

## Religion and Politics in India: Implications for Religious Minorities (1990-2010)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine critically the active role of religion in Indian politics in the years 1990-2010. Constitutionally, India is a secular state and does not claim any religion as her official religion. Despite having such a status, her attitude towards religious minorities is indomitable. This anomaly has provided Hindutva to play a key role in her politics. This role of Hindutva became prominent especially in the last two decades. The most significant departure from secularism is observed in the 1990s that set the stage for the rise of the right wing political parties. They have used Hindutva as an instrument of populism in their electoral campaigns. This became evident more and more in the emergence of the BJP as one of the major political parties on Indian political scene. This research attempts to analyze that how the emerging role of religion in the mainstream politics in India threatens the viability of India as a secular state. Besides, this also attempts to analyze how historically this role of religion in Indian politics has implications for minorities especially in the years 1990-2010. Descriptive-analytical method is being used to substantiate the questions.

**KEY WORDS:** Religion, Secularism, India, Hinduism, Hindutva, Religious Minorities

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### INTRODUCTION

India is a multi-religious country. India is the land of Hindu majority with a large number of Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs as notable minorities. As a result, to meet the challenges of such diverse society, India framed its political system on the principles of secularism. This principle of secularism embodies separation of religion from politics. This philosophy was the main reason that kept most of the minorities to stay in India in order to enjoy equal rights of citizenship. As a result, a large portion of the Muslim population decided to stay in India. Christians and Sikhs also decided to stay in India. They had the belief that they would have their respective religious as well as political freedom.

Secularism was an imported philosophy. The Colonial Masters adopted this philosophy as the law of the land without analyzing Indian society. They failed to see whether this society could assimilate this philosophy. The People of this part of the world had strong affiliations with their religions. Their respective religions rule their respective social, economic and political life. Therefore, this relation was inseparable. This study will highlight the role of religion in Indian politics in the land. Besides, how it has challenged the secular status of India on regular intervals threatening security of the minorities? How people have supported the philosophy of Hindutva that has resulted into continuous communal violence etc? Over and above, this research attempts to analyze that how the emerging role of religion in the mainstream politics in India threatens the viability of India as a secular state. Besides, this also attempts to analyze how historically this role of religion in Indian politics has implications for minorities especially in the years 1990-2010.

### Conceptualizing and Operationalization of Religion and Politics:

#### Religion:

Defining religion precisely and universally is an arduous task. There is no consensus at one standard definition. The adherence of all world religions are fanatically convinced that their respective religion is the only way to be followed and its outlook is the only ideology that makes sense. This is the reason behind this disagreement. These

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are the common claims of all the major world religions. They vary from each other in their beliefs and practices. Therefore, their points of view should be analyzed in order to understand this complex phenomenon.

Literally, the word, 'religion', means "continuously tying all together". William James gives the most common perspective about religion. He explains that religion is to believe in the divine authority. The basic purpose of the human beings should only be to adjust themselves in the framework of practices and beliefs that the authority has laid down (James, 1901). H.L Menken supports him. H.L Menken defines religion as the struggle of man to fulfill the desire of his God Who has the control of his destiny, and by sincerely obeying his commands, man is rewarded with good fortunes in his life (Mencken, 2009).

In Contrast to the above approaches, there are scholars who have discussed religion completely with different perspectives. One among them is Karl Marx. He considers religion as an intoxicating agent for the lower class of the society when their demands and rights are exploited by the upper class of the society. This was how religion got its birth in the society where the oppressed could register their protest against the oppressors. In the words of Karl Marx, religion "is the sigh of oppressed creature, the heart of heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions; It is the opium of the people" (James, 1901).

Similarly, Michael York of Bath Spa University expresses his opinion while defining religion. He defines religion as a three dimensional phenomenon. It consists of the world we live in, humanity, and supernatural authority. The relations among these three dimensions are regularized through set rules and regulations under the cover of religious laws. He further explains that religion is not limited only to these three factors as some of the world religions do not follow these rules yet they attract a large number of followers. Anthony Wallace also defines religion as "a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which it mobilizes Supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man or nature" (Griffiths, 2007). Khalil Gibran in his book "The Prophet" gives the simplest definition of religion. His perspective is of Sufism. He refers to the story of a saint. People asked him his understanding of religion. He replied them that "all actions and all thoughts" is what he understands of religion (Gibran, 1923).

