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# UNIT 33 NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AND THE COMMUNAL PROBLEM\*

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## 33.1 INTRODUCTION

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This Unit is on the experiences of the nationalist leadership with the communal problem. It talks about how the nationalist leadership understood the communal question and what attempts it made to deal with the communal question. It will familiarise you with the central position which the communal problem acquired throughout the life of the nationalist movement and how a handling of the communal question became a virtual pre-condition to the successful operation of the nationalist struggle. The Unit begins with an overview of communalism as it emerged in Indian society and politics from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It then goes into the question of the relationship of communalism with the nationalist movement. It describes the various efforts made by the Congress leadership to come to terms with the communal problem. It also examines and evaluates the efforts of the Congress leadership and their relevance. Finally it focuses on Jawaharlal Nehru and his handling of the communal question.

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## 33.2 THE COMMUNAL PROBLEM

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The 19<sup>th</sup> century in Indian history was a period of a great transformation. Never before had changes taken place at such a pace and with such intensity. The British rule established itself very firmly and began to penetrate the interiors of the Indian society. This was also the period of the emergence of the modern industrial economy, mobility and dislocation.

Under the impact of these monumental changes, the traditional social structure too began to undergo transformation. The story of the kind of changes that came about has been mentioned in M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*. In a nutshell, India's community structure went through a process of dissolution and reconfiguration. India's traditional community structure was generally marked by plurality and syncretism. A large number of small and local communities existed with fuzzy and porous dividing lines. In particular, in as far as religious

life was concerned, there was considerable syncretism and overlap between various religious communities. For pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Indian society, it was not possible to talk of *A Hindu community* or *A Muslim community*. It would be more appropriate to refer to multiple Hindu communities, multiple Muslim communities, and multiple communities that were both at the same time. Religious life was lived more at a ritualistic level. The impact of doctrine or centralized tenets was, at best minimal in the lives of ordinary Hindus and Muslims. In other words the religious life of common people was marked less by centralized doctrines and scriptures and more by local rituals and folk practices. The general religious traditions of popular Hinduism and popular Islam did not appear very divergent from each other. There are any number of examples to corroborate this thesis from Bengal and Punjab, two important regions with a Muslim majority. For both these regions, it has been recorded by scholars that the influence of high scholastic Islam was very minimal and that of low, Sufi and syncretic Islam, very deep and pervasive. This was also true of Hindus and other communities.

Broadly speaking, the mammoth changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to alter India's community profile in two directions. On the one hand, a national community of Indian people, cutting across region, religion and culture, began to be formed. On the other, the diverse raw material of Indian religious communities began to give way to internally standardized, externally differentiated, neatly segregated, pan-Indian communities of Hindus and Muslims. In other words, something like a Hindu community with an all-India consciousness and a Muslim community with a similar all-India consciousness began to emerge. Their religious differences became sharp and those of culture, language and region began to become relatively less important. New differences also got invented.

It is necessary to emphasize here that this altered community profile was a product of 19<sup>th</sup> century transformation. It is important to recognize the empirical reality of the making of pan-Indian religious communities. It is however equally important to recognize that they did not always exist. India's community profile at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was dramatically different from what it became at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This development was extremely conducive for the growth of the communal politics. By communalism, we refer to an ideology that sought to transform religious communities into political constituencies. Two different but interconnected processes were involved in the politics of communalism: 1) Creation of pan-Indian communities of Hindus and Muslims; and 2) placing of these communities at the service of large political mobilizations.

The communal politics, which developed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was initially confined to the tiny elite minority of the society. The wider public was untouched by it. However, by the 1920s, this politics began to influence the middle classes. By the late 1930s and 40s, it also acquired a mass base. The kind of demands raised from the platform of the communal politics, easily confirms its class character in different phases. In the initial elite phase, the major demand was for reservation of seats in the legislative bodies. By 1920s, this demand was enlarged to include reservation of jobs and protection of culture and language of religious communities. However, from the late 1930s onwards, communalism began to acquire a mass base. It was during this period that Muslim League, the communal organisation claiming to represent the Muslims, began to argue that

lives of all Muslims were unsafe in India and that they could live with dignity only if they had a separate homeland of their own.

