

Politicization of Religious Identity: A Case of Mangaluru

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“Religion is one of the most powerful, deeply felt, and influential forces in human society. It has shaped people’s relationships with each other, influencing family, community, economic and political life. Religious beliefs and values motivate human action, and religious groups organize their collective religious expressions. Religion is a significant aspect of social life, and the social dimension is an important part of religion.”¹

Introduction

These lines from Meredith McGuire’s *Religion; The Social Context* expresses the significant role that religion plays in a person’s private and social life. Religion indeed, pervades not only existentially but also metaphysically in an individual’s past, present and future life in more than one way. Therefore, it has the power to influence a person spiritually, emotionally, ideologically and practically. The question is how such a powerful tool is used in our day-to-day life in our society and in particular, politically to gain power and position in political set up.

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Religion is part of social sciences which is complex and is intertwined with a web of relationship with other social sciences. Subjects in social science are not defined in clear terms as in a pure science. Therefore, each of the disciplines somehow invades the other disciplines either by enriching them or by diminishing them. Politicization of religious identity is such a phenomenon. All the same it is nothing new. Politics has used religion, especially the institutionalized religion, to justify and perpetuate ruling class ideologies and subsequently religion has used politics for its own propagation and survival. Thus the

¹ Meredith McGuire, *Religion; The Social Context* California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1986, 18.

interdependence seems to be mutual and universal, though the mode of it changes depending on time, place and context.

In the past few decades, the phenomenon of using religion for political gain and using politics for the religious gain is gaining momentum. Political parties seem to over-depend on religious sentiments and feelings for their own benefits. There are quite a few political parties which substantially depend on religion and religious sentiments both in our country and elsewhere.

This paper tries to analyze the aspect of politicization of religious identity with special reference to Mangaluru. Mangaluru historically has been a melting pot of cultures, religions, ethnicities and languages. Despite these points of diversity and plurality, it maintained peace and stability for a long time. However, in the last few decades' society there is polarized more than ever on the basis of religious communities. This kind of division and political identity was created for political gain at the cost of religious harmony.

Religion and Religious Identity

Religion, broadly speaking, is a way of life or belief based on a person's ultimate relation to the universe or God or gods. According to Milton Yinger, Religion can be defined as a "system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life".² In this sense such diverse systems as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Shinto etc. may be considered religions.

A religion has basically three elements: creed, code, and cult. **Creed** is faith in the revealed pattern and in the divine intelligence that gave it. **Code** is the divinely sanctioned and authorized system of human laws and morals comprising the rules of active participation in society. **Cult** is the ritual of worship, or symbolic acts, whereby the community brings its mind into accord with the mind of God, either by ceremonial dances or dramatic re-enactments of the deeds of God, or by sacrificial meals held in common between God and his people.³

In general religion emerges from the faith experience of a person or a faith community and subsequently remains in the realm of spirituality and spiritual experiences. However, as the community grows it becomes vulnerable to diversity and various other kinds of threats. To protect religion from various kinds of threats, dogmas, doctrines, structures,

² Ibid., 23.

³ *Encarta Encyclopedia*, "Religion," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2006, <http://www.wsh-leszno.pl/wsh/nsjo/religion2.pdf>, accessed on 3 July 2015.

institutions, rituals, myths, idea of salvation or liberation etc. come into existence. Consequently, it may remain in the realm of spirituality and faith or may move on to an ideology taking into consideration its own evolution, context, internal and external pressures. However, when religion becomes merely an ideology, it can take the shape of fundamentalism or religious extremism, or even fanaticism. Further to sustain this institution, it will seek political approval, by building nexus between religion and politics. This process can happen consciously or unconsciously.

Conscious of this fact, Karl Marx once said, the function of religion is to legitimize structures of social domination. He calls it ‘mystification of reality’⁴ and considers religion to be the greatest stumbling block in the realization of the final goal of humanity.

So the question that we struggle to articulate is: what is the relation between religion and politics? We know that the discourse on the relationship between religion and politics is not new. Expressions like ‘Sacred and secular’; ‘give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God’, ‘this worldly and the other worldly’ etc. have been very common and popular in history when we speak of space of religion in society. These expressions have come mainly due to the conflicting role that both religion and politics play. Therefore, there have been attempts to appropriate and segregate these two areas.

Mostly religions speak of otherworldly concerns such as life after death, heaven and hell, moral life and a way often negating the earthly life concerns. On the contrary politics concerns itself with daily life in the world, deals with power, positions and administration. At the same time, it has a pejorative meaning.

