

Combating Communalism through Correct Narratives

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2022-10025102

Volume: 10

Issue: 2

Month: October

Year: 2022

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 06.07.2022

Accepted: 28.09.2022

Published: 01.10.2022

Citation:
Ahmad, Shahbaz.
"Combating Communalism
through Correct
Narratives." *Shanlax
International Journal
of Arts, Science and
Humanities*, vol. 10, no. 2,
2022, pp. 1–7.

DOI:
[https://doi.org/10.34293/
sijash.v10i2.5102](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v10i2.5102)



This work is licensed
under a Creative Commons
Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0
International License

Shahbaz Ahmad

IFS Retd.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5978-3033>

Abstract

Communalism is an ideology which negates the concept of pluralism and assumes that not only the interests of a religious community are common, but these are necessarily opposed to the interests of other religious communities. In India, communalism has spread mainly due to false historical narratives. The British historians, with an aim to create Hindu-Muslim dissension, divided the Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. It was projected that Hindus and Muslims had been two homogenous blocks who have always been antagonistic to each other and the subject of history is mainly a narration of the confrontation of Hindus and Muslims. It was also propagated that the religion of Islam spread mainly by sword and there was vast desecration of temples by Muslim rulers. But this communal version of history is not supported by historical research. All religions preach love and compassion and no religion teaches hatred for any class of persons. Responsible citizens of all religions need to become vocal and give an ideological challenge to communalism. Religious fanaticism needs to be strongly condemned and the common moral values of religions be emphasized. Highlighting the correct historical narratives and emphasizing the composite Indian culture will be helpful in engendering an environment of harmony and brotherhood. If the forces of Peace and Harmony become vocal, communalism will itself take a back seat.

Keywords: Communalism, Harmony, Historical Narrative, Peace, Pluralism

Communalism is an ideology which negates the concept of pluralism and assumes that not only the interests of a religious community are common, but these are necessarily opposed to the interest of other religious communities. According to historian Bipan Chandra, the use of the word community with reference to Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs in India was, and is, entirely misplaced. Not only did Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs or Christians not form a nation or nationality, they did not even form a distinct and homogenous 'community' except for religious purposes.

In pre-Independence India most of the leading communal leaders were ex-government officers, big landlords, title holders and big merchants. In a very basic sense, communalism was the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie at the command of imperialism and the jagirdari elements. The Hindu communalists upheld the upper caste domination while the Muslim communalists supported the social domination of the *ashraaf*¹ over the *ajlaaf*². The communalists also opposed any change in the socio-economic structure which would have adversely affected their vested interest. The Hindu Mahasabha opposed land reforms and other legislations which meant to give relief to the peasants and small land owners.

1 Ashraaf are believed to be the descendants of the Prophet and hence having a higher social status.

2 Ajlaaf are generally local converts and are supposed to be of a status lower than that of Ashraaf. But Islam doesn't endorse such type of classification which discriminates people on the basis of birth or family.

The Muslim League also opposed political positions which in principle were opposed to democracy and social equality. For example, Hindu Mahasabha adopted V. D. Savarkar, Muslim League M. A. Jinnah and RSS M. S. Golwalkar as their lifetime heads.

Communalism is basically based on false consciousness and a wrong understanding of reality. For example, the Hindus or Hindu 'community' did not exploit Muslims or vice versa. It were the capitalists and landlords, whether Hindu or Muslims, who exploited workers, peasants and lower middle class whether Hindu or Muslim, or in other words it were the Indians who were exploited by imperialism.