From the above varieties of definitions of religion, it is hard to conclude keeping in view the complex nature of the ter. However, it could be held that it is the unification of masses that surrender their rights in favor of the divine authority and lead their lives according to the rules and regulation laid down by that authority to smoothly and peacefully operate the system of life socially as well as politically. In the light of the above discussed definitions, the role of religion in politics will be analyzed in this research.

### **Politics:**

In the simplest words, politics is the struggle for power. Before discussing the definitions of various scholars, first of all, we will discuss the origin of the word. The word politics is derived from a Greek word Polis. The term was used for city or city states. This word gave birth to another word "Polities". Polities were used for the people. Hence, the word politics was used for governing states and people. The word "polis" is still used in modern times while referring to modern or developed cities. However, the word with a little bit modification Metro-Polis is often used. The Roman origin of the word politics is from the word "Politicus". They used this word for any activity related to state (Jr & Wittkopf, 2004).

Like the above term of religion, the word politics also has a lot of variations with respect to its definitions. Power politics is regarded as a struggle for power. The liberalists consider politics as a struggle for consensus rather than acquiring power. However, the liberal-idealists further elaborate politics to be an agreement among world community over common values and mutual cooperation. In this era of globalization, two new concepts about politics have emerged in the names of 'low politics' and 'high politics'. The former concept stands for the role of international organizations in politics. In this type of politics, the global issues related to masses are addresses. Social, economic, environmental, and demographic issues as well as the relations between government and people are dealt with. The later concept addresses the geostrategic issues of national as well as of international security that helps in determining war and peace situations (Ibid).

Idealists view politics as the science of government that deals with rules and regulations and to promote peace and stability in the state. It also strengthens unity through nationhood to counter any foreign adventurism. The last and the most popular approach that has been followed since ancient times is the realists' approach. They fully support the concept of power politics. They regard the system to be anarchic and the only way to survive is none other than power. They simply define politics as "the activities aim at getting another actor to do something he would not do otherwise" (James, 1901).

Winston Churchill views politics in these words as "the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month and next year and to have the ability afterwards to explain why it did not happen" (Griffiths, 2007). Mathew Quay also explains politics in the light of W. Churchill's perspective. According to him, politics is

“the art of taking money from the few and votes from many under the pretext of protecting one from the other” (Jr & Wittkopf, 2004). In this research, the term politics will be analyzed in the light of the definition of American Heritage Dictionary. The dictionary defines religion as “the art or science of government or governing especially the governing of political entity such as nation and the administration and control of its internal and external affairs” (Davies, 1976).

One of the prominent scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and leading political scientists, E.E. Schattschneider gave his model of politics in his research publication entitled “the Semi-Sovereign People: A Realists’ View of Democracy in America” in 1960. In this model, he regards politics as a conflict and how these conflicts attract or expel parties. With the addition of new participant, a new set of ideas and approaches are added that pollute actual conflict. Defining these conflicts is the most important task of the politics. He further explains politics is fully dependent on people and how these people are divided into different factions, parties, and sects. Issues determine the status of each and every individual in a political system as to which group he belongs to and also tell him who is with him and who is against. What is the strength of opposition that helps him in making the conclusion that who will be victorious? He concludes politics is to eliminate conflicts or resist conflict or exploit the conflicts. So politics revolves around how issues are formed and defined. How conflicts are created and resolved (Schattschneider, 1960)?

### **Religions in India:**

India religiously is a plural society. Some are indigenous and some are of foreign origin. There are four of indigenous origins. Hinduism is the most ancient religion of the land. Its history spans over five thousand years. It is the major religion of the modern India. Its followers are almost eighty percent of the total population. In the hierarchy after Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism have ancient links to the land. Both the religions flourished in the era of 500 BC. Today, they have nominal representation in the country. They are almost one percent of the total population. Similarly, Sikhism originated in the second half of fifteenth century under the leadership of Guru Nanak. It has short history as compared to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It is the fourth largest religion. Its followers are about three percent of Indian population (Hopkins, 2005).

