

Ethnic movement

India is characterized by more ethnic and religious groups than most other countries of the world. Aside from the much noted 2000-odd castes, there are eight "major" religions, 15-odd languages spoken in various dialects in 22 states and nine union territories, and a substantial number of tribes and sects.

Three ethnic or religious conflicts have stood out of late: two occurred in the states of "Assam and Punjab; another, the more widely known Hindu-Muslim conflict, continues to persist. The Assam problem is primarily ethnic, the Punjab problem is based on both religious and regional conflicts, while the Hindu-Muslim problem is predominantly religious.

ETHNIC CONFLICT IN ASSAM

Of the three conflicts mentioned, Assam has attracted the largest attention of late. Not since the 1947 partition of India have so many people been killed and uprooted as a result of ethnic or communal violence. By most available reports now, mob violence has claimed four thousand lives, rendered about 200,000 homeless, and forced a large number to leave the state for protection elsewhere. The immediate occasion of this bloodshed was the election held in February, though conflict and tension have been present for the last three years. In Assam, three culturally disparate groups have been in collision: the Assamese, the Bengalis (both of which have segments of Hindus and Muslims) and the tribals, which are localized communities.

Historical Pattern of Migration

Assam has had the highest rate of population growth in India since the beginning of this century. Migration into the state accounts for a substantial part of this growth. Most migrants came from Bengal, including what is now Bangladesh (known as East Bengal before the 1947 partition and East Pakistan from 1947-71). Bengali migrants were both Hindus and Muslims. Bengali Hindus started arriving after the British created tea plantations in the middle of the nineteenth century. Because of their educational advantage over Assamese, they were better suited to man the growing administrative and professional machinery.

Bengali Muslims on the other hand, were mainly peasants. They originated predominantly in East Bengal, a highly populated area with low agricultural productivity and a fragmented landholding pattern incapable of supporting large families. In contrast, Assam was less populated, many areas were unsettled, and there was less pressure on the land. Bengali peasants made large tracts of waste, flooded and forested land habitable and productive along the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River, an area that is also populated by indigenous tribal groups, especially the Lalung.

Overall Bengali dominance began to manifest itself in various ways. They held urban professions, their language was more developed and widely used in Assam, and their educational and even numerical superiority became more than evident. With the halting spread of education in the twentieth century, the Assamese middle

class slowly emerged, and with the growth of the Assamese middle class, the seeds of what has been called "little nationalism" were sown in Assam.

Post-Independence Developments

After the partition of 1947 and the transfer of a very large Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet to East Pakistan, the Assamese middle class came to power for the first time in about a century. Through expanded educational programs and the use of Assamese as a language in the university, this newly acquired power, electorally buttressed, was used to consolidate the position of the Assamese middle class against Bengali dominance in administrative services and professions.

On the other hand, the various tribes on the lower ranges were less developed than both of these contending communities. Depending on the preponderance of one or the other in their local context, they felt pressured, even exploited, culturally, economically and politically by both groups.

Despite the existence of an international border, the migration from East Pakistan continued alongside migration from West Bengal. There is considerable dispute over the actual magnitude, but the most comprehensive estimate shows that between 1961 and 1971 the proportion of Assamese declined for the first time and that of Bengali speakers increased; between 1971 and 1981 itself, as many as 1.2 million migrants were added to a population of 14.6 million in 1971. Moreover, the number of registered voters increased dramatically from 6.5 million in 1972 to 8.7 million in 1979, a rise which cannot be totally attributed to the coming of voting age to the previously ineligible. This last discovery of the Election Commission was, in fact, the starting point of the present phase of the organized student movement supported by large sections of the Assamese middle class. The movement has wide-ranging demands including development of Assam and greater share of benefits from its rich national resources, including oil, for the Assamese. Why the issue of deportation of "illegal aliens" has come to be the focus of the movement needs some explanation.