Religious Identity, a Process of Politicization

When religion moves away from pure faith and spirituality, it seeks its existence as an ideology or becomes an instrument for identity. Religious identity, be it in rural or urban areas, remains a powerful force to reckon with, although it varies like temperature, from time to time, depending on prevailing political circumstances.⁵

Religious identity becomes a means to the members of a particular religion to share, to mobilize, compete effectively in the public space. When there is a perceived threat to that identity, members are urged to form an organized political action-group or support the political group which is in line with the same ideology in order to maximize their corporate

⁴ Pandit Moti Lal, “Did Marx Kill God” Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, 36.

⁵ Aquiline Tarimo SJ., *Politicization of Ethnic Identities and the Common Good in Kenya*, Markkulla Centre for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University, http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/global_ethics/kenya.htm, accessed on 01.09.2015.

political, economic, and social interests. Identity plays an important role in informal relationships, as well as in rituals, marriages and religious ceremonies. Such identities are garnered for the political benefit, sometimes even giving birth to religio-nationalism. This religio-cultural identity makes it easier for the political leadership to mobilize support.

Hindu religion which is in fact a 'way of life', as articulated by many, suffers from a certain sense of singleness or oneness in its articulation of religious experience. Obviously it has its positives such as the religious faith being able to be articulated and practiced in diversely in different ways. So people depending on time, place, culture and experience share and live religious faith in their own way without a strict hierarchy. Practicing religious experience in diverse ways also means that there cannot be a visible coherence and consequent uniformity leading to unity.

On the contrary most of the monotheistic religions or in other words, the religions of the book, be it Judaism, Christianity or Islam, have a certain amount of uniformity in belief in one God, in practicing the religious faith, in articulating theology, holy book, clear-cut sacred laws in its rituals and sometimes in the dress patterns and even in food habits. This has its political overtones such as administrative patterns, hierarchy, unity of command and a single leader. In such a system it is easy to have command over the members of a religion.

In this context, it is a challenge to Hindu religion where there are thousands of different religious experiences, gods, cultures and ways of life. In the recent census it is said that Hindu religion has 4.6 million different castes and sub-castes⁶! The question is how to bring these diverse and pluralistic belief systems in one platform? It is in this context the politicized Hindu religion falls back on aspects of nationalism, uniform organization such as VHP, RSS etc. for religious as well as political benefits. According to Asghar Ali Engineer the Sangh Parivar has consolidated its base during the six years of its rule (NDA) and possesses disciplined cadre and thus possesses great capacity to communalise politics and provoke communal violence.⁷

Politicization of Religious Identity

⁶ Annapurna Singh, *Socio-economic census 2011 reveals 46 lakh castes, sub-castes*, *Deccan Herald*, July 5, 2015, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/489752/socio-economic-census-2011-reveals.html>, accessed on August 20, 2015.

⁷ Asghar Ali Engineer, *Future of Communal Relations in India*, PUCL Bulletin, 2006, http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Religion-communalism/2006/communal_relations.html, accessed on 29.08.2015

Using religion for the political gain has been a regular phenomenon in history. Hobbes opines that the legislators want to keep the people in obedience by instilling in their minds the belief that religious precepts proceed from the gods and by making them believe that the same things are displeasing to the gods, which are forbidden by the laws.⁸ In the Indian context we see that a lot of social structures and systemic problems such as caste system has ‘divine approval’ too.

It is with the event of colonialism on one hand, and, subsequent parliamentary democracy on the other hand that led to politicisation of religion and religious communities. Thus inter-religious clashes are in fact, inter-political clashes. Different political parties carve out their vote-banks among different religious communities and target some communities, in order to emerge as champion of one’s own community. In fact, they are champions of their own political interests, rather than community’s interests⁹.

Thus the, “politicization takes place as large numbers of individuals come to think of themselves as members of political collectivities determined by religious identity.

Our corrupt political leaders are experts at exploiting any situation to their nefarious designs. They adroitly exploit this confusion between spirituality and religion by politicization of religion. Today, many of the so called religious leaders are worse than our politicians in their manner of dealing with the public with their vituperative utterances and firebrand speeches. They are trying their best to divide the society further – ironically in the name of god!¹⁰

Causes for the Process of Politicizing Religion

At the outset one could easily say that the cause for politicizing religion is for political gain. In this direction the research done by the Indian Social Institute with regard to Mangaluru religious conflict has this to say:

“The role of politicians in communal violence is crucial. Politicians, especially the local level leaders and members of political parties were often found to be involved in spreading communal feelings among the people so that they might win elections and come to power. Some others wanted to come to power so that they could create unrest among the people and spread communal violence. Either way, politicians were known to spread unrest to meet their own political ends. Most often they used religious and caste feelings as a means to get the

⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ed. C. B Mcpherson Penguin, 1975, quoted in Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*. Hutchinson University Library, 23.

