



## A STUDY OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ASPECTS OF ISSUES RELATED TO INDIAN MINORITIES

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### ABSTRACT:-

*This paper makes an attempt to analyse the political aspects of issues related to minorities in India. Here, people having a specific linguistic or religious inclination who are in minority in number are given the status of minority. As the jurisprudence of the Indian Constitution assures equality before law and equal protection of law with the guarantee of secularism. But the entire political arena revolves around the pseudo secular dimension for vote bank. Most of the issues of minorities are still unresolved and they are also facing the problem of identity, cultural adjustment and accommodation.*



**KEY WORDS:** *Constitution, Dalit, Identity, Minority, Politics, Secular.*

### INTRODUCTION:-

India is home to almost one sixth of the total population of the world, making it a unique case of heterogeneous society. Almost all the major different castes, cultures, religions, ethnic groups and diverse identities find an element of their presence in this subcontinent. This diverse character of the population has always been an important factor in determining the course of Indian politics. Today it has become the key issue around which the struggle for power in India revolves. People of religions like Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Jains and Parsis live together in India. Also, traditional identities of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, Ashrafs, Ajalafs, Jat-Sikhs, Ravidasiya Sikhs, Mazhabi Sikhs, Rai Sikhs, Catholics, Protestants and Dalits almost all reside in this region. Apart from this, there are people of Kashmiri, Punjabi, Bengali, Malayalee, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and other linguistic identities in India. Apart from this, rich and poor, rural and urban people live in India which gives it another taste of diversity.

### The concept of secularism:-

The word secular is not used anywhere in the main text of the Constitution of India, yet its preamble declares it to be a secular democratic country. The Constitution makes it clear that the state will have no religion and there will be no preferred citizens. As far as democracy is concerned, India is the largest democracy in the world which guarantees political participation to all the diverse citizens present in India as they have an equal stake in policy making and determining the future of the country. However, democracy is not only about governance but also about numbers. Hence, different sections

depending upon their numbers become more or less important as far as forming the government is concerned and here the issue of minorities becomes prominent.

### The Concept of Minority

The term 'minority' relates to a section of the population having a distinctive caste, language, religion or any other social characteristic due to which others see them as somewhat different and distinct from the rest, while minorities are suspiciously viewed by others as dominant. In the socio-political context of India, the term 'minority' includes groups of every possible kind- racial, linguistic, religious and regional and also groups unique to Indian society: minorities based on low caste status etc. Generally speaking all religions other than Hinduism and various weaker sections of society in India are considered part of the minority. Taking advantage of the vulnerability and insecurity of minorities in India, which is natural to minorities anywhere in the world, electoral considerations have led secular political parties to treat minorities as vote banks. Many scholars and academics with diverse political interests believe that this has led them to encourage or at least not oppose the political consolidation of minorities on non-programmatic, non-ideological or even explicitly communal grounds.

Muslims in India though are the largest minority in terms of numbers, next only to Indonesia. Though they comprise about 14% of India's population, yet are economically the most backward with the lowest employment rate. Christians are the second largest minority having the largest presence in the state of Kerala and other north-eastern states. They are well represented in the welfare of the underprivileged and other social services such as the health and education sector. Sikhs though spread all over the country have a major presence in North India, particularly in Punjab where they are not only in majority but also dominant. They are excellent agriculturalists, have played a very important role in the Green Revolution and have always maintained a major share in the Indian Defence Forces. Besides these other religious minorities like Jains and Buddhists have also contributed significantly to the Indian socio-political system.

The debate at the time of the framing of the Indian Constitution revolved around the idea that India would not be concerned with the profession of any religion, creed or faith; and would follow an approach of absolute neutrality in all matters relating to the religion of any class of its citizens or other persons in the Union. The Constitution of India provides for many different provisions relating to avoiding discrimination and securing the interests and progress of these minority communities. Yet, like any other country in the world, minorities in India has to face many problems. These minority groups are not able to identify and fully integrate into the Hindu dominated society despite living side by side with the Hindu population. Minorities allege that they have been discriminated against by Hindus and have been deprived in the field of employment, politics, economic front and other social amenities. Minorities are poorly represented in bureaucracy, medical, engineering and education departments.