Despite the general anti-Bengali sentiment, the expulsion of migrants that came from West Bengal - these migrants are predominantly Hindus - could not be brought about legally or politically. Interstate movement and residence are perfectly legal in India, and the Assamese economy and society, despite the antagonism, is inextricably linked with West Bengal.

On the other hand, the "post-1947 place of origin" of migrants from Bangladesh, largely Muslim, makes them "aliens" and their migration, for political purposes, can be called "illegal." The students thus found a ground for demanding their expulsion. Additionally, these Muslim migrants provided unstinted support to the Congress Party, now represented by Mrs. Gandhi, and the party in turn patronized them, so much so that local politicians of the Congress Party seem to have put aliens on the electoral rolls irrespective of whether or not they had Indian citizenship.

It is in this atmosphere that the elections were called. Mrs. Gandhi has been heavily criticized in India for her decision to call the elections. Two considerations seem to have gone into her decision: her need for an electoral victory due to the reverses her party had suffered in recent state elections, and her intention to negotiate with a new

set of elected leaders who would possibly be more pliable than students on the issue of "aliens."

Large-scale violence and destruction of lives, property, bridges, and various other resources resulted. In addition to the predictable attacks on Bengalis in the towns, there were massacres in which first pro-election Boro tribals attacked Assamese villages at Gohpur and later, in the worst massacre witnessed in independent India, another tribe, the anti-poll Lalung, reportedly with Assamese support, killed scores of Bengali Muslims in Nellie.

The spread of urban conflict to villages seems to be partly a result of the emergence of support for leftist parties in the previous elections. The land reform-oriented agrarian program of the left and its attempt to create a base in the Muslim peasantry seems to have antagonized the Assamese landlords and wealthier peasantry. The most popular party of the left, the Communist Party Marxist (CPM), is in power in West Bengal and therefore is associated with Bengalis. Moreover, tribals seem to be involved in the struggle over land, attacking whichever community, Assamese or Bengali, in possession of most of the land in their respective local situations.

Hold over government, struggle for jobs, land scarcity, and population influx have thus intensified the historical differences between Assamese and Bengali into violent ethnic antagonisms in Assam. All of this took place in a context of acute underdevelopment of Assam and slow economic growth. The anti-aliens agitation is an expression, among other things, of the Assamese fear of becoming politically swamped by an ever larger Bengali presence in the state.

SIKH-HINDU CONFLICT IN PUNJAB

Starting in August 1980, mounting communal tension between Hindus and Sikhs in the state of Punjab led to violent clashes, in the last year in particular. Unlike Assam, Punjab is a state with the highest per capita income. It is the seat of the Green Revolution in India, whose biggest beneficiaries have been the rich Sikh peasants. In Punjab, Sikhs are a majority, Hindus, a minority.

Although religious symbols have been used for the mobilization of Sikhs and the secessionist slogan of Khalistan (a sovereign state of Sikhs) has been raised, the Sikh's charter of demands, drawn from the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, has strong economic and political components, unlike in Assam where the issue of aliens has sidelined economic demands.

The "major" religious demands by the Sikhs, including greater radio time for religious broadcasts over federally controlled radio, and a separate legislative act for Sikh religious shrines, were granted by New Delhi this past February. The major political demands are greater powers, including financial, for the states vis-a-vis New Delhi. A commission has been appointed to review these demands.

The economic demands include a greater share of river waters for irrigation and larger central investment in the industrial sector of Punjab. The territorial and the waters issues are the only unsettled points left. Other demands, minor at present, may later assume importance. The agitation continues unabated.

Classes, Religion and Green Revolution in Punjab

According to the 1971 census, Sikhs constituted 60.2% of Punjab's population and Hindus 37.5%. In the villages, the Sikh majority was even greater, constituting 69.4 % of the total rural population as opposed to 28.6% Hindus. In the urban areas, however, Hindus formed the majority, 66.4 % against 30.8 % Sikhs. Trade and services, rather than manufacturing, are the main sectors of urban economy in Punjab, and Hindu traders are dominant in both. The agricultural sector is dominated by the Sikh cultivating castes, known as jats.

