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AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE AS SOCIALLY MEANINGFUL ACTION

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Communal violence is a topic which is again on the rise in South Asia. Over the past decade, the reoccurrence of communal violence has caused immense concern and theoreticians are discovering that discussions of the violence as the flare-up of primordial irrational sentiments inherent in human nature are inadequate. Instead many are realising that communal violence represents a socially meaningful action derived from social and political processes. The eruption of tensions has been encouraged by political institutions, by resource struggles and through the use of symbols meant to play on collective identities. By intermittent reference to Sri Lanka, this essay will explicitly show how communal violence is not an irrational emergence of tensions, but rather a socially meaningful action derived from the search for ethnic identity in an uncertain world coupled with the socialisation processes of modern day political institutions in South Asia.

1. Socially Meaningful Action

Communal violence can be just as socially meaningful as other human action and must be regarded as such despite the nefarious undertones it carries. But what do we mean by a "socially meaningful action?" And why then would communal violence be deemed as such?

"One of Britain's foremost sociologists" and incidentally the new Director of the London School of Economics (*Economist* 1996: 39), Anthony Giddens defines meaningful activities as:

> *Human actions which are carried out for definite reasons, and with specific purposes in mind. The vast bulk of human behaviour is composed of meaningful activities, this being one of the main characteristics which separates human conduct from the movement of objects and events in the natural world* (*Giddens*, 1993: 757).

Two key words come out of the above assertion: reasons and purposes. This essay will show that communalism is a decisive action meant to maintain ethnic identity and therefore a meaningful action. In the extreme this erupts as communal violence.

Banerjee argues that communal riots are *"essentially irrational outbursts of brutality ... generated by communal ideologies..."* However, while he calls these socially meaningful actions irrational, he carries on to say that *"communal ideologies are primarily responsible for the felt need to destroy and perpetually subjugate the rival community"* (*Banerjee* 1990: 41) thus indicating the very design of the albeit violent means. Such definitive purpose would render assertions of the irrationality of communal violence as invalid. For while the means to the end may be questionable from some moral standpoints, the ends represent the reason, the purpose if you will for the action. So for the collective engaging in communal violence, the purpose is clear, the reason is lucid, the action is therefore meaningful and not the irrational move often indicated by past theorists as Durkheim (*Srinivasan* 1990: 305).

For instance, in the case of Sri Lanka, Bastian argues that while dacoity and communal programmes are sometimes envisioned as aberrations from the "normal", they instead should be conceived as a "process" (*Bastian* 1990: 288-289). As the Sinhalese majority increasingly took hold of political power and economic resources (*Meyer* 1984: 151) much to the discontent of the Tamil minority, the impending struggle became increasingly ethnically polarised (*Bastian* 1990: 293). The formation of identity was divided along ethnic lines because those mobilising Sinhalese nationalist support did so through elite expressions of Buddhist rhetoric (*Obeyesekere* 1984: 154). However, it was the quest for identity rather than the religion itself that is the key to this process. In the case of communal violence, the religion thereby becomes simply the tool used largely by elites to make the means to the end viable (*Engineer* 1989: 2-3). For as Fuller points out, *"outbreaks of communal violence ... have hardly ever been caused by religious differences alone"* (*Fuller* 1992: 258). The means becomes first political segregation and if necessary, violence. The sought after end, if achieved is that of definitive ethnic identity rendering the search socially meaningful even in the context of communal violence.

2. Individual Search for Ethnic identity

Collective violence is not *"merely the eruption of unreasoning pre-social passions, but a logic which is both moral and collective"* (*Spencer* 1992: 271). *Spencer* articulately points out the collective nature of communal violence and brilliantly places attention on crowd psychology first addressed by Durkheim (*Spencer* 1992: 264). Kakar also feels that the *"collective need for the preservation of [the] core of group identity"* can lead to communal strife (*Kakar* 1990: 140). However this leaves us with a vital question. How do individuals get involved in such crowd mentality and collective endeavours leading to the socially meaningful action of communal violence as in the case of South Asia?

Appiah uses the work of Charles Taylor to draw a connection between individual identity and collective identity as follows:

> *"Individual identity is seen as having two major dimensions. There is a collective dimension, the intersection of their collective identities, and there is a personal dimension, consisting of other socially or morally important features"* (*Appiah* 1994: 151).