It should also be added here that the British government promoted and encouraged communal politics through a whole range of ways and measures. They created certain institutional structures which had the effect of politically separating Hindus from Muslims. In particular reference should be made of the practice of separate electorates initiated by the British in 1909 through an Act. According to this Act, entirely separate electoral procedures were created for Muslims and Hindus. When electoral democracy was started for Indian society, it was done by creating separate electoral constituencies, voters and candidates on the basis of religion. This meant that separate constituencies were designated as Muslim constituencies. A separate voter list, consisting only of Muslims was prepared. Only Muslim candidates could stand from these Muslim seats, having only Muslim votes. Under this arrangement, it was not possible for a Hindu to vote for a Muslim and vice-versa. It was clear that under such a system, political leaders representing specific religious communities had a good chance of becoming successful. Those political leaders with a support base in both communities, could never succeed because their support base itself was divided.

The system of separate electorates, was the single largest factor responsible for the emergence and the spread of communal politics. The communal politics was initially confined to a small segment of the population, when the voting rights were restricted. Gradually however, as the voting rights began to be extended to more people, so was the possibility of communalism. It is really a curious feature of Indian politics till 1947, that the increasing communalisation of Indian society and politics was integrally connected with the increasing democratisation of Indian society and politics. Given the peculiar nature of electoral politics introduced by the British, democratisation and communalisation went hand-in-hand.

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### **33.3 COMMUNAL PROBLEM AND THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT**

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The Indian national movement was based on the twin ideas of anti-imperialism and national unity. These two ideas were interconnected but not identical. The tradition of anti-imperialism was much older and dated back to the days of British conquest. Ever since the British rule was established, different groups – peasants, tribals, traditional zamindars, chieftains – had rebelled against it at different points and places. The Rebellion of 1857 was actually a culmination of traditional anti-imperialist rebellions. With the gradual emergence of an Indian nation since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the old tradition of anti-imperialism found a new ally in national unity. From now onwards, an organic connection developed between the two. It began to be argued, quite correctly, that an effective anti-imperialist protest could develop only if it was combined with national unity. National unity meant a coming together of all Indians – cutting across differences of religion, culture, language and region – on a common platform and acquiring a common national consciousness.

It should be quite clear that communalism stood as the single most serious obstacle to this project of national unity. Thus, political national unity and political communal unity were separate trajectories, basically opposed to each other. One

could succeed only at the expense of the other. This reality of Indian polity had been clearly understood both by the colonial state and the leaders of the national movement. But they derived very different conclusions from it. The colonial state understood that an effective counterpoise to the growing national movement could be developed by preventing national unity and by promoting inter-religious division in Indian politics. The colonial state systematically pursued its politics of preventing national unity throughout. The leaders of the national movement, on the other hand, decided to handle sensitive religious matters in such a manner as not to create friction and division across religions. For instance, the Indian National Congress passed a resolution, at its fourth session in Allahabad in 1888, not to take up any issue concerning a religious community, if the majority of that community was opposed to it. These were initial efforts to try and discourage any kind of religious divide within the ranks of Congress.

However, certain developments of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century adversely affected these fragile though sincere efforts of the nationalist leadership, and complicated the issue. Let us briefly look at some of these developments:

- The Arya Samaj was formed in 1875 and became quite active in north India. The organization attempted to consolidate Hindus on a common social platform. A militant branch of the Arya Samaj started a campaign called *Shudhi* (purification), which was based on a re-conversion of those Hindus, who had been earlier converted to other faiths. The activities of the Arya Samaj however were confined to the field of education and reform. Around the same time, a cultural and educational movement developed among the Muslim elite of north India, called the Aligarh movement. Syed Ahmed Khan, the leader of the Aligarh movement, wanted to develop a partnership between the Muslim elite and the British government. So when the Congress was formed in 1885, he made an appeal to Muslims to stay away from it. These two institutions – Arya Samaj and Aligarh movement – effectively prevented unity of Hindu and Muslim elite of north India.
- In 1905, Congress launched Swadeshi movement against the decision of the British government to partition the province of Bengal into two. The proposed partition was such that one part of Bengal was to have a Muslim majority. The British government projected the partition as something that would benefit the Muslims. The British propaganda was very successful and the Muslims stayed away from the Swadeshi movement. Though in its basic character, the movement was essentially anti-imperialist, yet it acquired a Hindu identification. By the end of the movement in 1908, the Hindu-Muslim divide had become deeper.
- Formation of All India Muslim League (AIML) in 1906 and All India Hindu Mahasabha (AIHMS) in 1915, added a new dimension to the communal problem. These two organisations claimed to represent the Muslims and Hindus, respectively. The antagonism between the two religious communities got a new fillip with the formations of these organisations. It also created new challenges for Congress as representing the politics of secular nationalism.