The historian Romila Thapar points out that the present draws on the past not necessarily always to understanding the past, but to use the past to legitimize the present. Hence the communalists in India found a good opportunity in 'The History of British India' by James Mill. In his book James Mill divided the history of India into Hindu Civilization, Muslim civilization and British Period. It was in the interest of British Colonialism to portray the Muslim Period as a period of plunder and persecution from which the British had liberated the people of India. Colonial scholars argued that Hindus and Muslims belonged to entirely separate cultures with little in common, and that the relationship was always antagonistic. A notion was propagated that Islam was spread by sword and there were forced mass conversions. There was also desecration of temples on a large scale, some taking the count to 3000 or even 60,000. The communalists among the Hindus took this theory very eagerly and rejected all other histories and interpretations contrary to their opinion. Such communalists interpret history to give a single definition to Indian culture, the roots of which are said to be in Vedic foundation. The strikingly unique feature of the plurality of culture in India, that distinguished Indian civilization, was purposely ignored in the desperate attempt to identify a single culture and to give it priority. When nationalism is reduced to identity politics, and priority is given to a religious community, then the history sought will be a history distorted to suit this ideology. According to Professor Irfan Habib, the peaceful Indian Muslim, descended beyond doubt from Hindu ancestors,

was dressed up in the form of a foreign barbarian, a breaker of temples, and an eater of beef, and declared to be a military colonist, in the land he had lived for thirty or forty centuries.

The communalists selectively pick out the periods of history to portray persecution of one religious 'community' by the other. For example, the persecution during the Muslim rule is exaggerated and elaborated to justify the inculcation of anti-Muslim sentiments among the Hindus of today and to claim victimhood. But similar persecution due to the confrontation between *Shaivas*³ and *Shramans*⁴, and the persistence of untouchability, which have been manifestations of a severer and continuous religious persecution, are ignored. Religious persecution, by whosoever, can never be justified. But it is essential to study history in an unbiased manner and learn from it instead of distorting history or selecting it out to suit the present.

Thus it is evident that the present day communalism in India is mostly due to the creation of false or distorted narratives so as to create enmity and hatred especially among Hindus and Muslims. Some Muslim politicians and religious leaders also fuel communalism by eulogising the Muslim rulers and by expressing their narrow understanding of Islam. They have the audacity (or rather foolishness) to call every non-muslim as a 'kafir' and by declaring that they will go to hell. They should know that it is God who will decide on the fate of each human being and nobody has been authorised to speak on His behalf. They should also know that the Quran uses the word 'kafir' for those ungrateful persons who, knowing the truth of the Oneness of God Almighty, were aggressively hostile to the believers in God and tried their best to exterminate the existence of such believers. Some muslim religious leaders also talk of 'Ghazwae-Hind' in which there will be a battle in Indian subcontinent between muslims and non-muslims. Such people still live in a self-made wishful world away from reality. They must know

3 Shaivas are followers of Shaivism which refers to a cluster of religious schools and traditions in Hinduism devoted primarily to the worship of god Shiva..

4 The Shramana movement was a non-Vedic movement parallel to Vedic Hinduism in ancient India. The Shramana tradition gave rise to Buddhism, Jainism and Yoga.

that now there is not going to be any war purely on religious basis or strictly between two religious groups. Moreover, if any country unnecessarily attacks India, then as an Indian, it is the religious duty of all Indians to be on the side of their country. It is due to the religious zealots and fanatics of both the religions that the common Indian suffers the consequences of communal tension. This situation is often very helpful to the governments because then they don't have to worry about the real problems facing the country. The communalists and the irresponsible media very well do the job of engaging the people in petty communal issues.

The theory of forced conversions is historically not true. It is a creation of communal elements to create animosity against the Muslims. The majority of conversions were by caste and that also from the lower castes, and this is more a reflection of the then society than on the persecution. Upper caste conversions were often motivated by political alliances and hardly due to persecution. According to Michael Ades, a specialist in global history, the growth of sedentary agriculture in highly Hinduised regions of India will tell us more about conversions than will the movement of medieval armies. For in both wings of India that became Muslim-majority regions—Bengal in the east, Punjab and Sindh in the west—the growth of Muslim societies correlated with the adoption of sedentary agriculture. In Punjab and Sindh, the Sufi shrines attracted and integrated pre-agrarian and non-Muslim pastoral class into this ritual, socio-economic and political orbits. In Bengal, the Muslim pioneers constructed mosques which functioned as magnets integrating non-Muslim forest people into a locally structured life-style of Islam heavily influenced by the culture of saints and saint variation. India's south-western coastal region, Malabar also saw a dramatic growth of local Muslim communities through Arab intermarriage with the local population. In the sixteenth century, the appearance of the Portuguese as hostile rivals for pepper trade, dramatically solidified the Malabar Muslims. Thus, the conversion of non-Muslims to Muslims in India, and elsewhere also, has not been an abrupt event at some time due to the use of force. Through the intermingling of local population, and through cultural interaction, people adopted

