

Module name/ title: Religion and Identity politics

Paper: Media and Margins

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Component II: Description of the Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Media and Communication Studies
Paper Name	Media and Margins
Module Name/Title	Religion and Identity politics
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Pre-requisites	
Objectives	
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Cultural and Political Aspects of Marginalisation in India

Religion and Identity Politics

1. Introduction:

India, the country with diverse cultures has a massive history when one brings in the concept of Marginalisation in multifarious aspects. It is no doubt a land which embraces a person belonging to different religion, caste, creed, language, race etc. It also has its own limitations as well. History stands testimony to the multiple aspects of inequality prevailing within the ideal and diverse country the core being the cultural and political dynamics at large. India had been under the rule of different powers in the past however, it had stood strong against all such powers. This module will try to focus on the various elements of the Indian scenario and the subsequent discussions emerging out of it.

2. Learning Outcome:

- This module will help you understand the concepts of religion and identity politics per se to recognize it in the broader social life.
- It will enable to understand the varied dynamics of the causes of marginalisation.
- It will enable you to trace different trends emerging in India.
- It will help to locate the intersectional aspects of it within the diverse society of the country be it local, regional or at national level.

3. Definition and Meaning of Religion:

Religion is a very broad concept which has wide range of connotations for different people of the world. It is so powerful a word that it can unite as well as create trouble for the entire human race. One may be an avid believer of religious ideals while the other may be a total atheist. It largely depends on the environment in which an individual is brought up since childhood. It also depends on one's ability to question between logic and the science behind it. Many a times, people just follow some religion blindly without giving any thought over it. Religion itself is multidimensional and has many aspects to it. It is not only personal but also becomes collective within the larger ambit of religious consciousness and identity. It is an important institution which itself has a cultural dimension to it. There is a whole set of beliefs involved which is a way of linking oneself with the supernatural world or with abstract powers.

Some of the classical definitions of Religion include:

The sociologist [Durkheim](#), in his seminal book, [The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life](#), defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things". According to him, religion is a social fact which needs to be explained with other facts of society.

The anthropologist [Clifford Geertz](#) defined religion as [...] "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz, 1973:90).

There are various functions of religion; it acts as a means for providing social cohesion, it acts as a mechanism of social control through various religious doctrines, norms and values etc. and it also provides emotional support in adverse situations. While religion seems to be a unifying agent for the majority of people, it can also divide people of the same country as well.

4. Definition and Meaning of Identity Politics:

Identity Politics, as the word suggests, has been described by many scholars as a modern phenomenon. Craig Calhoun rightly elucidates the situation when he puts forward his views that it is in the modern times that we face aggravated efforts at consolidating personal and categorical identities and reinforce self-sameness. It is basically a modern process as some scholars feel that emphasizing on identity based on core organising principles (of ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual preferences, or caste positions, etc.) are a type of “compelling remedy for anonymity” in an otherwise impersonal modern world. It is thus said to be a “pattern of belonging, a search for comfort, an approach to community” (Calhoun, 1994).

The believers of identity politics usually use the power of myths, cultural symbols and kinship relations to mould the feeling of shared community and gradually politicize various aspects in order to claim the recognition of their definite identities.

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines Identity Politics as - The laden phrase “identity politics” has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos or party affiliations, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination (cited by Heyes, 2016).

So the identification of members of a group based on sharing common attributes or some of the attributes like gender, language, religion, caste, ethnicity, tribe, etc. denotes the formation or existence of identity and the mobilization on the basis of such attributes or markers leads to the formation of identity politics.

5. Understanding Religion and Identity Politics:

Religion and politics have become a fancied topic of debate and discussion which aptly goes with the saying '*Personal is Political*'. It has a history of its own which has differently impacted people of varied religions in the world. It often gets linked with the whole issue of identity politics and merges with the concepts such as nationalism, secularism, etc. People have multiple identities but gradually how we want to be recognized or represented in society brings in the entire aspect of differences among people. There is always the constant fear as well as insecurity among different groups of people giving rise to intersections of groups which leads to competition and struggle as well.

Referring to mythological history it has a deep and age old relation between religion and politics. It also provides authority to the government that has remained in existence until the eighteenth century Enlightenment period, a form of legitimacy which the so-called religious fundamentalists in the later twentieth and early twenty first centuries would want to re-establish. As politics and religion used to support one

another, with religion entering into politics with a pinch of divine elements in lieu of state enforcing religious dogma, many religious and political leaders around the world seem to like the policy and would like to reinstate such an arrangement.