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## 33.4 THE CONGRESS APPROACH TOWARDS THE COMMUNAL PROBLEM

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It was thus clear to Congress leadership that the communal problem was a huge obstacle in the anti-imperialist struggle and that it was absolutely necessary to address and solve the communal problem.

The available evidence suggests that the Congress leadership did not approach this question with a well-rounded and comprehensive strategic framework. Rather the leadership treated this question as a contingency and dealt with it on the basis of immediate political situation. To put it differently, the leadership tried to handle the communal problem with a series of tactical options, tried at different points in time. These tactical options were not necessarily connected with each other and sometimes they were also inconsistent with each other. This was completely in contrast with the Congress approach towards the anti-imperialist question. The anti-imperialist struggle, particularly from 1920 onwards, was fought within a well-rounded and comprehensive strategic framework. Nothing like a centralized strategy existed *vis-a-vis* the communal problem.

Basically, at the level of a problem to be solved, communal problem meant three things to Congress leadership:

- 1) How to bring Muslims into the Congress fold?
- 2) How to handle Muslim League with its ever increasing demands?
- 3) How to prevent Hindu Mahasabha from becoming the spokesman of Hindus?

Out of the three the third appeared the simplest and easiest to achieve. Congress had effectively neutralised any possible threat emanating from Hindu Mahasabha. As mentioned earlier, a larger number of Hindus had joined Congress, more so after the Swadeshi movement. Congress had disseminated the ideas of territorial nationalism to them. Given the strong base Congress had acquired among Hindus, it appeared unlikely that Hindu Mahasabha, with its narrow base and elitist politics, would be able to make a dent in the Congress bastion and be able to wean away Hindus from the Congress fold.

Initially the main focus of the Congress was mainly on how to bring Muslims into Congress. On this question the approach of the leadership consisted of four different tactical options tried at different times: a) pacts and negotiations, b) aiming for an exclusive Muslim mobilisation, such as the one tried during the Khilafat movement, c) hoping to rope in Muslims through general nationalist or class appeal and mobilisation, and d) through maintaining active Congress presence inside Muslim League and other organisations of Muslims. Quite often one option was tried after the other one had been exhausted. Different tactical options employed by the leadership did not form parts of a package, but existed quite independent of, and unrelated to, each other.

The Lucknow Pact signed in 1916 between Congress and Muslim League was based on the idea that Muslim League was truly representative of Muslims. Congress granted concessions to Muslim in recognition of this idea. It was hoped by Congress leadership that a pact with Muslim League would enable it to gain access to Muslims. However, the pact was based on the promise of certain concessions. It became redundant once British government granted more

concessions, as part of Government of India Act of 1919, than Congress had promised.

The Khilafat movement, fought under Gandhi's leadership provided yet another opportunity to Congress to bring Muslims within its fold. The Khilafat movement was essentially the product of a global political climate in which the ideas of anti-imperialism and of pan-Islamism tended to go hand in hand. Its manifestation in India was an alliance between the nationalist and the Islamic forces. The Khilafat movement as a tactics for Muslim mobilisation was quite successful during the course of the movement. Large number of Muslims became a part of Congress activities. There was a marked decline in communal activities. Conflict around cow slaughter and music before mosque came down significantly.

However the grand alliance ended with the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement following the violence at Chauri-Chaura, and the annulment of the Khilafat issue in Turkey itself because of the overthrow of the institution of Khalifa there. The end of the alliance turned out to be bitter and there was a significant increase in communal activities. It has been argued by historians that the Khilafat experiment damaged the cause of secular nationalism by legitimizing religion's entry into politics and thus consolidating communalism in the long run. Bipan Chandra writes:

...since the Muslim masses and lower middle classes were brought into the anti-imperialist movement through an agreement with the top leaders and on a religious question, they came into it with their existing consciousness intact. They joined the movement as a matter of religiosity and not for the protection and advancement of their democratic and economic rights. What is even more important, the very terms of this agreement prevented Gandhi and the nationalist leadership from using this opportunity to impart a modern, secular, democratic and anti-imperialist consciousness or understanding of social forces to the Muslim masses who participated in the non-cooperation-cum-Khilafat-Movement. (Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, p. 260.)