the concept of One Almighty God prominently, the concept which was already there in existence among them, and accepted a life-style which gave them a sense of better socio-economic equity. The Muslims who came from outside and settled here were also affected by the local customs and traditions. These conversions and transformations were a gradual affair and happened due to various reasons but certainly not by force. There have been occasions when some rulers used threats to force people to accept Islam for political reasons. It is these scattered instances which the communalists quote to prove the 'conversion by sword' theory. But historical research does not support this theory. The truth is that the Quran strongly disapproves any such attempt to force people to change their religion. Even Swami Vivekanand did not acknowledge that people in India accepted Islam due to force. He says that people converted to escape the tyranny of the priests and the landlords. In her book 'Islam: A Short History', Karen Armstrong, writing about the spread of Islam says that some lower castes and trades, including some of the 'untouchables' converted to Islam, often as a result of the teachings of Sufi pirs. But the majority retained their Hindu, Buddhist and Jain allegiance. It is not true, as often averred, that Muslims destroyed Buddhism in India. There is evidence for only one attack on one monastery, and no concrete data to support widespread slaughter. Even in the early years, Islam's heavy emphasis on social justice and its rejection of all forms of hierarchy or privilege is said to have found a receptive audience among the disenfranchised class of Arab society, especially the poor, slaves and women.

The question of desecration of temples is also being projected as a religious issue to corner the Muslims and to create hatred for a particular community. The communalists among the Hindus restrict themselves to the period of Medieval India and quote the destruction of the temples by Muslim rulers and invaders. The Muslim communalists, both at that time and at present also, often refer to some of these desecrations as a pious act. Much of the contemporary evidence on temple desecration cited by communalists among the Hindus, is found in Persian materials translated and published during the British Imperialism in India. The most influential has

been the eight volume 'History of India by its Own Historians', first published in 1849 by Sir Henry M. Elliot. While it is true that contemporary Persian sources condemn idolatry on religious grounds, it is also true that attacking an image patronized by enemy kings had been, from about sixth century AD on, thoroughly integrated into Indian political behaviour.

In AD 642, the Pallava king Narasimhavarman-I looted the image of Ganesha from the Chalukya capital Vatapi. After 50 years Chalukyas invaded north India and brought back to Deccan the images of Ganga and Yamuna. In eighth century, Bengal troops sought a revenge on king Lalitaditya by destroying the State deity of the kingdom of Kashmir. In the early tenth century, the Pratihara king Harambala seized a solid gold image of Vishnu Vaikuntha when he defeated the Sahi king of Kangra. During the same period, the Rashtrakuta king Indra-III destroyed the temple of Kalapriya (at Kalpa near Jamuna river), of the Pratiharas, and took special delight in recording the fact. Besides the political devastation of temples, there are also records of the persecution of Buddhists by Pushyamitra Sunga (ruled 185—149 BC). In Buddhist literature Pushyamitra figures as a great persecutor of Buddhists bent on acquiring fame as the annihilator of Buddhist doctrine. To justify his position, he destroyed Buddhist monasteries and restored the sacrificial ceremony of the Brahmanic faith. Some other historians believe that Pushyamitra persecuted the Buddhists for political, rather than religious reasons.

Temples had been the natural sites for the contestation of kingly authority well before the coming of Turks to India. When the legitimacy of a ruler was associated with a royal temple—typically one that housed the image of a ruling dynasty's State deity, or *rashtra-deva*—that temple was normally looted, defiled and destroyed, any of which would have the effect of detaching a defeated raja from the most prominent manifestation of his former legitimacy.

