

India: Communalism and Development. Religious Identity Politics

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Communal politics has been viewed from different perspectives. The left primarily regards religion as opium of people, instilling false consciousness, giving them a high, and diverting their attention from their real issues related to material improvement in their lives like jobs, better wages, housing, health, access to medical facilities, quality education for the poor, and so on. However, majoritarian communal politicians promise their followers that their government would not only ensure religio-cultural adherence, further the cause of Hindu nationalism, but also that they are the best bet for the development of the nation and their material needs. They promise Hindutva with development. Hindutva, according to them, brings out dedication and commitment to the nation, spirit of sacrifice for the nation would ensure development.

The BJP had given all sorts of promises during the 2014 general elections to the youth regarding jobs, to the farmers about ensuring 50% profits over their costs and inputs, development of infrastructure – roads, electricity, etc. and building 100 smart cities, security for women, lowering of fuel prices, and such other promises ensuring that all sections of the society would have good life. Their tag line was “*sabka saath, sabka vikas*” (solidarity with all and development of all) and “*achchhe din aanewale hai*” (good times would arrive). In this article, it is not our purpose to evaluate the performance of the Central Govt. However, we are examining case study of Aurangabad city where many promises were made by the Shiv Sena which has controlled the Aurangabad Municipal Corporation since about three decades. We wish to look at the performance of Shiv Sena – BJP alliance in Aurangabad Municipal Corporation and try to locate the communal violence which hit the city on 11th May just before mid-night through the wee hours of 12th May 2018.

Religious identity politics

Religious identity politics, which misuses religious rituals, customs, traditions and other cultural dimensions of religion, is better known in South Asia as communal politics. Communal politics exploits outer manifestations of religion, like festivals, sacred symbols, to construct an exclusive political identity that is superior to other communities, instil the followers of the religion with pride in the superiority of their religion, and constructs an ideological justification to exclude ‘other’ communities. The ‘other’ is stigmatised, demonised, dehumanized and targeted. The cause of non-development or slower rate of development, economic crisis, joblessness and all other problems of the society are attributed to the ‘other’.

Communal politics seeks to instil fear the 'other', often exaggerated and illogical. The 'other' would over populate the majority in matter of few years, or they are existential threat to the majority through their foolish and violent means like terrorism and triggering off communal riots. They conspire to lure women from the majority community, get married and convert them to increase their population. They resort to conversion of members of the majority community using coercion or using fraudulent means or by offering inducements. They are intolerant and insensitive towards the culture and religion of the majority community. It ultimately calls upon the followers to close ranks to marginalise 'other', establish an authoritarian cultural state that would ensure instruments in the hands of the state to marginalise the other, and ensure that they are relegated to secondary citizenship status if they do succeed in expelling them from their territories.

A fact finding team of the CSSS and CPI recently visited Aurangabad from 19th through 21st May to investigate the communal riots in the city that broke out on 11th May 2018 on a filmsy issue of a Muslim man denying use of his mobile phone to two youth from Valmiki community whom he did not know. The denial later led to beating up of the Muslim man and triggering off the communal riot that night which went on till the wee hours of next day, until the violence was controlled by the police. During the fact finding visit, we came across general complaint from all respondents irrespective of their community, caste or gender regarding failure of the Aurangabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) in discharging its statutory responsibilities. It was evident that the city of Aurangabad, ruled by the Shiv Sena for about three decades was in utter mess.

Aurangabad Municipal Corporation

In the elections held for the Municipal Corporation in April 2015, the partywise position is: Shiv Sena - 29, BJP - 22, AIMIM - 25, Congress - 8, NCP - 4, others - 24. Shiv Sena Mayor was elected and the present Mayor is **Nandkumar Ghodele** and retained its 25 year long hold (Wajihuddin 2015). The City has elected **Chandrakant Khaire**, Shiv Sena as its MP. Two of the three MLAs of the city belong to Hindutva parties - BJP MLA - **Atul Save** from Aurangabad East and **Sanjay Sirsat** from Aurangabad West. After the winning AMC elections, **Aditya Thackeray** - one of the most important Shiv Sena leaders said they would not sleep after winning and work hard to fulfil all the promises.

The roads on which we were driving had large potholes and even the main city roads were in bad shape and narrow. The city, we were told receives water once or twice in a week, even though the metered water charges have been increased several times. Citizens of Aurangabad are furious as the supply of water is decreasing and charges increasing. Some of them have found an easy way out - drawing water from Municipal pipelines through illegal connections. It is these about illegal connections that were sought to be disconnected which contributed its share towards communal riots on 11th May. The Valmiki community in Gandhinagar alleged that their water post outside the Hanuman temple was damaged by a Muslim Maulvi to take revenge for the water disconnection of water supply to the Dargah by the Municipal Corporation. The Valmiki Community members however, could not back up their allegations with FIR or any other evidence. When we talked to the members of Muslim community, they told us that it was true that water connection to the Dargah in Motikaranja was disconnected, but they were assured that after a few days they could reconnect and continue to draw water for the Dargah when monitoring of the illegal connections was relaxed. Someone would be foolish to seek revenge in this manner and denied the

allegations.

