Nehru and the Question of Communalism

Vivek Kumar Srivastava, Dr.
Nehru and the Question of Communalism  
Mainstream, VOL LIII No 48  
New Delhi  

_Saturday 21 November 2015_  

by Vivek Kumar Srivastava  

Nehru, the architect of modern India, was a staunch nationalist for whom communalism was the worst socio-political evil. He fought his whole life against it. His views about communalism were shaped in his upbringing which was absolutely secular; the other reasons lay on his ideas about religion and composite culture. In his childhood he had come across people from different religions. His teacher, F.T. Brooks, his father’s munshi Mubarak Ali, his brief interaction with the Theosophists including Annie Besant, his stay at Harrow and Cambridge where he met Jews, Christians and finally his long family traditions of interacting with people of different faiths influenced his psyche and he became a man with inclusiveness in all spheres of life.  

His ideas about religion were different from the usual perception of the common people of his age. In his opinion, different religions were closely associated with superstition and dogmatic beliefs. He disliked the supernatural element in religious practices. He was not attracted towards any particular religion, although he accepted the great values of religious texts as Gita which appealed to him much, but any religion with orthodox approach to life was severely criticised by him. Mysticism, metaphysics and spiritualism were major components of religion but he rejected all of these; albeit he found attraction towards Theosophy and Vedanta but not fully. Finally, the Marxist attitude towards life influenced his thoughts but he knew its limitation too. In essence religion was not a decisive factor influencing his mental process. Composite culture, in his opinion, emerged in the country due to joint living and the interconnected cooperative life of the Hindus and Muslims. In villages there was no distinction between both. The common culture had shared values of living, attire, participation in each
other’s festivals and to face collectively the common problems of the day. A fused culture grew in which the common language played a crucial role. None intervened in other’s affairs; a common identity and shared values emerged. Religious diversity was respected and in due course the complex but quite delicate common culture became the mainstream culture of the country.

In his view, communalism was political by nature, not economic, as the masses never developed any conflict at the ground level for economic sharing but the demand for seats in the legislature was a major concern of the leaders of the Muslim community. People had no antagonism at the economic and religious levels. Moreover they did not fight for establishing the superiority of their religion.

Nehru was of the firm conviction that the communal problem was of recent origin with no historical evidences; not being in existence even in the decade of the 1920s when middle class Muslims as from the NWFP had participated in the freedom struggle along with the Congress. Moreover several Muslims were leaders and workers of the Congress. The spark to the communal problem was lit by the British Government. The religious communities were having mutual tolerance towards each other. Nehru had analysed that it was their common culture that had fused both communities. He was right because communalism in the wider framework always tears the fabric of composite culture and finally the spirit of tolerance. When historically fused cultural values are segregated, communalism takes birth. Nehru therefore adopted a cultural approach to understand communalism.

He also found that the main contributors in the growth of communalism were the divisive government policies, certain organisations and their political leaderships. Communalism was not caused by the local people but it was the handiwork of certain extraneous forces which were keen to exploit the religious cleavages for narrow political interests.
Nehru discovered that major political parties in both communities, the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha, vitiated the social milieu. The Muslim League got some success in the 1937 election but the Hindu Mahasabha failed. Thereafter the Muslim League raised unnecessarily the issue of atrocities on Muslims by the Congress Ministries. Though there was no suppression by the governments, the Muslim League attempted to cleave both communities. Nehru’s conclusion was that communalism was an institutionally supported activity; first it was done by the British Government and later by the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha. Communalism was never a living philosophy of the common people but they were often swayed by the utterings of their chosen leaders. Nehru’s conclusion is valid in the present time too; only the actors have changed.

Nehru also analysed the factors which allowed these leaders and the reactionary parties to control the psyche of the masses. He found that the emergence of the Muslim League as a mass party of the Muslims was facilitated due to the extreme backwardness of Muslims in the social and political spheres. They were non-analytical and less informative; as a consequence they had fallen prey to the communal forces. This inference is of much utility in today’s Indian social milieu where most of the people are still not much analytical and are easily controlled by the reactionary forces. Nehru suggests that common people should be made aware about their composite culture and the real character of the communal leaders and parties should be exposed by the intellectuals working in any capacity.