It is well known that before 1192, when an indigenous Indo-Muslim State first appeared in north India, Persianised Turks e.g. Subuktgin and Mahmud of Ghazni, systemically raided and looted major urban centres of South Asia, sacking temples

and hauling immense loads of property to power bases in eastern Afghanistan. This type of temple desecration had been done by Hindu rulers also. The looting and devastation of temples happened by a series of Hindu kings in Kashmir between 8th and 11th centuries for the purpose of acquiring financial resources. In *Rajatrangani*, Kalhan mentions that Harshadev appointed a special category of officers, *devotapataniyah*—officers for the uprooting of gods—to supervise the looting of temples.

Robert M. Eaton, Professor of History at the University of Arizona, USA has, through intensive research, identified about eighty instances of temple desecration during 1192–1729 AD whose historicity appears reasonably certain. Occasionally temples were converted into mosques, which completed the disestablishment of former sovereignty with the establishment of a new order. When a non-Muslim subordinate officer in an Indo-Muslim State, showed signs of rebellion or disloyalty, the State often desecrated the temple(s) most clearly identified with that officer. Whatever form they took, acts of temple desecration were never directed at the people, but at the enemy king and the image that incarnated and displayed his State-deity. The Indo-Muslim rulers only followed the political tradition of temple desecration which existed ever since the sixth century and there was no religious basis for such acts. But once the rule was established in a region, the temples lying within the sovereign domain were treated as State properties and the temples and their priests got full protection. This historical reality has been distorted by some chroniclers. Aiming to cast earlier invaders and rulers in the role of puritanical heroes, later chroniclers occasionally attributed to such rulers, the desecration of staggering number of temples—figure that the communalists like Sita Ram Goel accepted at face value.

The mosques in India, though religiously potent, were considered detached from both sovereign terrain and dynastic authority. As a result, mosques were generally untouched by the conquerors. But there have been instances of mosque desecration also. In 1680, the Rajput chief Bhim Singh, seeking to avenge the destruction of temples in and around Udaipur by Aurangzeb, raided Gujarat and plundered Vadnagar, Vishalnagar and Ahmedabad.

In Ahmedabad he destroyed thirty small and one big mosque.

Thus we find that the narratives of forced conversions and temple desecrations on religious grounds are false and have no historical basis. Yet, they have been so ingrained in the Indian psyche that highly educated persons and even people in the judiciary appear to be highly influenced with them. Such narratives are being reinforced and are being hotly discussed in TV debates. These false narratives are being utilised by communalists to create communal dissension and create enmity and hatred within the society. In the interest of peace and harmony in the country, it now becomes the duty of all sincere citizens to expose the design of communalists and to bring into lime-light the correct historical narratives.

According to Bipan Chandra, communalism above all is an ideology and it cannot be opposed successfully without liquidating the heritage of communal ideology inculcated among our people for over 100 years. Communalism cannot be suppressed by force. Ideology has to be overcome at the level of ideology. One of the basic constituents of communal ideology is the view that in medieval India Muslims constituted the ruling class or the dominant group while Hindus were the ruled, the dominated, the subjects or the 'subject race'. Romila Thapar believes that religious fundamentalism is primarily a political condition that wears the authoritative colour of a religion, and can only be terminated by ending the political inducement it offers and by undermining its claim to being the unquestioned authority over all codes. Mahatma Gandhi wrote—"Communal harmony could not be permanently established in our country so long as highly distorted versions of history were being taught in her schools and colleges, through history text books". In fact communal ideology once initiated, would develop on its own steam unless actively opposed. Once developed, it cannot be appeased, it has to be opposed.

