

Politicians as the  
system is extremely  
unaware



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Politicians invariably seek power whatever be the form of government and they intend to wield that power with the government and party as well. When enlightened and respected political leaders like Gandhi or Maulana Azad claimed to draw inspiration from religion, their concept of religion was poles apart from that held by leaders of today who organise a separate political party, for their religious community and demand a separate homeland for it. Gandhi considered the ethical values imbuing every religion to be an important part of politics; that was what he meant when said that politics divorced from religion becomes debasing. Religion to Gandhi did not mean sectarianism. It implied a belief in ordered moral government of the universe.

In this sense, religion is much more than a matter between human beings and their maker; it is, apart from being a mode of worship, also a set of ideas and values. Religion is then a source of moral discipline for its followers. Religion is also a system of theological beliefs and dogmas. In this role, it may be deficient in rational content and many a rationalist may condemn it as obscurantist. In the West, much blood has been shed on account of theological differences.

But not a single communal conflict in India can be traced to such differences. The conflict here is more due to communal than religious causes. Religion is also a vital basis for identity formation.

Even those who do not share its theoretical beliefs or follow its rituals and are agnostics or even atheists form part of the community by virtue of their family and social ties. It is this role of religion which poses a problem in

politics. For most of the religious communities are tending to acquire socio-political aspirations. Development, mobility, media and information explosion, politicisation and adult franchise are further encouraging a sense of self-awareness among the people. As class, political and ideological identities have not grown fast enough in India; religious identities have filled the vacuum.

Besides, as the system is extremely unaware of the aspirations of people to recognise individual identities and to provide security and justice to them, many people seek them through their communal identity. Thus, community is as important an identity in Indian politics as an individual. In these circumstances, no secular system can be built in India by dismissing altogether the reality of communal identities and their claims in the economic and political fields. For instance, a cabinet in any state or at the Centre which is composed of a single community, caste or religion will not be acceptable to others on the plea that merit of its individual members was the exclusive criterion. The real question is not whether politics should recognise religious identities. How can politics ignore realities? But the question that needs to be debated and that has not been properly debated is: What is the legitimate field of these identities and the degree of their autonomy? How are these identities to be related to one another, to other forms of identities and to the national identity? The debate on the subject has been much influenced by the European experience which is not entirely relevant to India.

First, unlike the countries of Europe, India is not a unreligious country.

Secondly, Europe has a history of domination of Pope over the states and

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even now Christian political parties exist in many countries. India's own past is far more relevant in this context, for, unlike Europe, India does not have a history of theocratic state. As far as Hindus are concerned, there is no treatise on politics that is regarded by them as infallible. In fact, the tradition of Raja and Rishi represents a clear distinction between a spiritual and temporal role. The two roles were interconnected but autonomous. Eight hundred years of rule by the Muslim Kings in India is equally marked by its pluralistic characters.

Though the king and ulema interacted, secular authority always reigned supreme. A third dimension of the Muslim polity, viz. Sufis carved out their own autonomous domain, often in defiance of both the king and the ulema. The lesson of the Sikh history is no different. The fact that spiritual and temporal affairs were conceptualised in the Sikh tradition by two distinct terms *peeri* and *meeri*, respectively, symbolised by two swords of the gurus and two separate forums of Harmandir Sahib and Akal Takhat, clearly implied duality. Sikh religion and politics though closely related were autonomous. The autonomous character of their religious and secular leadership and institutions became more pronounced after the gurus.

Any attempt to project a monolithic religious and political identity of a community, would, thus not only be a negation of the entire history of religious communities in India but would also retard its future growth. Those who claim that religion and politics are inseparable to the extent that all the members of a religious community should belong to a single political party, imply subordination of religion to politics. To seek unity of a community on the basis of complete political agreement means loss of political freedom to

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its members. In an open society, under normal conditions, it is the surest way of disintegration of a community. For political ambitions of its leaders are bound to clash. There is another serious implication of organising political parties exclusively on the basis of religions. If all voters remain faithful to their respective religious parties the system of elections would become redundant and political balance would be frozen to the numerical strength of various communities.

This would lead to permanent political majority and political minority which, in other words, would mean permanent domination of the former over the latter. As the individual members of the former too would not have any option, it would amount to their regimentation and a goodbye to democracy. Thus, a complete merger of institutionalised religion and institutionalised politics into a monolithic forum would create as anomalous a situation as their complete separation. In practice, members of every community need to associate with those of other communities to promote their class, professional and cultural interests through, say, organisations of workers, peasants, occupational groups, writers, artists, etc. So far, no religious leader has objected to autonomy of such organisations from religion.

Why should not it apply to politics in the interest of intellectual freedom of the members of the community and of a more abiding basis of its unity? These fields can neither be put into watertight compartments nor merged into a single monolithic entity without emasculating them.