The emergence of the left-wing politics since the late 1920s provided a political alternative to the Khilafat movement. Now it was not considered necessary to bring religion into politics in order to bring Muslims into Congress. In fact, such an approach was considered not just undesirable but also outdated and medieval, under left-wing influence. Jawaharlal Nehru was convinced that Religion was actually the source of all communal troubles and that it had to be kept out of every aspect of public life. It now began to be argued by some Congress leaders that Congress should reach out to Muslims, *not as Muslims*, but as part of larger pools of workers, peasants, middle classes etc., or simply as Indians. It was felt that a separate religious appeal was unnecessary. Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, an important Congress leader from UP, issued an interesting statement in 1937, making it clear that the pacts between religious communities and with communal organisations were a thing of the past:

Maulana Shaukat Ali and Sri Jinnah should realise that this is not the India of 1920s. We have moved ahead and if Sri Jinnah and Maulana Shaukat Ali do not keep up with the times, it is not our fault. Earlier cleavages [in the society] are fast disappearing and are being replaced by new ones. From 1920 to 1930 major communities were religious – Hindus, Mussalmans, Parsees, Sikhs etc.... Today

they have been replaced by communities based on class – Taluqdars, Zamindars, Kisans ...workers, factory owners and customers. Those who have worked in the villages in the previous elections know that Muslim Kisans are as interested in, and influenced by, the peasant-related activity of the Congress as the Hindus. This is only natural.... We are [therefore] not going to convene a meeting of the two communities to solve the Hindu-Muslim problem. (Quoted in Salil Misra, *A Narrative of Communal Politics, Uttar Pradesh, 1937-39*, p. 227.)

The formation of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 provided a further fillip to this tendency which relied upon class categories, rather than religious ones, to bring more and more Muslims into Congress.

Almost simultaneously with this, another stream of thought developed within Congress on how to effectively deal with communal bodies. It consisted of maintaining an active presence in the communal organisations to prevent their further slide down the communal road. As part of this thinking, some Congress leaders joined either Muslim League or Hindu Mahasabha. Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lajpat Rai (till he died in 1928) and B.S. Moonje were members of both Congress and Hindu Mahasabha. Likewise Suleiman Ansari, Hafiz Ibrahim, M.C. Chagla and Khaliqzaman were simultaneously members of both Congress and Muslims League. Important Congress leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Sarojini Naidu, Asaf Ali often attended the sessions of Muslim League in the 1920s. Sometimes Congress leaders also made speeches from Muslim League platform.

It seems that this approach of containing communalism from within and through some kind of infiltration was more in vogue in the 1920s and went out of practice in the 1930s. From late 1920s onwards, the conflicts between Congress and Muslim League on the one hand, and Congress and Mahasabha on the other, increased quite a bit and the Congress leaders found it difficult to retain a foothold in both the organisations. However, it was only in 1938 that Congress high command forbade the office bearers of Congress to maintain dual membership with communal organisations such as Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha.

The year 1937 is very crucial as far as Congress approach to communal question is concerned. It was in this year that the first general elections were held under separate electorates. The election results revealed some important facts. Congress had done very badly in exclusively Muslim seats, consisting exclusively of Muslim voters. Out of a total of 485 Muslim seats, Congress contested only 58 and won 26. However, what was even more interesting was that even Muslim League did not do too well in Muslim seats. It got a little over hundred seats, around 20% of the total Muslim seats and around 5% of total Muslim votes. It was clear that although Muslim League had done better than Congress in Muslim seats, it was nowhere near a satisfactory performance for the League. Most of the Muslim seats had gone either to regional parties, or to independent candidates or to local small parties. It was also clear that the Muslim voters were as yet outside any major political ideological influence, either of the nationalist variety or of the communal variety.

It was against this background that Jawaharlal Nehru came out with a new approach. The new approach consisted of ignoring the communal organisations because the election results had clearly brought out their unrepresentative

character. Instead Congress should reach out directly to the masses of Muslims and bring them into its fold. It was hoped that in this way Congress would be able to deal effectively with the communal problem. Nehru, as Congress President, issued a circular to all Provincial Congress Committees to 'make a special effort to enrol Muslim Congress members'. It started the Muslim Mass Contact Programme by Congress in April 1937. This programme alarmed the Muslim League leadership which decided to initiate a similar programme of reaching out to Muslim masses. The Congress campaign went on till 1939 after which it subsided and eventually petered out. In this way, by around 1940, Congress leadership had tried a whole range of options to deal with the communal problem.