There are foreign religions. They are also four in number. They are being discussed in accordance with the numbers of its followers. Therefore, Islam comes first in this sense. It is the second largest religion being followed in the country. Islam flourished during the period of Mughals in the Sub-Continent. Concurrently, it is followed by thirteen percent of the Indian total population. Christianity is the other major religion of foreign origin. It blossomed during the hundred year’s rule of the British. It grew larger due to the conversions of a large number of lower caste Hindus. These Hindus were leading a miserable life in their society. Today, it is the third most populous religion spanning three percent of India’s total population. Zoroastrian and Judaism are the other two religions of foreign origin. Their presence is nominal and their followers are thousands in number. Thus, the brief survey of the religions of Indian society is given in the preceding lines (Ibid).

### **Relationship of Religion and Politics in India:**

Religion is the collection of rules that regulates life. Similarly, politics is the collection of rules in order to regulate a sub-system of the system. Politics also means to deal with the affairs of the people. In the light of these definitions, it is difficult to separate religion from politics. However, religion is the combination of rules to regulate life of the people and resolve their everyday issues in the light of their religious belief and social structure. It is impossible to keep both religion and politics apart. Religion is deeply entrenched in the social as well as political fabric of India (Kamath, 2005). It is, therefore, their separation is difficult if not impossible.

No doubt that India is the world largest democracy and has a secular political system. However, the role of religion is significant in its politics. History bears witness to how it has worked as the determining factor in the results of the elections of the country. Its role became vibrant during 1990s. The BJP, the rightist political force, exploited the anti-minority sentiments and clinched the mandate of the people. This mandate of the right wing political parties determined the people’s attachment with their religion (James, 1901). This gives birth to a question as to how this confessional politics found room to rise in the secular and liberal India. This is being analyzed discussing the major religions of India and their role in politics.

### **Hinduism and Politics in India:**

Hinduism is the major religion of the country. Besides, it is the native religion of the land. It has an ancient history. Therefore all the rulers have attempted to legitimize their rule through religion throughout its history. This practice remained for thousands of years. Here we will analyze Hinduism’s role in politics during the Colonial Era. The transition of power from the Mughals to the British was not only the transition of power but it was also the transition

of people fate into the hands of their new masters. India ruled for centuries by the invaders of foreign origin. The Hindus of Indian Sub-Continent also realized that it was an appropriate time to change and decide the fate of their own state. They did not want to remain any more second rate citizens on the land of their own under the rule of the foreign invaders (Falk, 2006).

The revolt started in the shape of 1857 War of Independence. The Hindus were locals and were a majority of the land. They decided to seize the opportunity to regain the reign of the land of their ancestors. The unification of the community was necessary for the realization of their dream. Nothing else except religion could make this unification. This freedom movement started in the shadow of religion that was the bedrock of their political struggle. Hindus had reached to the conclusion that they had been easy preys to the foreign invaders. Their religion is caste ridden. As a result, they had loose bonding within its religion. The policy of hate against other religions was decided to be adopted in order to unite the people. This philosophy is known as unity through hate in the Hindu community (Hanninan, 2005).

Bengal is known as the motherland for such politics. The Hindu community started anti-colonial religious movement in the province. The services of the local writers were hired in order to mobilize the masses. Those writers gave air to the religious sentiments of the masses in their writings. They used religion to get their political aims. This was a beautiful blend of religion with politics. Religion was regarded as the whole and sole authority to govern the lives of the masses of the region. This blend of politics with religion made the bond more powerful and strong. These writers gave the name of Bahart Mata (Mother India) to the land of India. This created a lot of anger among the common Janta against the British. The Hindus used to consider that the Colonial Masters had been exploiting their mother land (India). The writers did strenuous efforts to religiously motivate the people. Besides, the religious anthem Vande Matarm was written to increase the hate against the British (Falk, 2006)