⁹ Asghar Ali Engineer.

¹⁰ *Politicization of Democracy, Restore true Democracy in India*,

<https://sites.google.com/site/restoretruedemocracynindia/politicization-of-religion>, accessed on 20.08.2015.

support of the people and come to power”.¹¹

However, these two approaches are mutually supporting each other. Politics can easily garner support from emotions and the religious spirit of the people. Some members also feel that their religion is threatened by other religions, modernism, globalization, Individualism, relativism etc. Such threats lead to fundamentalism which is somehow supported by some political parties and somehow they find solace from politics.

Methods of Politicizing Religion

There can be varied ways in which the politicizing process can take place. First, to use religion as an identity. This religious identity is created by making symbols. These symbols inspire mass politicization. It also appropriates the religious identity in the political process. Some of these symbols are: the cross for the Christians, the saffron color or Ayodya issue for the Hindus, and the green color or skull cap for the Muslims. These symbols somehow carry the hopes, loves, aspirations and frustrations of people and have strong emotional bonding and they become easy means to arouse feelings. Similarly, in every religion there are religious leaders or popular figures or even god-men who take side of political parties either for the benefit of the religion or for their own benefit, thus allowing all those who follow them to align with the party of their religious leader’s choice.

Secondly, politicization of religion takes place by mobilizing people on occasions like *Samajotsava*, charismatic/evangelical movements, religious organization, feast celebrations etc. along with this the political leaders make use of these occasions for their won acceptance by the public. Such religious occasions are used to assert hegemony if they are of a majoritarian group and assert identity and freedom if they are a minority. Similarly, politics also uses institutions at its disposal such as communalization of educational curriculum¹² by mythicising history and historicising the myth or using the media that is at its disposal.

Thirdly, the concept of ‘otherness’ which applies words like ‘We’ and ‘They’ and consequently includes a few and excludes the others. The best example for this is Golwalkar’s book “We and our Nationhood Defined”. It explains the qualifications to be

¹¹ Joseph Xavier, and others. *Communalism and Role of State in Karnataka*. Bangalore: Indian Social Institute, 2011.p. 17

¹² Rana Ayyub, an assistant editor with Tehelka says that the government brought changes in the curriculum. Social sciences textbooks of Classes V to VIII are being rewritten with history retold to suit old prejudices. The state government has allocated Rs 14 crore to publish these new textbooks for the coming academic year. The Class V textbook (Veda Kalada Bharata) says cow slaughter was forbidden in the early Vedic period. The historical record, however, suggests otherwise. Historians such as DN Jha have shown how the Rig Veda has references to beef eating.

Indians and excludes the rest of them. A research conducted by the Indian Social Institute has this to say,

“Hindutva ideology is popularized by the BJP. BJP came to power on the communal plank and by the manipulation of the religious sentiments of the people. The BJP through its sister organizations like RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal and others were able to rouse the communal sentiments of the people by using "RAM" as their religious icon and uniting all the Hindus in the name of Ram and Hindutva.¹³

Lastly, indulging in ‘Vote Bank’ politics based on caste and religion¹⁴ encouraged people to vote for a person belonging to their religion and caste, whatever may be the qualification. This further creates animosity against people of other castes and religions during the elections and afterwards.

Politicization of Religion in the Context of Mangaluru

Mangaluru is one of the major coastal cities of Karnataka. It is demographically diverse with several languages. Tulu, Konkani, Kannada, Urdu, Malayalam and Beary basse are commonly spoken in this area. The main religions of this place are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Jainism.

Like many other places in India, Mangaluru too had its share of conflicts due to religion. Historically these conflicts took place around issues like disputed places of worship, idol desecration, defiling of places of worship, religious processions etc. and these polarizations are patronized by political parties. However saffron politics arrived here as far back as the 1950s. The first elected representative of the Jan Sangh in South India was to Udupi municipality in 1968. While the Jan Sangh didn't aim at political power, it remained socially active in the region¹⁵. Then, in the 90s, when L K Advani came to Mangaluru as part of his *Rath Yatra*, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement caught the imagination of millions of Hindus. According to K Phaniraj of the *Karnataka Komu Souharda Vedike* (Karnataka Forum for Communal Harmony), the Sangh launched a big movement in 1989 to consolidate castes like Poojaris, Bunts, Billavas and Moghaveera, and revive Hindutva.¹⁶

¹³ Joseph Xavier, p. 16

¹⁴ Illan Greenberg says, Religion is part of a mosaic of identities in India, where caste, geography, age, and local politics are all important factors in how a person votes.