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### 33.5 AN APPRAISAL OF THE CONGRESS APPROACH

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In general it can be said that the Congress approach met with both success and failure. Or rather, it succeeded in some areas and failed in some others.

Congress approach in handling Hindu communalism and its organisation the Hindu Mahasabha, was extremely successful. A strong Hindu communal organisation was potentially capable of reducing Congress to a position of political insignificance. But that did not happen. A large body of Hindus had joined Congress fairly early on, certainly from the days of Swadeshi movement, well before the formation of the Hindu Mahasabha. They remained with Congress even after the formation of Mahasabha. The Hindu Mahasabha remained an elite organisation, devoid of larger support. It is therefore not surprising that it was ignored by all the other major political forces of the time – British, Congress and Muslim League. Hindu Mahasabha contested the general elections of 1937 and 1946 but failed to get the political support of Hindus. In the crucial elections of 1946, its vote share was around 1% of total Hindu votes. Throughout the period of the national movement, the forces of Hindu communalism remained very weak. It can be argued that Congress, through its activities, had succeeded in disseminating the idea of territorial nationalism to a majority of Hindus. This certainly was a major accomplishment of Congress leadership.

However in certain other respects, the Congress approach has to be considered a failure. If one major objective of the Congress was to bring Muslims into its fold and defeat the Muslim communal organisations politically and ideologically, then obviously the Congress approach did not succeed. All the evidence suggests that almost till the end, Muslim participation in the national movement remained very low. And Muslim communalism kept growing and increasing its demands. The ultimate demand came in 1940 when Muslim League declared that Indian Muslims were not a minority but a nation and therefore entitled to have a separate nation state of their own. This was a demand for a partition of India. This demand became successful in 1947 when the British, before leaving, partitioned India into two separate nation-states, India and Pakistan.

At an elementary level, it may be said that the Congress approach on the communal question lacked the consensus it had on the anti-imperialist issue. Often plans were made by individual leaders, but were implemented by the larger organisation only in a half-hearted manner. This was for instance the case with some of the schemes initiated by Nehru and Gandhi in the 1930s. The Congress leadership

did not fully realise the rapid pace at which communalism, particularly its Muslim variant, was growing. The leadership therefore often suggested mechanisms that may have been appropriate for the earlier phase of communalism, but not applicable under changed circumstances. To take an example, in his correspondence and negotiations with Jinnah during 1937-38, Nehru kept asking Jinnah what his demands were. Once Congress knew what the major Muslim League demands were, they would try to address them. Such an approach was perfectly appropriate for the communal situation prevalent in the 1920s. In the 1920s the politics of communalism essentially represented a set of demands. British government and Congress were the acknowledged major political forces, and communal leaders of different persuasions were putting forward their demands either to British or to Congress. However, by the 1930s, important changes came about in the character of Muslim communalism. Muslim League was now fighting for parity, to be treated at par with Congress and to be recognized as the only authoritative body representative of Indian Muslims. In a decade's time Muslim League had been transformed from a petitioning body into an organisation claiming equal status with the Congress. In such a scenario, Nehru asking Jinnah about his demands obviously made no sense and only infuriated Jinnah. The Nehru-Jinnah negotiations broke down, mainly because of a basic incompatibility in how the two parties understood each other.

As mentioned in the previous section, Nehru, as Congress president declared in 1937 that they would ignore the communal leaders and reach out directly to Muslim masses. Once Muslim masses joined Congress, the communal problem would be solved easily, if not automatically. In itself this was a sound approach and certainly had the potentials of being successful. The trouble was that when Congress started its Muslim mass contact campaign, Muslim League also started its own campaign of mass contact. By 1939-40, it had become quite clear that the Muslim League campaign had been much more successful and a large body of Muslims had joined Muslim League. Muslim League in the 1940s was no longer an elite organisation that could be easily ignored. The new situation obviously required a new approach from Congress. The earlier approach of ignoring Muslim League, as suggested by Nehru, could only work in a context when Muslim League was a tiny insignificant body. But once it became popular and powerful, and was also recognised by the British government, it would be simply counter-productive to ignore it.