The work of Spencer lingers heavily on the importance of this collective identity, but it is also important to understand how individual social and moral features are nurtured even in the midst of such atrocities as seen in collective violence. In the modern context this is enabled through the rationalisation of communal affiliations. Banerjee argues that *"the communal problem ... is a modern phenomenon"* (*Banerjee* 1990: 37) and arguably, the individual's rationalisation of communal violence could be largely attributed to the search for ethnic identity in the secularised modern world.

In the context of the "modern," De Vos asserts that ethnicity consists of the *"subjective, symbolic or emblematic use by a group of people ... meant to differentiate themselves from other groups"* (*De Vos* 1975: 16). Ethnicity can thereby be linked to the individual and group desire to maintain a distinctiveness. Identity has been identified as

> *"one of the grand promises of the modern... It was hoped that dominion of collective suppression and prevailing linguistic patterns would end and that identity would be based in one's own person and one's own responsibility... Identity was the paradise of a secularised promise"* (*Hoffmann-Axthelm* 1992: 200).

But for South Asia, this "paradise" could only be at best, a utopian dream. The very changes created by the intrusion of modernity and secularism posed a great challenge to identity. Thus, individuals were left with a sense of pugnacity which evolved into a need to regroup and heavily blockade against modern threats such as population growth, urbanisation, industrialisation, growing literacy, Westernisation and most importantly secularisation. It is no wonder that in a volatile and changing situation that the individual strives to reinforce identity and thus communal bonds.

For the collective, this identity is based often on difference and distinction. Goldman asserts, *"difference can be straightforwardly exclusionary . . .* [and therefore] *deathly dangerous"* (*Goldman* 1994:12). From a political perspective this exclusion is necessary, but from a social perspective it is disastrous. Exclusion allows for identity formation on the basis of differentiated religio-cultural factors. The vehement eruption of nefarious outrage is often the result of this struggle to maintain an insular distinction on a social level albeit through political means.

Politically, elites are able to encourage exclusionary support for their causes by utilizing religion as an instrument for political gain within the state apparatus (*Engineer* 1989: 88-90). Brass points out that the formation of strong identity is not to be attributed to the religious itself, but rather, mobility *"results from the conscious manipulation of selected symbols ... by ...elite groups in economic and political competition with one another"* (*Brass* 1991: 76). This manipulation by elites can be profound. They seek to mobilise groups previously untouched for example, the peasantry or industrial working class which has at times been more difficult to mobilise (*Baxi* 223). This leads to populous politics which are seemingly politically effective for people seeking their ethnic identity in the tumultuous and ever-changing modern world. They are increasingly turning to communal affiliates.

This is not to present the opinion that communal identities are solely the product of mobilisation by a charismatic or elite leader. Rather, organised violence was the product of collective action emanating from a "popular mood" of ordinary people (*Spencer* 1984: 188). Through the eruption of violence from communal affiliations, everyday life too becomes more divided (*Kanapathipillai* 1990: 324) and the propensity for elites to act upon that popular mood is enhanced.

In the case of Sri Lanka, Meyer points out, that forces of secularism and modern use of English were seen to pose a threat to the majority notion of identity (*Meyer* 1984: 148-149). Sinhalese nationalists set out to eradicate the influence of English in a policy of anti-colonialism (*Dharmadasa* 1992: 308). For colonialism was argued to have greatly benefited the Tamil minority (*Suriyakumaran* 1990: 15). The pertinacious attempts of Sinhalese nationalists to preserve their culture, ethnic solidarity and integrity were amassed with the passage of the 1956 Sinhala Only Bill (*Tambiah* 1991: 72) meant not to necessarily disenfranchise Tamils in particular, but rather to eliminate the growing influence of English which bore a bitter reminder of the not so distant colonial past (*Gunasinghe* 1989: 253). Seeing themselves as a minority in the South Asian region, the Sinhalese fostered attempts to maintain cultural distinction from Indian counterparts (*Manor* 1984: 9). Buddhism was given a place of primacy, though not established as the state religion, thereby allowing questions of religious identity to be cemented in the struggle for state control (*de Silva* 1988: 134). *"The only purpose this [institutional framework] now serves is to defend Sinhalese Buddhist interests against the threat posed - as they see it - by Tamil forces within and outside the country"* (*de Silva* 1988: 158.) Many deem the Sri Lankan conflict as religious in nature due to the Sinhalese Buddhist claim that Sri Lanka is the Land of Lanka, chosen by the Buddha himself. (*McGowan* 1992: 7) However it was only through the use of religion as a tool for mobilisation that forces were able to gain politically.