The reason for letting water scarcity in the city along with higher charges seems to be deliberate measure by the Municipal Corporation. The Shiv Sena-BJP alliance wants to promote a private company to take over water supply of the city. The private company they seek to promote is owned by BJP Rajya Sabha member Subhash Chandra – Essel Utilities. Essel Utilities has floated a subsidiary company – Aurangabad City Water Utilities Co. Ltd. (ACWUCL). The water problem of the city can be solved by transporting water from Jayakwadi – largest reservoir in Marathwada located 50 kms. south of Aurangabad. AMC was to construct pipelines connecting Jayakwadi reservoir with Aurangabad since 2008.

The AMC gave water distribution rights to ACWUCL for the entire area of Aurangabad Municipal Corporation and Cantonment Area which has population of 12 lakhs and 1.25 lakh consumers. ACWUCL in its contract with AMC had right to supply water for 20 years and increase water charges by 10% every year. It was a Rs. 782 Cr. Project and running far behind schedule and not investing money. While supplying water to the residents, its contractors would call the consumers to pay up high charges and threatened to disconnect if they failed. The contract with ACWUCL had many loopholes and the Municipal Commissioner Om Prakash Bakoria ultimately had to terminate the contract in 2016. ACWUCL is being promoted by the Shiv Sena – BJP combine and has unwritten / undeclared support from the Central leadership. Shiv Sena MP Chandrakant Khaire and the Shiv Sena – BJP are trying to re-engage the Company and give it water distribution rights. The civic body is also facing flack for allegedly not carrying out any audit of funds worth Rs 190 crore allocated to ACWUCL for installing a parallel pipeline project in the last few years.

Water scarcity would soften the citizens towards higher charges to be paid to a private company. The ACWUCL has to replace cement pipes with metal pipes to plug leakages and to maintain 8 pipelines. It is unfathomable why should AMC require ACWUCL to do the job on Public-Private Partnership (PPP) basis and enable it to earn Rs. 22 Cr. according to a senior journalist Pramod Mane.

Waste management

The AMC utterly failed in another of its statutory duty – managing waste of the City. The AMC was dumping the City's waste for 35 years at its dumping site at Naregaon village leaving the village with 10-20 lakh cubic metres of untreated waste and causing health hazards for the villagers. Naregaon waste dumping site was earmarked as grazing land for cows. The BMC had given directions to the AMC in 2003 to shift the dumping site within 6 months but for a good 15 years AMC made no alternative arrangement and continued to dump its waste in Naregaon. As the waste was being dumped illegally, the villagers approached Bombay High Court and obtained a stay mid February 2018. The AMC thereafter began to dump 436 metric tonnes of garbage a day onto a new site at Padegaon Mitmita village. The residents of Padegaon Mitmita witnessed the value of their property coming down drastically and burnt two AMC trucks which were dumping waste in their village. As a result, the AMC trucks for days could not lift the City's waste! There were mass protests in the City.

Communal politics

Bad roads, scarcity of water, lack of waste disposal, and other problems of the City has left the citizens of Aurangabad dissatisfied with the functioning of the Municipal Corporation.

Most persons we talked to, irrespective of the community and caste they belonged to and their political affiliations were unhappy. The All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) – a Muslim interest party and functioning as an opposition in the AMC as well as Shiv Sena BJP survive by communalising the scarcity. Which community gets larger portion of scarce resources. the Imtiaz Jaleel, AIMIM MLA from Aurangabad Central told us that his partymen had to grab water pipes to be installed in Muslim dominated areas as they were being denied their fair share. The Shiv Sena convinces its political base that whatever scarce water supply or lack of waste disposal or bad roads, they are better than the Muslim community because of them!

Hindu supremacists' claim that Hindutva and development go together has not proved to be correct in Aurangabad. However, Aurangabad may not be an isolated example. We see that promises of development and welfare even of the Hindus has proved to be jumlas at national level as well. Communal polarisation allows the communal politicians not to worry too much about development and welfare even of their community. They are easily tempted to serve the interest of elite and the richest confident that they are not answerable and accountable and can get away. In UP the Jinnah vs. ganna contest in the by-polls in Kairana proves that Indian people are not so gullible. They may be misled once, but they have become wise now and would ask hard questions. In Aurangabad, Shiv Sena usually campaigns around the theme of "Khan ki Baan" – Muslims (Khan) or Shiv Sena (Baan – arrow – election symbol of Shiv Sena) and Aurangabad vs. Sambhajinagar (Shiv Sena calls Aurangabad as Sambhaji Nagar). The secular and social justice forces will have to work harder even though their resources are scarce to organize people for their real issues. The choice before lower classes and castes of Hindu community is Hindutva or development. However, we will have to educate people and inform them about their limited choices.

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