The trouble however was that as Muslim League became more popular, it also became more stridently communal. It entered a phase of extreme communalism. Its major demand now was a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. This was a difficult demand to meet for a nationalist body like Congress. So at a time when it was necessary for Congress to come to terms with Muslim League (because it had become popular), it also became very difficult for Congress (because the League had begun demanding Pakistan). Thus, it was difficult for the Congress to evolve a satisfactory mechanism to deal with Muslim League. Muslim League's simultaneous popularisation and shift to extreme communalism had serious implications for Congress approach. Had Muslim League become popular without shifting to extreme communalism, it would have been possible – and relatively easy – to negotiate and deal with it. On the other hand, had Muslim League had shifted to extreme communalism without becoming popular it would have been possible for Congress to ignore it. But that was not to be.

Apart from the basic inability to effectively come to terms with communalism, its politics, organisations and the leadership, a large number of other weaknesses within Congress have also been pointed out by various scholars. The essentially middle class character of the Congress leadership, inability or refusal to offer more concessions to Muslim League and not doing enough to win its political support, a right wing hegemony within Congress leadership thwarting the efforts of the organisation to reach out to Muslims, and the presence of many Hindu revivalist elements within Congress leadership making it difficult for Muslims to join Congress, have been some of the explanations offered for the failure of Congress to incorporate Muslims into the national movement in large numbers. It would be safe to conclude that the inability, or failure, of the leadership of the national movement to evolve and implement a comprehensive strategy to counter communalism, must constitute an important part of the explanation for the emergence of communalism in India.

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### **33.6 JAWAHARLAL NEHRU AND COMMUNALISM**

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While studying the Congress approach towards the communal question, it is very necessary to deal specifically with the ideas and activities of Jawaharlal Nehru vis-à-vis the communal question. Nehru, more than any other Congress leader, paid attention to this question, wrote about it and often formulated the Congress approach to this question. In his long political career, many changes came about in his understanding of communalism as a political phenomenon.

Nehru was a pioneer on an understanding of communalism. Many of the social science ideas on communalism – consensual as well as contentious – actually go back to Nehru. It would be difficult to attempt a historical analysis of communalism in India without referring to Nehru’s ideas. His ideas were constantly growing and evolving, as far as communalism is concerned. However, the 1930s, particularly the period 1932-37 is the most crucial period for his intellectual engagement with the issue. It was during this period that major breakthroughs occurred in his thinking and remained with him in the subsequent period. Broadly speaking, following ideas may be treated as the major building blocks in Nehru’s understanding of communalism. These ideas also shaped the approaches that were adopted during this period by Congress vis-a-vis the communal problem:

- Nehru increasingly began to see that communalism was not simply a question of religion, or of religious differences, or only a matter of violence. He set out to explore the social and economic roots of the communal question in India. He began to look upon it as essentially a middle class problem, rooted in the insecurities, anxieties and the uneven development of the middle classes in India. In other words, Nehru began to apply a Marxian approach to an understanding of the communal problem. Prior to Nehru, the communal question was often seen primarily in terms of conflict between religious communities and politics based on those conflicts.
- An extension of this understanding was that he looked upon the problem as a ‘myth’ or as something false. By that he did not mean that it was empirically false or that it did not exist, but that it did not correctly represent the social reality. It claimed to protect religion but in reality it only served the narrow interests of the middle and the upper classes. Thus he began to see

communalism as a tool in the hands of the vested interests. He argued that communalism was a smoke screen to disguise the narrow class interests of the elites.

- Nehru was probably the first to talk separately of minority and majority communalisms, or rather Muslim and Hindu communalism. In an essay, he provided the novel thesis that whereas the communalism of the majority can easily disguise as some kind of nationalism, the minority communalism has to emphasize its separateness. This may impart some respectability to the communalism of the majority, but in reality both are equally anti-people and dangerous.
- Nehru made a distinction between communalism borne out of fear and insecurity, and communalism as motivated by narrow selfish interests. He called former “Honest Communalism” and latter “False Communalism”. He made a historic statement in one of his essays: “Honest Communalism is fear; false communalism is political reaction.”
- He also saw communalism as a weapon in the hands of those opposed to progress and change. Such elements were also supported by the British. It was not just a part of their policy of discrediting anti-imperialist Indian nationalism. It also fitted in with their tendency of aligning with the most conservative sections of the Indian population. He equated communalism with obscurantism and medievalism and something that was essentially opposed to progress and a modern outlook.