Green revolution, based as it was on biochemical and mechanical inputs in agriculture and surplus production for market, has deeply linked trade with agriculture and made the latter dependent on the market. Both for buying modern inputs and selling surplus produce, the rich Sikh farmer has to go through the urban market, dominated by the Hindu trader. So long as the economic pie kept increasing, this incongruity did not much matter, but when prices of food grain and other crops stopped increasing, a clash of interests between the Sikh farmer and the Hindu trader was created.

Irrigation problems have worsened the situation. That Punjab has the best irrigated agriculture in the country is not enough for the rich peasant; while 1.4 million hectares in Punjab are canal-irrigated, two million hectares are dependent on tubewells. Due to its power and diesel needs, tubewell irrigation, is "three to nine times more costly" (India Today). The prosperity of the rich peasantry has thus slackened.

Other developments have occurred. Landlessness has increased from 17.3 percent in 1961 to 32.1 percent in 1971 and more later. The landless, mostly Untouchables and low caste Hindus and Sikhs, have also become politicized by the leftist Agricultural Labor Union. Sikhs in urban trades are neither economically nor numerically as dominant as the Hindus. And finally, the proportion of Sikhs in the Army has fallen from 35 percent to 20 percent.

Amid these mounting uncertainties, religion both divides and unites.

For the rich Sikh peasantry, faced with Hindu traders on the one hand and politicized labor on the other, religion performs a useful role. It unites the Sikh trader, who is also opposed to the Hindu trader, and the low caste Sikh laborer by dividing the agricultural labor into low caste Sikhs and low caste Hindus or Untouchables. Religious slogans appeal to the religiosity of the insecure small Sikh peasant and the unpoliticized Sikh laborer.

Power, Electoral Politics and Religion

It is unlikely that these links would have automatically led to political action without the mediation of political parties. This mediation did not simply reflect the emerging socio-economic divisions; it deepened them. The two main rural parties, the ruling Congress and the Akali Dal, a party dominated by the rich Sikh peasantry, have contributed much towards this deepening. Scholars have noted the schizophrenic

character of Punjab politics. It has a "dual political system and a dual political area," one secular and the other religious and confined to Sikhs.

Since the exhaustion of the green revolution in Punjab, this is the first time that Akalis have not been in power. Although they had their first relatively stable rule from 1977 to 1980, Congress returned to power in 1980. The Akali elite, when in power, did not take up any of its present demands with New Delhi where its partner in electoral alliance, the Janata Party, ruled, but soon after the rival Congress returned, agitations were launched in support of the demands. The power implications seem reasonably clear: unless the enhanced economic power of the rich Sikh peasantry is matched with political power, peace will be difficult to maintain in Punjab. Either political power should compensate for the halt in its economic prosperity, or greater economic incentives must return as expressed in the river waters issue. Interests of the Akali political elites have thus coincided with those of the discontented peasantry. Religion is a particularly effective vehicle of political mobilization in such a situation, for that alone can prevent the increasing differentiation in the Sikh community from fragmented and weak political expression.

The ruling Congress has also played an electoral game. In an effort to weaken Akali Dal, it has, in the recent past, supported rabidly communal factions, including the present messiah Sant Bhindranwale, in the SGPC elections. The Congress is clearly not interested in settling the problem unless some political or electoral gains are likely, or unless the violence reaches explosive proportions.