In this respect the roles of leaders become crucial. He concluded that communalism also arose due to the deficiency of eminent leaders in the communities. Muslims, due to their feudal background and close links with the traditions, lagged in this respect. Hindus were also backward but were more progressive than Muslims; hence they produced some quality leaders, Parsees also produced a good leadership. Its consequence was explicit as Jinnah-like leaders dominated the Muslim psyche but it did not happen with Hindus and Parsees. Not only Jinnah,
but leaders like Maulana Mohamad Ali, the President of the Coconada (Kakinada) Congress session, 1923, with whom Nehru had a chance to interact, proved narrow in approach and he moved away from the Congress’ philosophy of unity.

Nehru was convinced that the Muslim leadership was myopic which led to the birth of communalism in a sharp manner. Nehru even questioned Gandhi’s emphasis upon the religious values, his concept of Ram Rajya did not appeal him; though he thought it was aimed to reach the masses but he inferred as well that all these led to cultural revivalism. Gandhi did not, however, preach any dogmatic religion and hence survived in Indian politics. His efforts during the Khilafat movement symbolised his belief in composite culture.

The Hindu Mahasabha failed because the Congress with some influential leaders never allowed Hindu communalism to take roots in the country but it did not happen in the Muslim community where Jinnah succeeded in communalising the milieu. In this respect, the role of modernity becomes crucial. For Nehru, modernity springs from a scientific attitude to life where religious or divine order is not the ultimate determinant. Muslims were not modernised as they lacked new knowledge and scientific understanding. This proved an important reason behind their shift to the ideology of the Muslim League.

At the political front he did not accept the two-nation theory of Jinnah as it was based on the communal philosophy. The partition was accepted because it could solve some of the problems that had troubled India. Speaking in the Lok Sabha on March 17, 1950 he presented the secular philosophy of the country. ‘Clearly, it was impossible to divide India on the basis of separate religious groups, on one side or the other, because they were bound to overlap.’ He also emphasised that minorities, whether in India or in Pakistan, should be provided complete protection; otherwise the structures built by us were to collapse. He thus nullified the sentiments of certain Hindu groups that India belongs only to Hindus and other communities should be expelled from the land.
He defined the Indian approach to fight communalism to the world audience. He made a TV and radio broadcast in Washington on December 18, 1956 in which he stated in clear terms that ‘India is a country steeped in history and tradition, with a civilisation as old as recorded time and a culture nourished on its own soil and blended happily with those of other peoples and of other lands. Through the centuries, India has preached and practised toleration and under-standing (and) gave to ourselves a Constitution based on these principles and guaranteeing the fundamental human rights of freedom of the individual, equality of man and the rule of law.’

Nehru also provided a policy framework to deal with the problem of communalism. In April 1936 he gave his presidential address at the Lucknow Congress session; he said that communalism and democracy could not live together and communalism would divide India into several compartments where the development of democracy and economy was never possible. For the resolution of the communal problem he suggested three methods: first independence, second to displace the circumstances generating the communal problem and making friendly relations among the concerned parties, and finally and the most relevant even for contemporary times, that the ‘majority community must show generosity in the matter to allay the fear and suspicion that minorities, even though unreasonably, might have’.

Nehru’s ideas are more relevant than ever today to combat the demon of communalism. It needs to be kept in mind that history gives us lessons to rectify our previous mistakes. Communalism in India had small beginnings but led to partition. In the present time orthodox elements are present in both communities. Nehru dealt with such forces successfully, now there is a greater need to take guidance from him.

Dr Vivek Kumar Srivastava is the Vice-Chairman, CSSP, Kanpur. He can be contacted at e-mail: vpy1000@yahoo.in