Barlas & Wanasundera point out that such action proved to be a colossal disadvantage for Tamils who were all but reduced to "second-class citizens" (*Barlas & Wanasundera* 1992: 11). The threat of losing such an important symbol of identity as that of language led to much hostility on the part of the Tamil community as witnessed in the formation of TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front), a party working for the separate state of Tamil Eelam through non-violent political means (*Tambiah* 1992: 67). Increased suppression and lack of viable political enterprise however led to militant insurgencies and the emergence of the infamous guerrilla crusaders/terrorists, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (*Tasker* 1995: 38; *Canada IRB* 1988: 6).

In this regard, Sri Lanka provides an example of communal violence derived from modern socialisation processes of political institutions as well as the politicians ability to manipulate crowd sentiments through the offering of identity (*Mansingh* 1988: 171). It is precisely the secular ideals of equality, democracy and development that have allowed for the emergence of greater competition and therefore the creation of greater "religious" and ethnic consciousness as an instrument of the struggle.

Bjorkman argues that *"as long as change occurs and as long as social relations are disrupted, human kind will seek some mental or spiritual solace from those who at least pretend to know"* (*Bjorkman* 1988: 17). Nandy points out the impending danger. For identity and sense of "self" discovered through religion as an ideology, as it is forwarded by the secularist elites, rather than as a faith ignores other concepts of being which define the "self" (*Nandy* 1990: 73). When faced with such social change people are forced to *"fervent[ly] search for social meaning and for roots"* (*Bjorkman* 1988: 7). This leads to collective action and thus a reconstruction of social reality itself through adherence to offered ideology (*Gunasinghe* 1989: 247).

The very pressures of modernity and secularisation force the individual to seek out greater meaning and action to their lives. The meaning becomes the religion or whatever other communal affiliation organisations may offer. The action becomes the preservation of insular identity which can take the route of secular participation or communal violence. Communal violence that flares up as a result of the pressures of modernity then becomes a very socially meaningful action according to the definition provided by Giddens.

3. Communal Violence - A Meaningful Action Resulting from Secularism

With the coming of the modern secular state the politics of South Asia have grown increasingly more communal (*Nissan & Starrat* 1990: 24-26) thus bearing vast social consequence. For embedded within the very soul of modernity and

secularism is the desire to override difference, to suppress inequality and to create institutions that allow for full societal implications (*Madan* 1991: 394). Despite the altruism inferred, the superimposition of these goals upon the hierarchical structure of South Asian society very much led to a violent imbalance that still continues to rage (*Nissan* 1990: 25).

First, the very hierarchical structure of South Asia and effects of colonial policy upon this was largely misunderstood by Westerners and thus dealt with somewhat dubiously (*Spencer* 1995: 243). Pandey asserts that such communal tendencies along religious cleavages were a construction of the writing of the colonial period. For in report after report, he asserts that the tale is as follows: *"Evil clashes with evil. Good intervenes. Order is restored"* (*Pandey* 1990: 109). Rather than understanding religion and difference as the integrated fabric of society integral to functioning, institutions created by the British colonialists pre-empted the formation of identity along communal lines precisely by defining the society in such a way (*Spencer* 1990: 8). The coming of colonial rule politicised inequality and structured the divisions based on ethnic and caste lines in much of South Asia thus socially altering the existing framework (*Beteille* 1983: 35). Through the imposition of political uniformity, the seeds of communalism were sown (Nissan 1990: 26). Secular boundaries were institutionalised and the individual was left to utilise those divisions in order to gain economically or politically through the assertion of communal, often religious, affiliation.