The British ruled India at length. They had the understanding that India is a pluralist society. As a result, she lacked unity. This pluralism of Indian society was exploited to the maximum under the policy of Divide and Rule. Hindus and Muslims were the two major sections of Indian population. However, they had differences that kept them disunited. During the era of colonialism, Hindus sought to take command of the land in their own hands and to be the sole authority of the land. They parted their ways with the Muslims. Moreover, they boycotted the Muslims festivals like Eid and Muharram. They had been active precipitants in the past. They not only alienated themselves from other communities but also started ethnic violence in the region. As a result, they killed Muslims butchers who had slaughtered the cow. Hindus regarded the cow as the sacred animal in their religion. Such state of affairs provided space to the British and strengthened their feet in the region (Ibid).

Ethnic violence reigned the society. In such circumstances, M.K Gandhi emerged as the political leader to tackle the problem of ethnic violence. He had know-how of all the religions as he had observed closely the pluralistic society of South Africa during his stay there. He had also the understanding of how to overcome the religious gulf among the masses who share same nationality. He attempted to provoke his philosophy of non-violence. The philosophy was developed during his stay in South Africa. It was his policy of tolerance that melted down the glaciers of differences among the different communities of the land. Gandhi had the belief that religion could not be separated from politics. He mixed spirituality with politics to mobilize the masses. He earned support and respect not only from Hindu community but also was equally famous amongst the Muslims. His popularity was not limited to a particular location. It was existed in each and every corner of the region. He gained this popularity and devotion in that diverse society on account of his non-violence philosophy. Besides, his respect for all religions was appealing to the people. This completely transformed relation between religions and politics in the region. (Kamath, 2005).

India became a secular state on the principle of philosophy that had been hired from the West. The founders of the state considered this philosophy to be the best philosophy for the diverse Indian society. However, secularism has to face severe challenges from religion as religion is deeply rooted in Indian politics. History is witness to the ethnic violence in the shape of religious obscurantism against the minorities by the majority. Moreover, the presence of religious political parties and organizations in Indian political setup is a big question mark on the forehead of Indian Secularism (Hanninan, 2005).

### **Politics of Hindutva:**

The common misperception about Hindutva revolves around that it is often mixed with Hinduism. Both are completely opposite to one another as far as their natures are concerned. Hinduism is a religious philosophy whereas Hindutva is a political philosophy pursued by a particular section of the society to achieve their social and political objectives. The upper caste of Hinduism Brahmins propagated and led this philosophy. Their basic aim was to make India the land of Hindus only. However, their aim shifted to convert India into a Hindu Rashtra that is Hindu State after partition (What is the Nature of Hindutva Politics?)

### **Origin of the Philosophy:**

Hindutva literally means Hinduness. It is the brainchild of Vinayak Damoda Savakar. He was a die-hard follower of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was the founder of Hindu Revivalism in Indian Sub-Continent. He revived Hinduism through various holy festivals in the times of the British rule. The name of the philosophy is derived from the book that V.D Savakar had written during the days of his exile. The basic aim of this book was to religiously motivate the confused Hindu youth and inject in them the spirit of nationalism so that they might be able to become the part of mainstream politics of Indian Subcontinent. The spirit of nationalism was implanted in them. They were taught the lesson that India was the land of their ancestors. It was also the Holy Land for them as it is the birthplace of their religion. Besides, it is also the land of the shrines and birth places of their gods and saints. These were the justifications in order to compel them to join and unite under the philosophy of Hindutva to counter the oppressors and convert India into a Hindu Rashtra (Kamath, 2005).

The philosophy actually originated during the times of the Colonial Era. However, now it has developed into a giant. It is hard to keep it separate because it is deeply rooted in Indian society. It is flexing its muscles to challenge the secularist forces of the country. Hindutva has strong organizational structure. The RSS is the basic source of the philosophy. The parliamentary powers are vested in the hands of Bajrang Dal and the BJP. The VHP and the IDRF perform the religious and social services. Besides, the ABVP mobilizes the youth and looks after the responsibilities of their recruitment. This is how the organizational and operational structure of Hindutva is operated (Hindutva and the Politicization of Religious Identity in India).

