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CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNALISM

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Abstract:

Communalism as a problem in India has been growing for several years. It is not restricted merely to localities or specific regions but has pervaded the entire country. It has become a nation wide problem. To quote Bipan Chandra, communalism in India, starts with the belief that in India people can be organized, grouped together for secular that is economic, political and social and cultural purposes around their religious identities. The formation of one's communal identity forms a very important aspect of the whole discourse on communalism.

INTRODUCTION

The identity is the marker through which an individual can be recognized. The images of the 'self' and the 'other' on the basis of religion form an essential part of this discourse. The collective historical memories that are shared by the members of the group, the memories of the past experiences and the symbols and myths attached to them are significant in the formation of that identity. Myth making is a part of all the societies. Communalism deals with the relation between groups that consider themselves to be different from others and are also considered by others as being different.

Communalism is basically an ideology. It means division of the people into religious communities whose interests differ and are even opposed to each other. The problem in India emerges from the fact that the communal identity is politicized. Communalism, therefore, becomes a way of looking at the society and politics. Religious markers are the methods through which communal boundaries are maintained and changed. Myths about one another are derived from these markers. It is these markers that are caricatured and stereotyped most often by the elite within the group.

The caricatures and stereotypes drawn are most often negative rather than positive. This is because the values of the groups within are used and applied to judge and evaluate the other groups. In-group values are used as a yardstick to differentiate and evaluate out-groups in the process of self-definition. This fosters a negative out-group stereotype. Stereotypes often create misunderstandings. Negative behavior of the self is explained externally but that of the others is attributed to certain internally related traits and motives. This perception is forged by the elite.

The manipulation of myths is done by the elites. Communal violence is mainly the result of elite competition and conflict. The communal identity is politicized by the elite. There is a struggle between the elite over strategic positions of power like places of employment, taxation, funds for development and so on. To carry out their struggle and make it more effective, it is essential to mobilize their forces and seek support from the masses, which also lends legitimacy to the cause. Mobilization becomes a cumbersome task. Conflict does not occur only due to the existence of a different communal identity. There is nothing inherently bad or conflictual about communalism. When communalism is politicized by the elite it becomes conflictual. Stereotypes assume a serious form only when they are associated with a social and political interest. It is the elite that tell the people where their interests lie. The elite create a problem where

none exists to enable them to assume leadership and thus challenge the existing power structures in which they have a limited say or no say at all.

Tackling incompatibilities is one of the greatest challenges to the conflict resolution process today. The term conflict resolution can be defined as the analysis of the underlying sources of conflict situations. In other words conflict resolution refers to the process of analysis of incompatibilities that lie at the core of a given conflict situation and on the basis of it arrive at a solution. The conflict resolutionists admit that the real issue involved is the denial of the human need for security, identity and participation. Therefore a strategy for conflict resolution will involve three distinct levels: the elite, the militia and the masses. These levels address several distinct problems for which strategies have to be evolved. The target groups are the elite core where a perception about the incompatibilities are developed, the military core or the level of the executors responsible for direct action, and the level of the masses where stereotypes are developed.

Communal violence occurs at the level of the militia, though it is masterminded by the elite. The state has to play a major role to stop the spread of communal violence. The state has the capacity to suppress communal violence and thus minimize the damage to life and property. Moreover peace marches and peace committees also play an important role in the control of communal violence. The militia, or to use Bipan Chandra's word, 'rioters' are merely pawns in the hands of the ideologues. They are, however, treated as the instigators, as the villains of communalism. The elite who are the instigators are, on the other hand, treated as the community leaders and they enjoy a high degree of respect. This situation needs to change. The ideologues who are the generators of the conflict need to be treated as the enemies and punished adequately. The rioters need to gradually be brought back into the mainstream social fabric.

It is essential that the elite lose their legitimacy in the eyes of the people they claim to represent. Often communal leaders are referred to as the leaders of their communities. This tends to authenticate communalists in the eyes of the followers as respected leaders while treating the secular leaders as outsiders who may represent the nation or the state or a particular class but not the community. For a resolution of the problem, however, it is important to tackle communalism at the mass level, at the level of the creation of communal identities. It is a problem that has developed over generations and therefore no short-term solutions are possible. The process of decommunalization is a lengthy process. It implies showing the people the falsity of the claims made by the communalist elites. A long-term strategy to combat communalism is required.

A process of resocialization needs to be initiated. Communal ideology can be consciously combated through the spread of education. A permanent solution can be found at the civil and not the political sphere. One of the central roles of education today is commonly referred to as preparing students for the future. It is important to strike at the level where stereotypes are developed. Myths about the other should not be allowed to develop in an extreme manner. Children should be trained in cultures of partnership. It is not just enough to teach them about democratic institutions but also to involve them more actively in the democratic process. They must be taught to realize their rights as active citizens whose rights are broadly defined. Children must receive the dignity as human beings. This, however, demands that there be systematic institutional support and material resources committed to this end.

The images that young people have of the future will help to shape their aspirations as adult citizens in the next century. Thus attention must be paid in this regard. The new millennium must be seen as a time of transition that can be used to prompt deeper reflection on beginnings and endings, directions and purposes. Their hopes and aspirations need to be given shape in the curriculum that we design. It is necessary to build solidarities across generations. A vital challenge before the educationist is to ensure that violent social futures of students and successive generations are avoided.

It is essential that children be given access to good literature. Literature has the power to transform attitudes and eradicate prejudices and biases. It can help children in developing an attitude of tolerance towards others. Fostering tolerance and empathy is essential for the peace builder. A sense of social responsibility needs to be created among the students especially so in countries plagued by internal conflicts. Young children make sense of the world through stories while adolescents can expand their understanding of life and the human condition through stories. Through stories a child learns about his environment. They are agents of socialization through which a child's perception about the 'other' are developed. Values and standards of the society are learned through them. Stories also develop a sense of imagination among the students. Children learn to imagine peace, to think about new solutions to old problems to be able to imagine a world without violence and bloodshed.

Imagination will enable a fortunate child to understand what it might be like to be poor and hungry or displaced. It helps a child in visualizing a better future. Realistic fiction is equally important for the developing child especially in the context of peace education. Good realistic literature fosters a respect for diversity. Realistic fiction set in specific cultural contexts and featuring children in their daily lives helps

reduce fears and prejudices about people of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

Good literature helps children to identify alternative and multiple viewpoints. While dealing with the conflict in the story the child learns to deal with conflict that he might encounter in the future. He learns to find solutions to these conflicts. Stories depicting characters from the minority groups will enable the child in understanding the obstacles faced by the minorities in claiming their rightful place in society. When reading material does not add anything meaningful to ones life reading becomes viewed as a meaningless often difficult and tedious activity associated only with the classroom.

Thus we see that the responsibility of building a peaceful and enlightened society rests chiefly with the educator. However, this makes it more important for the educator to understand what needs to be taught. Educators need to learn about peace and peace education before they can transmit it to their students. First and foremost they must be able to deal with violence themselves and then equip their students to do the same. Interactive discussions in the classroom with and among their students about conflict resolution, peace, communal feeling, communal violence need to be encouraged. Students must be allowed to express their concerns about violence. For this the teachers will require strong administrative support and a positive school climate. Profound thinking is required at the dawn of the new millennium as to what happened in the past so that we can benefit from the positive and project it towards a less violent future. In summary, the task of the new millennium is to guide the scientific, technological, philosophical, moral and practical priorities towards the learning of conflict resolution before there is a violent outbreak so that a sustainable model is generated which comes up from the bottom and from the most urgent demands of the voiceless population. It will also have to promote a harmonious relation between humans and their environment.

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