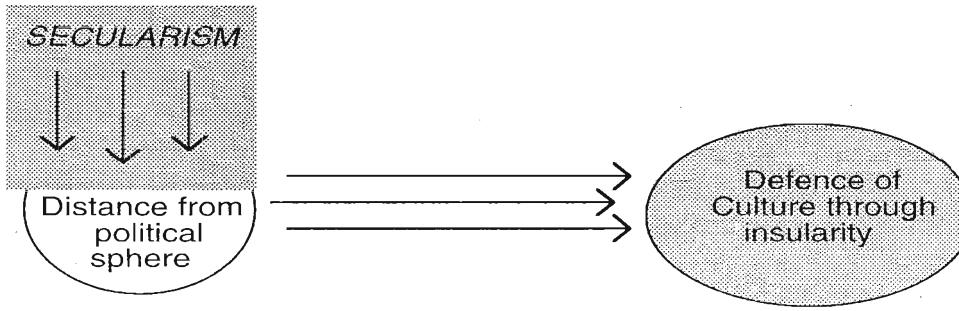
Secularism then poses an interesting dilemma. For while its proponents preach the need for a separation of religious beliefs from the state, it appears that it is these very religious beliefs that nurture the tolerance that need to be included. The exclusion of such principles has been conducive to social change which has disrupted identity and enhanced incendiary communal violence in secular societies.

Madan believes that religion and the tolerance of difference is embedded in the identity of South Asian society (*Madan* 1991: 398). For this reason, countries such as Sri Lanka were able to handle that ethnic diversity until the last century (*Mansingh* 1988: 1974). However the coming of modernity and increased secularism, has been divisive since its incipience for the secularist state is not the tolerant, neutral force it was enacted to be (*Pandey* 1990: 119). Tambiah draws our attention to the burning of the Jaffna library, the main Tamil archive, by Sinhalese police (*Tambiah* 1992:5). States such as Sri Lanka have used institutionalised and ethnically divided apparatus such as police and military intervention to quell conflicts (*Obeyesekere* 1984: 160). More appalling is that in many cases, these forces kill more people than the communal rioters themselves (*Das* 1990: 24). Explicitly, through the promotion of what Brass calls "pseudo-secularism" (*Brass* 1995: 229) the doors have been opened to adequately promote the religious tensions and hostilities that lament as fundamentalism and evolve to communal violence.

Mansingh illustrates arguments first asserted by Smith indicating that Buddhist philosophies *"are conducive to religious freedom for individuals and groups, separation of the political functions of the state from the patronage of any one religion and respect for different faiths"* (*Mansingh* 1988: 173). Nandy also conforms to this stance in his belief that rather than abandoning religion, the state could do well with utilising the peaceful and tolerant premises carried within it. He explicitly condemns states for refusing to envision the ability of religion to *"link up different faiths or ways of life according to its own configurative principles"* (*Nandy* 1990: 71-72). Needed is *"a new state ideology that recognises the importance of faith in people's lives, and stresses the message of tolerance said to be present in all Indian faiths rather than secular neutrality"* (*Brass* 1995: 229) which is feigned at best. Faith is not something to be ignored, but rather a definitive pattern that needs to be addressed not by populous politics, but through an overall banner of tolerance.

Second, there is something to be said for the ability of South Asian society to withstand its structure despite the history of changing rulers (*Saberwal* 1995: 40). Saberwal's examination of the resilience of South Asian societal frameworks regardless of top level power changes (*Saberwal* 1995: 4) can be used to shed light upon the significance of communal violence. South Asian society was able to retain social autonomy largely through the use of defensive mechanisms which Saberwal calls "social blanks" (*Saberwal* 1995: 129). Instead of fighting on coming political intruders, Saberwal indicates that in order to maintain the social fabric, people defended cultural insularity by distancing themselves from the political sphere and "mak[ing] peace with the ruler" of the day (*Saberwal* 129). Increased participation forced by the secular system however intruded upon this ability to maintain cultural insularity through defensive means.

While Saberwal's discussion is limited to caste in Indian politics, the argument can be applied to the communal nature of South Asian politics at large. For if we expand these "prerequisites" offered by Saberwal into the realm of secularism, we can observe the following pattern. Secularism puts those once defending themselves through distance into the very ring of fire they wish to avoid. At the same time they are still keen to defend the insularity and maintain identity.



From the diagram, you can see that the secular pressure exerted upon the societal defence mechanisms causes an imbalance to the system for which it must compensate. As significant pressure is exerted on the *distance* defence mechanism, this causes the society to strengthen its only viable alternative which becomes a greater *insulation* of the culture. This causes an emphasis on segmental boundaries and thus a proclivity for communal tendencies and communal violence to arise. Certainly this bears social meaning for not only does the society itself then change, but moreover, the eruption of communal violence is an aggravated effect of insularity.