The followers of Hindutva used religion in their politics in this era of religious revivalism in the domain of politics. The Muslim community of the country has faced the worst manifestation of their politics. The five hundred years old Mosque Babri Mosque was made target. The Mughal Emperor Akbar built this mosque during his reign. They had of the view that it was the birth place of Hindus god Ram i.e. Ram Janam Bhoomi. The U.P state government under the leadership of BJP i.e. L.K. Advani staged this violence to suppress the Muslims (Aiyar, 2005).

Thousands of Hindu fanatics marched towards the Mosque. This was a naked show in front of the whole world by the Central government of the secular state. The Mosque was attacked on Dec, 6<sup>th</sup> 1992. All the governmental machinery acted as silent spectators to this blatant aggression. This pushed the whole country into communal violence. Hindus and Muslims become locked into conflict. The Muslims were the worst victim of this violence. This left a deep scar on the face of Indian secularism. It also developed fear among the other minorities of the country. They feared their future uncertain at the hands of Hindu majority. The policy of Hindutva succeeded in achieving its goals when the BJP clinched majority in the elections of 1996 for the Lok Sabha. It enjoyed that status till 2004 (Ibid).

To keep fresh the fear among the minorities, they repeated the same aggressive anti-minority policy in Gujarat after the lapse of ten years. Chief Minister Narendra Singh Modi was the architect of all these riots. The leadership of the BJP was on his back. This anti-minority policy is remembered as in the name of the start of Hindu Jihad. This violence cost the lives of more than fourteen hundred Muslims. Hundred and fifty thousand had to migrate from their places. The government actively participated in this whole act of Hindu fanaticism. The Muslims have been the worst victims of the politics of Hindutva. Moreover, the people from other minorities also were no exception to this wrath. Sikhs bore its brunt in 1980s when they were deprived of their legal demands. Similarly, the Christians had been victimized continuously in this part of Indian history. The Indian authority had to take violent steps to eliminate this worse aspect of Indian politics in order to become, in true spirit, the world's largest secular democracy (Kamath, 2005).

### **The Muslims and Politics of India:**

#### **History of Muslims in India:**

India, the holy land for the followers of Hinduism, has remained a vehicle of exploitation for foreign rulers. This land offered minimum or no resistance at all. The rulers of the land had the largest and well equipped army. However, they lacked passion of war. This was the basic reason why they were easy target for the foreign invaders (Hassan, 1990).

The Muslims shared ancient relations with the region. They sought to establish their rule in the region in 712 A.D when Muhammad Bin Qasim conquered Sindh. This was recorded as the first Muslim intervention in the region. This intervention lasted till the collapse of Mughal Empire in 1857 at the hands of the British. The Muslims of different origins ruled the land. The Arabs, the Afghans and the Turks were famous during all those years. However, the Mughal's Rule is considered in the region as the golden times of Muslim rule for many reasons. They, unlike other Muslim invaders, did not come to the region for the time being. Rather they had intentions to establish their rule in the region (Sen, 2006).

Historically, the Muslim rulers came to the region, defeated the local Hindu rulers, and went back without establishing their own rule in the region. They sometimes invaded exclusively for wealth. However, the Mughals came with the intentions of establishing their rule in the region. They needed the support of the locals in order to prolong their stay in the region. They successfully engaged the elite of the local Hindu community that is Brahmins in the process of decision making of the region. They succeeded in achieving their intended policy by engaging the locals in the process of decision making. The credit of the policy of engagement goes to the Mughal emperors Akbar. As a result, he found a place in the eyes of Hindus. He brought them in the process of the decision making. No other Muslim ruler had provided them with such an opportunity. The basic reason of this inclination towards Hindu is related with Jodha. She was the wife of Akbar and belonged to the royal family of Rajput. It also earned him the title of the father of secularism. As a result, he was immensely criticized by the Muslim scholars and revolted against him. They were of the opinion that he was distorting Islam. Despite their criticism, he remained stick to his stance and brought changes in his rule based on secularism. He was a strong believer of reason. He followed his whims irrespective of religious contradictions. This was evident in his belief on rationalism. He became vegetarian when a priest of the Jain convinced him (Ibid)