Although secularism and equal respect for all sections of society, especially minorities have been adopted as the basic principles of the Constitution of India, it is still facing multi-faceted challenges. At times various extremist political groups like BJP/VHP/RSS term it as pseudo secularism which has a tendency to appease the minorities especially Muslims. At a conference in Bangalore, the RSS declared that the security of the minority community depended on the goodwill of the majority.

RSS and its sister organisations have been constantly criticising Congress leaders for appeasing minorities, especially Muslims. This is evident from the fact that the Indian National Congress could not distance itself from the phenomenon of appeasement of minorities and its benefits even in view of the multi-religiosity of Indian society. Hence to reassure the minorities, the Congress chose its first three presidents from among the four only: Badruddin Tyabji (Muslim), Dadabhai Naoroji (Parsi), and George Yule (Christian).

On the contrary, there has been apprehension among the dominant groups that Christians are involved in the process of converting low caste Hindus or tribes to their religion to increase their presence. This has resulted many times in killings and intense violent clashes between the majority Hindus and the minority Christians. Obviously this has led to a feeling of mistrust and insecurity among

the Christian minority in India. Hindu-Muslim communal riots, especially during and after the Partition, created a feeling of insecurity among Muslims. The demolition of Babri Masjid in 2002 in Gujarat in retaliation to the Godhra incident and subsequent anti-Muslim violence have also brought to the fore communal sensitivities and divisions in India. Religion has been manipulated by various political parties for their own benefit by vitiating the electoral process by communal and extremist forces. The above-mentioned incidents like Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid, Godhra riots etc. are examples of this. In times of these crises various minority groups look towards the government machinery to provide them security. The inability of the Modi government to control the riots in Gujarat and provide security to Muslims in particular after the Godhra incident is a perfect example.

This is not to point fingers at any particular political party but was also seen when the Rajiv Gandhi Congress government at the Centre was humiliated for failing to provide adequate security to Sikhs after the assassination of the then Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi. The government has also succumbed to the pressure of communal organisations and groups from time to time, as is evident from the enactment of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, banning of The Satanic Verses, opening of the locks of Babri Masjid, etc. All this makes it clear that the government has played the caste/minority card from time to time to promote its own sectional interests.

Most of these communal riots in the country have been the handiwork of disgruntled politicians in connivance with the mafia, anti-social elements and criminals. The above and other similar incidents which are very common in India reveal some serious underlying weaknesses and Indian commitment to secularism, democracy and other principles enshrined in our Constitution. These instances not only make the situation of the minorities complex and grave but also reduce secularism to a slogan of opportunism and populism. Another amusing fact came to light in the recent Jaipur Literature Festival where the government felt that the Muslim minority, about fourteen crore in number, was unsafe for some writers and cartoonists. Political gains have been the main guiding principle behind all this which also reflects the inability of the government to tackle crises.

Dalits and other vulnerable castes and classes in India represent another aspect of minorities in India. The roots of Dalit oppression can be traced to the caste system prevalent in Hinduism, which is contained in the Manusmriti, a sacred Hindu text dating from the 2nd century BCE. Although the Constitution of India abolishes untouchability primarily associated with Dalits, they have not yet become a part of mainstream debates and discussions despite the controversial system of reservations at all levels. Since most of them are marginal farmers or landless labourers, economic exploitation remains their biggest concern. A large number migrate to cities or other places in search of better life prospects while others are in debt and forced to repay their debts in the form of bonded labour. In practice it is almost impossible to repay such loans as interest rates are high and poverty puts the labourer in deep debt which is likely to be passed on to the next generation creating a vicious circle. If he protests, he is met with violence. Undoubtedly, reservation has existed since independence and even before that and has helped in the creation of the new educated Dalit middle class, but it has been relatively and proportionately very meagre. The benefits have been found to be limited to a few dominant groups within the Dalits, while most of those who are really in need still fail to avail the privileges.