Due to the dissemination of false historical narratives as propaganda, the atmosphere in the country has become very sensitive. There have been hate speeches, communal incitements and riots. Then, one after another, claims have been petitioned in courts for handing over the mosques, which,

allegedly had been converted from temples by Muslim rulers. There is a legislation known as Places of Worship Act, 1991, according to which the status of all places of worship would remain the same as it was at the time of Independence. In spite of this provision, courts have been entertaining petitions aimed at verifying the nature of the places of worship related to Muslims. This is creating uneasiness in the society with the electronic media in general playing a very negative role. The communalist elements are active and the governments also don't seem to be sincere in maintaining communal harmony.

All this is happening because of the false historical narratives which appear to have got a foothold in the psyche of the people. On one hand the communalists among the Hindus appear to be very active in propagating these narratives. On the other hand there have been irresponsible statements by some Muslim politicians and religious leaders. The Jamiate-Ulama, Hind convened a three day conference of Muslim representatives in Deoband and there have been very emotional speeches. They have fallen into the trap of communalists by convening a conference on religious lines. An all-religious conference should have been convened to jointly raise a voice against communalism and false narratives. The country as a whole has to stand up against communalism. It is now for the non-communal and responsible persons of all religions to raise their voices in a logical and organised manner, so that the communal forces are exposed and their strategy defeated. A communal harmony group has to be formed consisting of people from all religions. This group should be able to strongly state that—

- It has not been appropriate to classify Indian History into Hindu, Muslim and British Periods as has been done by British historians to give a communal tinge to history. The Indian society has never been a static homogenous block. It has been a dynamic mosaic of various cultures all influencing each other. There have been periods of good and bad governance and there have also been political confrontations between rulers and confrontations on the basis of caste and ideologies. There have been ups and downs of dynasties and cultures and these have to be understood in an unbiased manner. It would not be proper to pick out certain events or periods to justify any present communal ideology. There

were conquerors especially in Medieval period, who came to Indian subcontinent to loot the temples and the riches of the people and then went away. But there were also conquerors who came here and made this land their homeland. They became a part of the political dynamics of the subcontinent and did not siphon away the revenues to some other country as was done by the British. Such rulers, whether Hindu or Muslim or any other faith, were part of the Indian political history and they cannot be equated with those who came to loot and those who came to colonise India as the British. They ruled according to the acceptable political behaviour of their times. We may not endorse much of their behaviour but it is not appropriate to spread hatred for them. We can learn from history, but we cannot correct it to suit our wishes. Any ideology which creates dissension in society or differentiates between citizens as primary and secondary, needs to be discarded outright. Except for some communal organisations, the people of all religions and walks of life have struggled jointly to gain Independence from the British. All are equal citizens and have equal rights as per the Constitution of India.

- The communal version of history is not supported by historical research. It is not correct that the religion of Islam has spread in India and elsewhere by force. Except for occasional instances, the spread of the religion has been a gradual and peaceful process. In fact no religion can spread far and wide with threats and intimidation.
- It is also not correct that there has been any desecration of temples by Muslim rulers on a large scale and that too on religious basis. It is true that some Muslim invaders looted the temples for their riches, and this was being done by Hindu rulers also. During the Muslim rule there have been only about 80 instances of temple desecration mostly for political purposes to subdue and humiliate the vanquished king or ruler. This has been a political behaviour since about sixth century AD. The political desecration of temples was directed against the enemy ruler of that area or State and not against the people or any religion. Once there was peace, the temples and their priests got full protection.
- The Places of Worship Act, 1991 provides for the

status quo of the places of worship as on the eve of Independence in 1947. However if there are any other issues related to any place of worship, they may be amicably resolved by mutual dialogue. The communal persons and organisation would not want a peaceful resolution of any issue. Hence, such persons need not be involved any such deliberations. The litmus test for being communal is the belief in false narratives.

