories as “Kar Sevaks Storm Ayodhya Complex” and “Security Forces Overwhelmed” in quite tendentious accounts.

One aspect of the journalists' dilemma is that in the old days they were told not to identify communities but to play communal tensions down, by featuring such news in a sanitised way and presumably neutralising the social mischief. Several people continue to advocate that approach, even though it has become rather difficult to sustain. News reports conveying the idea, in celebratory tones, that the mosque's structure had been damaged, if not destroyed (some Hindi papers suggested the latter), had nothing to do with such legitimate problems. They were inflammatory and seriously misleading. After the events of November 2, 1990, the numbers game that various newspapers played was truly horrifying. One newspaper described the police firing on November 2 as “a massacre bigger than the Jalianwala Bagh massacre.”

The point that comes out in all this reporting is that, with certain honourable exceptions, the press turned kar sevak in response to the crisis. Similarly, on the Mandal issue, it has been pointed out that it virtually boiled down to which caste the journalist (or for that matter, the intellectual) belonged. The positions people took on reservation tended to be more or less directly determined (though there are distinguished exceptions on both sides of the fence) by their social origins — it often appeared to be as crude as that.

Fortunately in the case of the communal challenge, it was not as bad as that. This is suggested by several analytical articles, editorials and feature reports published on the subject of Ayodhya. However, in the coverage of the

“storming of the Babri Masjid”, banner headlines, tremendous exaggeration, a high degree of sensationalism and, most of all, the breathless tone of the journalist kar sevak were injected into newscopy. One tendency was to depict the issue as some kind of freedom struggle — easily recognisable to the older generation and those who have studied history. The idea of sacrifice mixed up with spiritualism and revivalism, the idea of young people plunging into the struggle in a death-defying spirit, was reported in a celebratory way.

The end result was that the press, even respectable national newspapers, went horribly astray in presenting the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue. Editorials in various newspapers, and columns written by several correspondents and well-recognised commentators did serious damage to the overall situation. This is not because there is any evidence that the press directly influences large masses of people (certainly the press does not have the power to do this in the Indian context) but because, unlike other institutions which have let us down in the post 1977 period, such as investigative agencies like the CBI, Parliament and, in some cases, opposition parties, the press had performed its democratic role rather effectively and commanded credibility.

Speaking individually as a journalist, but with some idea of what is happening in the institution of the press, I propose that we need to sort out our ideas relating to the basic character and future of our society. India is a pluralistic society in terms of social structures, religions, languages, ethnicity, nationalities, ideologies, politically outlooks, virtually everything. What is frequently described as a threat to national unity is the play of these various factors, including Centre-State relations. This is part of the challenge of holding India together and journalists, as citizens, surely have a responsibility in this respect.

We also have to be clear about India's secular future. The challenge that has been posed by the Advanis, the Singhals and various others (including mediapersons) has to be met frontally. They have challenged the whole basic structure of secularism — the very direction independent India attempted to take.

They say they do not advocate theocracy, but they want to reverse even the imperfect secular progress we have made. When Advani talks about “positive secularism” in India, we must remind ourselves of “guided democracy” in Pakistan under the generals. In both cases, the key concepts and practices have been so qualified, under the guise of doing justice to the cultural and spiritual particularism of the society, that virtually nothing is left of their integrity and credibility. The ideological crux of “positive secularism” is the demand for the recognition



of the hegemony of majoritarian Hindu religious sentiments and emotions by the state, by political parties and by intimidated minorities for the greater glory of "national unity".

There is an attempt also to reach out to those who want to preserve the caste system or, at least, not to do much about it. This is where the link between the anti-reservation movement and the Ayodhya campaign lies. On the one hand, there is an attempt to keep alive the divisive forces of a caste society, which is reprehensible from any progressive intellectual or moral standpoint. We may call it our *ancien regime* — because it is based on what has survived from feudal times, inequality, discrimination and a very insulting view of the rest of the world. At the same time, present-day conservatism or reaction wants to broaden its base and overcome barriers to communal mobilisation. It appeals aggressively to the urge for national unity, misusing and falsely interpreting history; the idea appeals to large sections of the electorate — or that is the assumption made by those who have resorted to this game plan. I think that unless this is understood, particularly by the media, we will miss a great deal of what is happening with respect to communalism.

The time has therefore come to look seriously at the concept and substance of secularism as applied to the Indian context. We are told by many a pundit that the Indian case is very different, that the secularism of Western societies does not belong here. This basically means that the idea that religion should not be mixed up with politics, the separation of church from state and state-funded education, is regarded as an alien view-point.

Over the years secularism has been devalued where it is not denied, and the time has come for every serious or honest intellectual to take a position. My position is that the basic propositions involved in the secular idea are the same everywhere. Indian secularism must be expressed in the universal propositions that there shall be no mixing up of religion and politics, no mixing up of church and state, and that there shall be equality for all before the law.

The point is that the battle for communal harmony and secularism must be understood as a just and democratic striving. India's history is characterized by a significant prevalence of communal and religious harmony; unfortunately there have been many breaches and violations over the centuries, which contradict the equation pressed by Hindu chauvinists: that Hindutva equals tolerance, always. Today, anybody who ruptures or threatens communal harmony in any way is committing a serious offence against humanity and national unity. Without communal harmony, there can be no civil society, no rule of law, no question of modern democracy, no pursuit

of social justice, no economic development, no stable politics.

Finally, to move to conceptual clarity, we must clear the confusion that often arises when Indians discuss and debate secularism, tolerance and harmony. I have already presented my irreducible definition of secularism as the separation of politics from religion, of state from church and of the assertion of the just principle that there shall be no 'preferred' religion under the Constitution. Now we must go beyond this.

In the first place, let us not confuse secularism and communal harmony. The latter relates to a project that has been a precious part of our history—but its violation has also been a part of it. It is (as I noted) a myth, an unhistorical claim, that Hinduism has always been characterized by tolerance; the historical experience of Jainism and Buddhism, particularly in South India, will bear testimony to a record of violent suppression by Hindu rulers and religious leaders. On the other hand, there have been several religious traditions and leaders — the Bhakti movement, the Sufis, the Tamil saints, Guru Nanak, various Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Buddhist and other leaders— who have promoted the project of communal harmony in our society. There were also great and wise rulers such as Akbar who valued, and consciously built, communal harmony as a project. They cannot be called "secular" in any modern sense and indeed, many of them were mystics. It was a very good thing that ideas of tolerance, brotherhood, compassion, human solidarity cutting across narrow differences were embraced at that point of time in Indian history. But secularism is something else.

Like the idea of a nation, secularism is of modern origin, Secularism is an arrangement — tied to reason and modern ideas of progress, law, science, and morality — which is precious in itself. It is also an instrumentality through which a modern society with a staggering range of problems can conduct its affairs and advance on a reasonable, democratic basis. Secularism also involves a fairness principle founded in ethics as much as in politics; it must be understood and handled as the oxygen without which India cannot survive as one nation.

Intellectuals, and those involved or interested in public life must be articulate on this issue—especially when there is a conscious political and mass-level attempt to lead us in a dangerous direction. People committed to secularism and communal harmony, with an understanding of the malignant communal problem, can do something to deepen public understanding and change the current reality in their own way. Surely journalists, who have a stake in democracy and in a progressive future, cannot stand aloof from this challenge. ■