Another shortcoming has been the absence of their children from schools. Though education documents assure that schools are available within walking distance for all children, yet when it comes to ground reality the picture is not that encouraging. Moreover, most of the times these schools are located in upper caste area, which are practically inaccessible to lower caste children, which adds to a really miserable situation for them.

Again various political parties have tried to raise issues related to these minority caste groups from time to time, but ultimately they have only been met with disillusionment and disappointment. Congress, BJP, SP, RJD, BSP etc. have all been tried time and again but all of them have only raised the voice of these communities so far and nothing concrete has come out of it yet. The gap between the rich and the poor has only widened and has only given rise to a new class of rich Dalits who have benefited from the political exploitation of their former brethren.

Although secularism is supported by the minorities as it has allowed them to maintain their personal laws and minority status, on the contrary they criticise the Indian political system on the pretext that it has failed to protect their interests, especially during times of crisis i.e. communal riots etc. Nonetheless, the various issues related to the minorities have put a lot of pressure on the governments to formulate and implement policies keeping them in mind. These groups are so heterogeneous and fragmented that it becomes difficult to incorporate various interests in a single plan. A lot of difficulties are faced while dealing with this issue; these include problems with the implementation of policies related to property rights and interests and restructuring of the rights of religious minorities. The pluralism existing within the political structure and the pressures created by it are now becoming visible and the process of social mixing affecting the position of minority groups can be felt. The need of the hour is that the various social benefit schemes being run on paper should actually reach the masses and for this people need to be made aware about these and their use. India has been running caste based reservation for the upliftment of Dalits since independence and to some extent it has proved useful. These newly educated dalits should come forward and make others aware too so that they can also take advantage of it. Various governments have come up with various education schemes but most of them have failed to deliver the desired results. The government should address these issues and concerns of the people by recognising their felt needs. Unless these people are educated, their upliftment will remain a distant dream. Moreover the power structure reduces the freedom of Dalits to choose where to live. It is important to assess the power structure of the caste system to understand the dynamics of the well-being of Dalits. States need to recognise the existing diversity and act accordingly.

The concept of minorities is a relative concept. The fourteen crore Muslims in India do not look like a minority when compared to other minorities. Generally, states protect the interests of smaller minorities considering them more at risk than other larger minority groups. However, political leaders in India view the issue of minorities only through the prism of elections and try to woo the largest of the minorities, i.e. Muslims, at the expense of others. Silent minorities like Manipur, which has only two Lok Sabha seats, are met with indifference, while minorities from states like Uttar Pradesh or Bihar that send a large number of leaders to Parliament are never ignored.

It is time to change the concept of minorities and give it a broader and new shape. There are many groups of minorities that are not getting adequate attention because they do not have a large organized vote bank. Some of these deprived and silent minorities could be people from the North-East, writers and artists, tribals, contract labourers, single parents, hookah smokers, live-in couples, prostitutes, gay and transgender adults, village schoolgirls, prisoners. Since the needs and vulnerabilities of these groups are inversely proportional to their numbers, none of them really matter to the opportunistic political class of this country.

### **Important Aspects:-**

The difficulty today is how to rally the minority masses to a resolution that is universal and moves forward on the path leading to unity. Some steps need to be taken immediately to address the wider issues relating to minorities in India. Some measures may be suggested as follows: Politics should be tried to be separated from the field of religious divisions as far as possible and more focus should be laid on development, employment, equitable growth and unity. Various government or privately managed institutions should act in a non-partisan manner and should function properly to prevent loss of material and human resources in times of any crisis. Apart from these efforts, stringent laws should be framed and implemented in the same sense so that the culprits of communal riots can be dealt with strictly.

### **CONCLUSION:-**

It is the need of the hour that civil society groups and secular forces should strengthen themselves so that they can fight the fundamentalist forces fearlessly. These various steps, if implemented, will not only instil a sense of security among the minorities but also prevent the loss of

huge material and human resources that exist as part of the diverse character of the nation. It will also reveal a true democratic and secular character of India apart from helping the political system to focus on other relevant issues related to growth and development.

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