Although the enormous diversity of religious expression is given, it is difficult may be imprudent to broadly postulate about the relationship between religion and politics, from established institutionalized beliefs to other forms, and the different forms of politics. The work is made easier by using a rather narrow view of both religion and politics, in spite of it the division seems to appear more theoretical than real. On one hand, religion is related with the supernatural elements and revolves on institutions like mosques, churches, etc., on the other hand, politics concerns the way in which society organizes as well as governs itself and maintains law and order. Where religion is considered to be a private, personal experience which involves spiritual aspects, politics is related with public expression of the collective wishes of society. Where religion views 'existence of temporality' as a preparation for higher purposes of spirituality, politics considers 'existence of earthly virtues' as an end in itself. Where religion pays attention to prayer and ritual, politics emphasizes more to the rational, scientific and material elements.

The division of religion and politics is too clear as it suggests clearly defined and mutually understandable realms between spiritual and secular authorities. Nothing is far from the truth. Religion and politics have always been endearing to the general mass of people which has been interactional and that interaction has often been confrontational if not violent. Problems begin to rise when religion considers itself to be the sole keeper of society's moral values, employs the state to put forward its will on the larger community of people, or when the state begins a new chapter vying with prevailing religious sentiments and history stands testimony to it. As a case in point, unable in persuading the Americans to stop drinking, churches in the United States during early twentieth century easily turned to state coercion, eagerly supporting the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The Islamic fundamentalists who got hold of power in Iran in 1979 had no concern about using political means for meeting religious ends. On the contrary, people having a secular bent of mind have frequently relied on political power to curb religious influence. The case was like Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, whose programs came at a high price for Muslim clerics. Likewise, Communist China's incorporation of Tibet in 1950 paved way for Dalai Lama to visit India in 1959 and eventually the destruction of thousands of Buddhist monasteries and nunneries of the Himalayas and the deaths of numerous monks. As for the case of United States, the Supreme Court's decisions of the early 1960s on prayer in the public schools that attempted to clear the boundary between religious practice and public institutions still irritates the religious conservatives (cited by John and Glenn, 2002:1-3).

Accelerating the process of complication of the interaction between religion and politics, there have been frequent attacks by one religious group upon the other, normally the dominant body against the minority ones and such conflicts have apparent political repercussions as can be seen in modern India. With more than 80 percent of its population classified as Hindu, it would appear that the small Muslim (12 percent), Christian (2.5 percent), and Sikh (2 percent) elements posed no threat. Yet, the Indian nationalist who considers Hinduism as a unifying aspect of their culture views it in a different way. As a consequence of it, a Muslim mosque of sixteenth century was demolished in December 1992 by the members of the Indian Peoples Party (BJP) and World Hindu Assembly (WHA), two of the most aggressive Hindu parties.

Apart from it, the Hindu-Muslim violence claimed the lives of thousands of Muslims in most parts of India, which caused many numbers of Hindus to flee from Muslim-dominated Bangladesh, and instigated Muslim terrorist to bomb Bombay. 4 Christians have evoked the rage of Hindu nationalists, who tried to restrain the pope's visit to India in November 1999. This was an alleged attempt by the Christian missionaries to convert India's Hindus. Many Hindu Nationalists considered that such conversion campaign posed grave threat as well as jeopardized the unity and integrity of the country by aggravating Christian separatist movements. The Christians blamed the unrest on the BJP, which came to power in March 1998 at the head of a coalition government. Such kinds of issues seriously test the traditional tolerance of Hinduism and create doubt on the capability of the rulers of India in achieving an ideal and pluralistic society (cited by John and Glenn, 2002:1-3).

6. Religion and Identity Politics – Indian Context:

For the spiritual descendants of Abraham, Hinduism remains the most difficult religious system to understand. The Hindu Scholar Kim Knott comments: While comparing Hinduism to Christianity, it can be seen that it indeed have a God- one ultimate reality and many gods and goddesses. There is no founder as such; there are multiple scriptures rather than one book, Brahmins but no priests in the Christian sense, and no central institution like a church. Rituals, myths, ethics, etc. form important elements and belief is of less significance, there being no major creed and less common teachings. But there are also things which may be inherent to Hinduism which may not figure out in comparison with Christianity. As for example, Hinduism comes under the fold of the complex socio-religious system of caste and its multifarious popular practices which in the terms of the Christians constitutes magic and superstition instead of religion (cited by Hanson, 2006:107).