All these points were important inputs into a general understanding of communalism that developed in India from 1940s onwards. However, with the advantage of hindsight, we should also point out two major limitations in the way Nehru looked at communalism:

- 1) When communalism, particularly Muslim communalism, began to break out of the middle class fold and acquire mass support, particularly after 1937, Nehru welcomed this development. He appeared convinced at this stage that communalism could not remain reactionary and become a mass force at the same time. He hoped that the popular pressure would force the Muslim League to moderate and dilute its communalism. That a popular communalism was somehow a contradiction in terms; it could either be popular or communal but not both. Nehru was optimistic that the entry of masses would cleanse the Muslim League of its negative reactionary character. Nehru did not foresee that this development could transform communalism itself into a powerful mass force. Once that happened, it would be virtually impossible to effectively oppose it. Thus, once this happened, the nationalist forces were quite helpless in the face of communalism backed up by mass support.
- 2) Nehru’s search for economic roots of communalism also culminated in the creation of a somewhat economistic and deterministic position on communalism. It was also the result of a mechanical application of Marxism to the important social and political problems of the times. He understood communalism to a product of a particular kind of political economy promoted by British imperialism. From here he went on to infer that the removal of

imperialism and economic development would be able to rid Indian society of communalism. He perhaps did not see the need for a powerful ideological campaign against communalism, particularly after independence. He believed that the communal consciousness among the people was rooted in the existing material conditions. Therefore a transformation of the material conditions would be successful in altering that consciousness. He did not foresee that an ideology, after establishing firm roots in the minds and hearts of the people, can acquire an independent life of its own.

To sum up this section, Nehru should be credited with having made an important contribution to the rich historiography that developed on communalism. Many of the ideas were initiated by Nehru and subsequently developed by other social scientists. The socio-economic background to communalism, distinctions between minority and majority communalism, class character of communalism, communal consciousness being 'false', communalism as the Indian brand of Fascism are some of the ideas that began with Nehru and were developed further by historians.

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### **33.7 SUMMARY**

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This Unit has argued the following points:

- The 19<sup>th</sup> century in Indian history experienced the unfolding of a new type of state system and a new type of economy. Under this stimulus, the traditional Indian social structure began to undergo a transformation. This transformation altered India's community profile in extremely profound ways. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indian society witnessed the emergence of pan-Indian, internally standardized, externally differentiated, religious communities of Hindus and Muslims. This transformed community structure was extremely conducive for communalism. Under the stimulus of communalism, the pan-Indian religious communities of Hindus and Muslims were also transformed as political constituencies.
- The nationalist struggle was based on the twin ideas of anti-imperialism and national unity. The ideal of national unity could be seriously damaged by the development of communal politics. Certain developments during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created a political divide between Hindus and Muslims. It was therefore imperative for the nationalist leadership to try and effectively deal with communal politics, if the idea of Indian nationalism was to survive politically.
- During the initial decades of the nationalist struggle, the Congress leadership did not approach this question with a coordinated and centralized strategic framework. Instead, the leadership tried a whole range of different tactical options at different points. On the whole, although the Congress was successful in containing the Hindu Mahasabha, it failed to bring in a large number of Muslims within its folds. The year 1937 brought a new dimension to communal politics. The results of the first general elections, held under separate electorates, demonstrated that Indian Muslim voters had not as yet been successfully mobilised either by the nationalist forces or by the communal ones. This was seen as an opportunity by Nehru to start a Muslim mass contact campaign seeking to mobilise Muslims on a Congress platform. But the Congress campaign petered out after 1939.

- During the post-1937 period, Muslim League gradually acquired a mass base. It was also transformed in the direction of extreme communalism. In 1940, it put forward the demand for Pakistan, as a separate nation-state of Indian Muslims. The simultaneous popularisation and communalisation of Muslim League made it extremely difficult for the Congress leadership to effectively deal with the communal problem.

The further development eventually culminated in 1947 in the partition of the sub-continent. The year 1947 was a year both of the great triumph and a huge tragedy for Indian nationalism. Although India became independent from imperialist control, the *raison detre* of Indian nationalism, it was accompanied by the partition. The inability to maintain the unity of the country on the eve of independence must rank as one of the major failures of the ideology of Indian nationalism.

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### **33.8 EXERCISES**

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- 1) Discuss the nature of communalism before 1920.
- 2) What were the changes in the communal politics in the wake of the Government of India Act of 1919 and the Khilafat Movement?
- 3) Explain the factors responsible for the failure of the Congress to contain the Muslim League and its brand of communal politics.
- 4) Critically analyse Nehru's views on communalism.