Those glorious days of the Muslims ended when the British took over the control and became the new Masters of the land. The Muslims resisted and started the war of independence (1857). As a result, they were victimized by the British who considered them to be the main force behind the uprising. The Hindus in collaboration with the British left no opportunity to damage them. Consequently, the region was divided between the Hindus and the Muslims (Hassan, 1990).

#### **Anti-Muslims Communal Violence: Post-Independence:**

Religion is deeply rooted in the politics of India. It had remained the base of division. India received the brunt of religious fanaticism soon after Independence and killed an infinite number of Muslims during the process of migration. The response from the Muslims also needs attention. However, the killings of innocent people were resented on both sides. Throughout its history, it has been struck by communal violence. This determines the role of religion in Indian politics. The major victims of this violence had always been the Muslims (Khurshid, 1989).

India declared herself as a secular state after independence. It was the philosophy of secularism that attracted a good number of minorities. They decided to stay in India rather than go to Pakistan. The minorities were promised to be given equal status and secure future under religion free polity. However, those promises were never materialized. Throughout its history, India has been hit by religious fanaticism against the minorities by the Hindus (Ibid). In such state of affairs, most of the time, the state has acted as a spectator. This behavior of the state has increased sense of insecurity among the minorities. The role of religion in Indian politics could be measured through the various anti-religious activities. As far as Muslims are concerned, they have no active political representation in mainstream politics. The places where they are in majority are the jails of India. In other walks of life, they have been given less representation as compared to their population. Political representation, civil services, and education are some of the domains as examples to show Hindus discriminations.

#### **Ayodhya Crisis:**

The crisis of Ayodhya reflects the influence of religion in Indian polity. This whole crisis revolves around the Babri Mosque. It was built by the Mughal Emperor Babar during the time of his reign in Uttar Pradesh (UP). The site of the mosque had been in dispute since its construction. The Hindus claim the place the birth place of their god Lord Ram. The Hindu sect of Nimrohi's recorded its first claim in 1853. Since then the site has been in dispute. After independence, the first attempt was made on the site in 1949 when the religious extremists of Hindu origin placed idols in the mosque. This action deeply hurt the sentiments of the Muslim community. They felt betrayed as they were promised of religious security by the leaders of India. Nehru immediately resented this in strong words and remarked, "A dangerous example has been set." (Shah, 2010).

The issue remained in cold storage for thirty years till 1984. The Hindu religious organization again raised this issue. They broke the locks of the Mosque. It was locked by the government because the matter was prejudiced. On the court verdict in 1986, it was ordered that the Mosque should be opened for the worshippers of all religions. The real issue started in 1990 when India had just overcome the Sikhs militancy in Punjab. The issue of Babri Mosque is considered as the reason that gave birth to the politics of religion in India. Almost all the right wing political parties and organizations of Hindus politicized this religious issue. The then Chief Minister of U.P Mulayam Singh Yadav rebutted successfully the previous attempt of the VHP to demolish the Mosque (Ibid).

The full-fledged campaign under the leadership of L.K Advani of BJP was launched on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992. As a result, the Mosque was attacked by the Hindu extremists. However, the state as well as the central authority did not take any step to counter the attack. Consequently, the whole country suffered from the worst communal violence

between the Hindus and the Muslims. Both the communities were religiously charged against each other and killed hundreds of the Muslims and Hindus. This communal violence is considered to be the worst ever happened in Indian history after independence. The majority of the Muslim population left the place before the incident. Some left on that very day. Those who stayed there either lost their lives or sustained serious injuries. The sufferings of this communal violence were so severe that more than two thousand people lost their lives. The injured were double in number as compared to the dead. The incident put a serious question on the secular status of the country. However, this event helped the BJP to achieve the status of being the majority party in the parliament for the first time in Indian history in 1996. This status of the BJP lasted till 2004 (Hanninan, 2005). The final verdict over this disputed area came on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2010. In the light of the verdict, Allahabad High Court divided the site equally between all the three parties i.e. Muslims, Hindus and Nirmohi Akhara (Shah, 2010). The secularists of the state criticized this move in strong terms. The internationally intelligentsia also came with their criticism on the issue.