- All religions preach love and compassion and no religion teaches hatred for any class of persons. Accordingly, Islam also teaches love, compassion, justice and equity. Any deviation from these principles is the fault of the person and not endorsed by religion. Islam considers all countrymen as fellow beings. Every citizen has a right to choose his or her religion and live accordingly. Religion is a matter between the person and God and no human being has any right to look down upon any person just because of one's religion. The word "kafir" has been used in the Quran to refer to those aggressively hostile people who in spite of knowing the Truth, were bent upon to exterminate the people who were believers in One Almighty God. The word 'kafir' cannot be applied to any person whether muslim or non-muslim by any other human being. It is for God to finally decide who is a 'Kafir', a 'Muslim' or anything else.
- The term "Gazwae-Hind" is an ambiguous term found in some muslim narrations. As responsible human beings people of all religions should stand by justice and oppose persecution of any kind and not support blindly any injustice or wrong just because of religion. If any threat comes to the country in any form, it is our religious duty to stand by the country.
- India will continue to be governed as per the Constitution of the country. The term "Hindu Rashtra" or 'Muslim State' are very vague and have no meaning besides inciting emotions. Instead of aspiring for a theological State people should propose amendments to the Constitution so that they may be debated and the Parliament and may consider their usefulness and appropriateness.

Resolutions like these need to be passed in an organised manner in specially convened meetings by groups of people consisting of all religions. This

will not only bring the correct historical narratives into focus, but will also pose an ideological challenge to the communalists. If communalism has to be conquered, the true patriots have to come out boldly and declare the correct historical narratives. Communalism has to be called communalism. If the forces of Peace and Harmony become vocal, communalism will itself take a back seat.

Conclusion

The ideology of communalism negates the concept of pluralism and fuels the feelings of hatred and enmity between different groups and communities. Religious communalism in India has spread mainly due to the false historical narratives spread by the British historians to create Hindu-Muslim dissension. The gist of these false narratives is that the religion of Islam has spread mainly by sword and that there was a vast desecration of temples by Muslim rulers. But this communal version of history is not supported by historical research. Historical facts have been grossly distorted to suit the communal ideology and to create dissension in society. Communalism is also encouraged by political parties if it suits them politically. It is time that the ideology of hatred is countered through the emphasis on correct historical narratives. It is the duty of non-communal and responsible persons and organizations of all religions to raise their voices in a logical and organized manner so that the communal forces are exposed and their strategy defeated. Communal harmony groups may be formed for this purpose which create awareness in the society and spread the message of Peace and Harmony.

References

Adas, Michael. *Islam and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*. Temple University Press, 1993.

Akyol, Mustafa. "Who is a Kafir?" *Dawn*, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1514167>

Ali, Syed Ameer. *The Spirit of Islam*. Low Priced Publications, 2015.

Author Details

Shahbaz Ahmad, IFS Retd. *Email ID:* shahbaz_in@rediffmail.com

Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2002.

Arnold, Thomas Walker. *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*. Gyan Publishing House, 2018.

Chandra, Bipan. *Communalism in Modern India*. Har-Anand Publications, 2021.

Eaton, Richard M. *Essays on Islam and Indian History*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Eaton, Richard M. *India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Golwalkar, M. S. *Bunch of Thoughts*. Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 2020.

Helwa, A. *Secrets of Divine Love: A Spiritual Journey into the Heart of Islam*. Penguin Random House, 2021.

Islam, Shamsul. *Muslims against Partition*. Pharos Media & Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2018.

Jha, D. N. *Against the Grain: Notes on Identity, Intolerance and History*. Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2022.

Khan, M. A. Muqtedar. *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*. Springer Nature, 2019.

Khan, M. A. Muqtedar. "What is Islamic Democracy?: The Three Cs of Islamic Governance." *E-International Relations*, 2015.

Khattab, Mustafa. *The Clear Quran*. Furqan Institute of Quranic Education, 2016.

Mishra, Ram Kumar. "Pushyamitra Sunga and the Buddhists." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 73, 2012, pp. 50-57.

Puniyani, Ram. *Busting Myths against Minorities: Indian Context*. Media House, 2021.

Puniyani, Ram. *Indian Nationalism versus Hindu Nationalism*. Pharos Media & Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2019.

Rai, V. N. *Combating Communal Conflict: Perception of Police Neutrality during Hindu-Muslim Riots in India*. Manas Publications, 2008.