¹⁵ Narayanan, Nayantara. *In Mangalore, Hindu and Muslim youngsters are getting targeted by moral police of both communities*, Scroll.in, <http://scroll.in/article/712564/as-mangalores-communal-polarisation-worsens-young-men-and-women-pay-the-price>, accessed on 01.09.2015.

¹⁶ G Vishnu, *Mangalore-Where Morality is Saffron Coloured*, Thehelka.com. <http://www.tehelka.com/2013/02/where-morality-is-saffron-coloured/3/>, accessed on 26.08.2015

According to the study, with the Sangh Parivar and its allies becoming strong in the State, communal feelings were on the increase and more and more people sympathized with the Hindutva Philosophy. Historical persons like Tippu Sultan were branded as anti-Hindu and anti-Kannada without any historical evidence. Religious places with syncretic culture were claimed as belonging to the Hindus.¹⁷

Mangaluru also has seen pub attacks (by activists of the self-styled Sri Ram Sene), love jihad, love kesari¹⁸, problems related to cow slaughter, issues of conversions and consequent church attacks, issues of Baba Budangiri Dargha¹⁹ etc. These are not purely religious issues, but they are very much ideological and political in nature. The president of Sri Rama Sene, Pramod Muthalik contested elections after gaining popularity in religious conflicts and similarly a recent study conducted by three political scientists of the Yale University claim that had Congress lost all the close elections between 1962 and 2000, there could have been 10% more communal riots in the country.²⁰

Mahendra Kumar who was state unit president of the Bajrang Dal, and is famous for his role in the spate of church attacks in 2008 says this about Hindutva, “Hindutva is a political strategy and it has nothing to do with Hinduism or the welfare or benefit of Hindu society. Playing on emotions, projecting wrong history and some negative points of the minority community, hatred is sown among the Hindu youth. It has been the strategy of the RSS to target minorities to consolidate Hindu votes for the BJP.²¹

Conclusion

The challenge for us is not the politicisation of religion as such, but how this aspect of politicisation is misused. In a democracy, active participation of a person is a must for the betterment of democracy. Misusing religious sentiments for political gain degrades and defiles democracy. The strengthening of democratic institutions can take place only when an individual is dispassionate of his or her personal or community gains. This kind of

¹⁷ Joseph Xavier p. 36

¹⁸ “Love Jihad”, is an attempt by Hindu groups to curb Muslim men relating to Hindu girls and “Love Kesari“, a counter to the Hindu bogey by Muslim men. The core philosophy of both groups is the same: Stop women from meeting, consorting with or marrying men of the other religions.

¹⁹ The Sangh parivar's attempts to Hinduise the Bababudangiri Dargah, a place known for its syncretic culture, in Chikkamagalur town, led to the creation of fresh communal tension. This was described by some of the critiques as an attempt by the BJP to come to power in Karnataka.

²⁰ DB Bhattacharya, *BJP gains after each riot, says Yale study*, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bjp-gains-in-polls-after-every-riot-says-yale-study/articleshow/45378840.cms>

²¹ Rana Ayyub, *Hindutva Lab 2.0* Current affairs, Tehelka, http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main51.asp?filename=Ne250212coverstory.asp accessed on 20.08.2015.

politicization decreases the feeling of brotherhood and harmony among different communities and increases mistrust and insecurity among the communities.

This does not mean that religion has nothing to do with politics. Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is”.²² Mahatma Gandhi tried to incorporate the good values and morals from religion to make politics rich. He dreamt of a *Ram raj* or Kingdom of God where *Dhrama* becomes the centre of our existence and the public life including the political life draws its inspiration from the religion to make it more enriching and not to exert pressure to fulfil some hidden agenda for the benefit of some and exclusion of many.

To bring positive changes in politics, the civil society organisations should continue to fight for peace, security, human rights, social justice, equality and poverty alleviation. Religion which degrades humans or democracy is not a religion at all rather it should enrich society and transform lives. Therefore religion should transcend petty differences and focus more on common human-centred values. A great emphasis should be given to human rights, inter-religious dialogue, sharing of faiths and building of the communities

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²² Mahatma Gandhi Quotes,
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mahatmagan135298.html#XiES404i4xFOXs95.99>

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