### **Gujarat Riots:**

The other scar on Indian Secularism became prominent when the 2002 Gujarat Riots caught the attention of the people. These riots were started against the Muslims. India is considered as the laboratory to successfully test the philosophy of Hindutva. This was regarded as the start of Hindu Jihad against the Muslims. The policy of unity through hate was used as a tool to mobilize the majority against the minority. Most of the Hindu leaders tagged the incident to remove the fear of Muslims from the hearts of Hindus. They motivated the people through making speeches against the Muslims. Moreover, they justified their action against them while referring to the past when they had been made a second rate citizens in their own land (Gray, 2008). This holocaust was the logical end of the incident happened at Godhra Station on 27<sup>th</sup> Feb 2002 when fifty eight passengers were set ablaze in S-6 compartment of the train. Among those passengers, the members of Sangh Parivar had been killed. They were coming back after attending the celebrations held in connection of Babri Mosque demolition. As a result, the Muslims of Gujarat were convicted for the incident and they had to pay the price for their uncommitted sin (Takur, 2005).

The BJP along with its religious wings under the then Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi, and state police set a stage for this horrific episode of communal violence. This religious obscurantism resulted in the killings of Muslims. More than one fifty thousand people were displaced from the area. The Muslims were left at the mercy of those religiously charged Hindu fanatics whose brutality could not be described in words. That act of the majority challenged the secularism of India in the world of the day. The approach of Indian authorities as well as that of the international community was questionable as they were completely silent over the issue (Ibid)

The culprits of the whole incident proudly accepted their crime before the world in the famous Tehlka Magazine in October 2007. That naked acknowledgement left questions on the face of the world's largest democracy with secular constitution. They should have been behind the bars rather than enjoy the highest political office of the state. The Muslims, on the other hand, had suffered miseries of what they had not committed. Their involvement was not yet proved by the courts. This rising role of religion in Indian politics is an alarming sign for Indian secularism.

### **Sikhs and Politics of India:**

#### **Historical Background:**

Sikhism is the third most followed religion of India. It does not have an ancient history like that of Hinduism and Islam. As a religion, it originated in Fifteenth Century (1469) under the leadership of Guru Nanak in protest against the degradation of lower caste Hindus in their religion. Sikhism is actually the mixture of two popular religions of the land i.e. Hinduism and Islam (Singh, 1995). After the demise of its founding father Guru Nanak, it failed to hold itself and divided into various sects. It was only in the nineteenth century when the political activism of Sikh community was observed. They had strong political hold over the Punjab- the region of Indian Sub-Continent- under the strong leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh accompanied by the presence of various religious organizations. The Punjab had become the strong center of Sikh community. However, it saw its ebb with the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839. There was no able leadership available to fill the vacuum after his death. At last, it merged in the British Empire in 1849 (Hanninan, 2005).

Two major sects were significant i.e. Keshdhari and Sahajdhari in the second half of the nineteenth century. The former believed in the separate identity of the Sikh community. The other considered Sikhism as the part of Hinduism and preferred to call themselves as Sikh Hindus. Keshdhari, the most important between the two, took the initiative to unify the Sikh population of India. They laid down the foundation of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandhak Committee (SGPC). Under the umbrella of that organization, revolutionary steps were taken to separate the identity for their community. The SGPC along with Akali Dhal transformed their duties from religious affairs to political affairs soon after the partition. They successfully achieved the sympathies of their community. They opted to stay in India during partition as more than two million migrated to India after partition and occupied the state of the Punjab