THE HINDU-MUSLIM PROBLEM

Of all the religious and ethnic issues in contemporary India, history has cast its deepest shadow on Hindu-Muslim relations. The most critical contemporary phase of this history was the partition of 1947. A Muslim sovereign state of Pakistan was born amidst ghastly communal violence but almost as many Muslims as there were in the new constituted Pakistan, for various reasons, stayed in India. The partition did not solve the Hindu-Muslim problems; it caused the situation of the Muslims in India to deteriorate. They were blamed for the division of the country, their leadership had left and their power was further weakened by the removal of all Muslim-majority areas except Kashmir. Most of all, the conflict between India and Pakistan kept the roots of the communal tension perpetually alive and pushed Muslims into the unfortunate situation of defending their loyalty to India. Even 36 years after independence, the problem has not been overcome; Hindi-Muslim riots have in fact increased in the last few years.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the entire Muslim community in India has been under pressure. First, even though a minority (according to the 1971 census, 11.2 percent of the Indian population was Muslim as opposed to 61.2 percent caste Hindus), Muslims are in a majority in one state and constitute 13.5 to 24 percent population in five states. There are 39 districts in India in which they comprise from between 20 percent to 94 percent of the population. Many cultural differences exist among them. Only 45 percent speak Urdu and there are caste and sect divisions. As many as 73 percent live in villages; only 27 percent are urban. This is particularly important, after 1947 the Hindu-Muslim riots occurred for the most part, in urban centers. Most of these towns are modernizing, middle-size towns such as

Aligarh, Moradabad, Meerut, Ranchi, Baroda, Hyderabad, Trivandrum. In the big and/or industrialized cities such as Bombay, Delhi, Ahmedabad, the communal fury, whenever it has erupted, has remained confined to the older parts of the city. Villages have remained largely undisturbed. Acute communal consciousness occurs largely in the middle class; its most fertile bases lie in the lower middle classes of growing middle size towns of sizeable Muslim populations.

Discrimination exists at other levels in other parts of the country. Decline in the status of Urdu in north India, widespread use of Hindu mythologies and symbols in school textbooks and continuing controversy over the foremost educational institution of Muslims, the Aligarh University, have indeed done much to provoke Muslim fears. Evidence that the police and administrative machinery in recent riots have sided with violent Hindus has further deepened widespread feelings of discrimination.

The emerging character of electoral politics have made matters worse. Communal Hindu parties apart, even the ruling Congress Party, professedly secular, has, since independence, had a dualistic character. The secular strain in the Congress was represented by Nehru but the communal strain was also present in the form of Patel, India's first Deputy Prime Minister, and was more pronounced at the provincial level. Nehru's stature kept the communal strain in check, but in the seventies, the party machinery has been taken over by the new generation of leaders, whose power and mobilization is based less on secularism or socio-economic programs and more on exploiting caste and religious divisions at the local levels.

If Nehru showed the integrative potential of democratic politics, the new leaders have shown its divisive potential. Muslims are the largest minority. Their votes can swing political fortunes. Parties have not hesitated to fan communal flames for electoral gains. The most recent example of this was the openly communal campaigning by the Congress in the violence-torn Assam elections. This new mode of realpolitik has been adopted by the new provincial and local leaders of most parties. The higher recent incidence of Hindu-Muslim riots has a good deal to do with this new phenomenon.

Conclusion

It is easier to outline these problems than suggest what should be done about them. In a situation of mutual distrust, almost any solution will generate controversy. Still, three solutions seem plausible. First, further decentralization of power to states would be of considerable help. This would partly address the problems in Punjab and Assam, both of which have complained of the gap between the resources they are entitled to and the resources they actually process. Second, a conscious attempt needs to be made to improve the educational attainment and economic level is easily demonstrated of Muslims whose socio-economic backwardness is easily demonstrated. The Muslim elite could do much in this respect. Special educational privileges are constitutionally sanctioned but they ought to be worked on. Modern liberal, as opposed to religious, education would be of great help. The government, for its part, could allay the apprehensions of the Muslim community by better representing Muslims in the police and paramilitary forces. Third, the secular leaders, to the extent that they exist, must make a sustained effort to reintroduce and deepen secular, socioeconomic concern in democratic politics. Partisan communal leaders and communal electoral mobilization, both within and outside the communal

parties, but particularly within the ruling party, should be exposed. Aware leadership - political, social and intellectual - has to work for this political reconstruction. Definitive resolution of problems may be inordinately difficult but substantial alleviation is not.