The increased pressure of secularism placed upon defence mechanisms fuels the desire to maintain cultural insularity. For example, increased struggles for resources forces increased participation in state apparatus and disallows for distance from the political sphere. Social changes resulting from conflict for material resources are often dealt with through communal politics. This is not to place too much attention on communalism as simply a question of economic struggle as asserted by those such as Chandra (*Chandra* 1984: 40), but instead to indicate the multi-dimensional orientation of communalism as a way to preserve identity. In the case of Sri Lanka, competition for economic resources and political placement increased during the British colonial period (*Gunasinghe* 1989: 250; *Alavi & Harriss* 1989: 171) and led directly to an inability for Sri Lankan communities to distance themselves from the political sphere. Consequently, the consciousness of identity and need for insularity was increased. Spencer states in the context of Sri Lanka, *"modern ethnic identities have themselves been shaped by political circumstances"* (*Spencer* 1990: 4). Much of this has been done by participating in colonial political constructs which paradoxically challenge the very core of identity through institutionalised indifference to it. This is exemplified in the secular treatment of minority claims. Seemingly political gains can only be obtained through the assertion of group affiliation.

Such paradoxes of the secularist state have created an atmosphere wherein individuals are better provided for through adhering to group affiliations which may go against the very secularist political culture the state intended to impose. In a very influential piece regarding the recognition of multiculturalism in state policies, Charles Taylor points out that *"identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or incompatible picture of themselves"* (*Taylor* 1994: 75). In order to portray a self-derived meaningful identity, many look to communal portals.

Brass asserts that in multi-ethnic societies for instance, it is not the existence of differences that is the determinant of competition for new opportunities. Instead this depends upon how that ethnic difference is turned into an ethnic consciousness through the spread of modernisation processes such as through industrialisation, urbanisation, and the achievement of literacy to name a few (*Brass* 1991:32). This increasingly makes it easier then to rationalise participation even if through communal tactics.

This becomes a rather frightening concept when, the end begins to justify the means to the end regardless of consequence. For instance, the individual may seek to justify terrorism and murder by showing that it is done with deeper notions of preservation and continuity at the forefront of thought (*Bjorkman* 1988: 2-3). Spencer points out that this stance however may be fundamentally flawed for in an attempt to transcend the every-day life practices of the population at large, the Western philosophies have left the population with the ability to "rationalise" carnage (*Spencer* 1995 236). By removing religion from the political sphere and replacing it with humanely removed understanding of tolerance which emphasises rational rather than spirituality, Western modernity has left the society with a dangerous notion of "cause and effect" tied to the power of gains.

What we see taking place is an increasing state isolation from the realm of religious tolerance that has indeed been nurtured through the rationalisation of social activity. Spencer illustrates this with the example of the Sinhalese Jathika Chintanaya group who stated that:

> *"The Western Chintanaya is tied to extreme rationalism. but we do not have a term (an equivalent) in Sinhala for rationalism. Instead we believe in "Cause and Effect." If we are to follow rationalism, which is a very dangerous thing, then you can even kill your father and rationalise it. Get me anything and I will rationalise it."* (qtd. in *Spencer* 1995: 236).

Goonetileke points out Voltaire's assertion that *"If we believe in absurdities, we shall commit atrocities"* (qtd. in *Tambiah* 1992: 5). For only in the rationalisation of identity preservation can communalism become possible and probable thereby making it socially meaningful. Communal violence thereby becomes extremely socially meaningful for if we refer back to the definition provided by Giddens, the action is believed by the individual to have both a reason and a purpose.

4. Conclusion

No longer can occurrences of communal violence fall under the precepts of irrationality; but rather, it has become painstakingly clear that the very modern forces that sought to secularise South Asia were also those that fuelled the violent reactions and revivalist movements. In a valiant search for identity, those that once had political distance and cultural insularity to reinforce the very structure that made society durable, began to form collective allegiances and fall into collective ideology. Communal violence is a result of modernity and the stresses it places on identity. It is therefore neither a departure from everyday life nor an aberration; but a very socially meaningful action with both premise and consequence. Only in finally addressing the viability of this atrocity as a function of the search for ethnic identity will we be able to quell its existence and offer real solutions to its demise.

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