(Ibid). During the first decade, the politics of Sikh community revolves around one point agenda after partition. They propagated for declaring Punjab as a separate state. But this demand was continuously paralyzed as there was Punjabi speaking Hindus in the province. That was the sole reason that Punjab did not become the part of territorial reorganization bill of 1963. In the light of the bill local language was considered as the state language of respective states (Singh, 1995). The first communal violence between Hindus and Sikhs was registered in 1966 after partition when Punjabi was declared as the state language of the Punjab. As a result, the bloodshed started in the whole state. This resulted in the formation of two new states, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. As a result, Sikhs got majority with sixty one percent (61%). Hindus got thirty seven percent (37%) of total population of the Punjab (Hanninan, 2005).

### ***Sikh Militancy:***

The hegemony of Hindus upon Indian politics is regarded as the root cause of Sikh militancy of 1980s. Historically, Sikhs had enjoyed political and military independence. Its origin was also revolutionary as it was originated in response to inhuman caste system of Hinduism. History repeated itself again when the Sikh community felt that they were being discriminated and purposefully being marginalized in Indian politics. As a result, they reacted violently. Two pronged reaction was observed in this regard. One school of thought supported the assertion of Sikh pride and identity. The other favored the policy of violent actions for their purpose. This school was mostly consisted of the youngsters (Stuart, 2007).

This violent militancy has links with the various historical movements launched in the past for Sikh identity. The 1980s bear evidence to the worst image of this violence by Sikhs and Hindus. Sikh militancy reached to its peak in the decade and killed Hindu civilians and police officers on daily basis. The situation further worsened when an Indian Airline plane was hijacked by Sikh militants in Pakistan. Resultantly, the Prime Minister, Indra Gandhi dissolved the Provincial Assembly. The Central government assumed the office on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1983 in Punjab.

Jernail Singh Bhindrawala was a prominent figure of the Sikh militancy. He along with his supporters' entered in the most sacred shrine of Sikhs, the Golden Temple, in Amritsar and took shelter there. As a result, the government launched the "Operation Blue Star" on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1984 (Ibid). It was one of the worst military operations in India in which death toll exceeded the figure of two thousand. Jernail Singh Bhindrawala was also killed in the operation. However, the majority of the casualties registered were that of the innocent worshippers. The response of the Sikhs came in the shape of assassination of Indra Gandhi. It was reported that her Sikh bodyguard killed her. This worsened the situation even further. Consequently, the worst communal violence broke out throughout the country against the Sikhs. The Hindu targeted and killed a number of men, women and children of the Sikh community.

Rajiv Gandhi succeeded his mother. He tried his level best to normalize the situation but this whole decade was the period of worst communal violence India had ever faced. The demand of Khalistan, a separate state for the Sikhs, was also the main issue of this particular decade (James, 1901). All this Sikh politics can be concluded in these words that Sikhs united themselves geographically, religiously, and culturally. They started their movement on the ground of religious identity and ended it on political identity (Griffiths, 2007).

### **Conclusion:**

The founding father of India M.K Gandhi was a strong believer in the philosophy of confessional politics. According to him, religion cannot be separated from politics. He was aware of the fact that India is a multi-religious society and religion involvement in politics could be harmful. However, he was of the opinion that harmony can be achieved through religious cooperation among the diverse society. Moreover, religion did not need to make rapid interference in the mainstream politics. Hinduism is the major religion of the land. It failed to find its place in politics. It is strongly divided on the basis of caste system that divided the population into various groups and weakened the bond among the community. Despite these differences, the politics of religion is making its way in Indian society.

The dominant role of religion in Indian politics is putting a deep scar on the secular status of Indian political system. However, people have strong affiliation with their religions. Their social, economic as well as political life is totally revolved around the religion. The aggressive approach of Hinduism against all other minorities throughout Indian history made the problem of India political system even worse. It has victimized the minorities in the past. This confessional politics put aside the secular politics. This is evident in the shape of the BJP. It has become a strong competitor of the INC. This transition is challenging the secularist status of the country in the form of communalism, various separatist movements, the popularity of Hindutva among the masses, and the insecurity prevailed among the minorities.



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