The complex history of India has contributed to the enormous variety of religious concepts and experiences associated with Hinduism. Around the early part of the second millennium B.C., nomadic people from the northwest invaded India's northern half. These Aryans (their term for themselves means "nobles") who brought their gods were associated with heavenly phenomena – the sun, wind, storm, stars, rain, and moon. The native darker-skinned inhabitants, the Dravidians, remained more devoted to their pre-existing earthly pantheon – vegetation, animal life, rivers and mountains. Recent excavations in the Indus valley have demonstrated the advanced level of the Dravidian civilization. So this was not a case of a more advanced people subjugating culturally inferior ones. The Aryans, however, did employ the more advanced military technology.

Both groups accepted elements of the other's beliefs and gradually they formed an uneven and highly diffuse system, composed of millions of gods, each an imperfect representation of ultimate reality. The favourite term for the supreme ultimate was Brahman, who is also known under the three forms: Brahman - the creator, Vishnu - the preserver, and Shiva - the destroyer. Vishnu takes form in numerous *avatars* [incarnations], the most famous of which are Rama, Sita, and Krishna. The reader can thus appreciate how theologically inclusive Hinduism can be. Hinduism also differs from the religions of the book in that it has accepted the prevailing caste system that divides Indians into four social groups: priests, warriors/rulers, merchants, and ordinary labourers. Later, a lower fifth group of "untouchables" was added. Historically, caste reflects the traditional Indian divisions of labour and the social supremacy of the Aryan Brahmin priests, with the colours white, red, brown, and black associated with the four castes. The Dravidians were dark-skinned.

The Vedas, Hinduism's most revered scriptures, also reflect the dominance of the Aryans. The roles of the Aryan gods such as *Agni* [sun, fire], *Varuna* [sky, cosmic order], and *Indra* [storm] predominate. At the end of the Veda period, other anonymous authors crafted the *Upanishads*, which seek to add a more human element to the impersonal and terrifying aspects of traditional Hindu religion. Both the Vedas and the *Upanishads* are classed as revealed [*shruti*]. This revelation was internal, not external. Among those scriptures handed down [*smriti*] are the Epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the *purana*, and the *sutras*. The Indian classic *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is part of the *Mahabharata*, offers the narrative of Krishna's instruction of the warrior prince Arjuna that the prince must above all follow his *dharma* [duty, law, teaching, order] in fighting his brothers. The *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Ramayana* definitely constitute the best-loved expositions of the Hindu tradition. In 1987, every Sunday morning more than eighty million Indians watched a television production of the latter story of Ram. Hindu scholar T. N. Madan states that *Gita* "has acquired in modern times the status of a central scripture, comparable to the Bible and the Quran. It is believed by many Hindus to be the word of God."

Even if Hinduism did not develop a large ecclesiastical organization, the above traditions were passed down by three types of religious figures: the storyteller [*pandit*], the spiritual guide [*guru*], and the ascetic [*sannyasis, sadhu*]. A *shankara-acharya* [leader, master] had to be both a Brahmin by caste and experienced as a *guru*. Hindus seek *moksha* [release] from *samsara* [the endless cycle of rebirth] through one of the three paths of intellect [*jnana yoga*], of action [*karma yoga*], or of devotion [*bhakti yoga*]. The key insight of the Vedic tradition and the *Upanishads* is the Sanskrit *tat tvam asi* [thou art that one], or that *Brahman* [the ultimate reality] and *atman* [the self] are one. But even this basic principle of the Shankara philosophical system is questioned by some latter Hindu systems. Both Hinduism and Buddhism assert that yogistic discipline is the best method for liberation.

Although there have been tremendous changes within the larger domain of political mobilization on the basis of religion, it is ultimately the common mass who has to bear the burden in the name of group solidarity and so on and so forth. In this regard, Marx aptly pointed out as to how religion acts as the opium of the masses which holds true no matter which country a person belongs. It is because of religion that people unite as well as fall apart due to its own social underpinnings. So it largely depends on an individual on how he/she wants to be recognized in society which brings in all the differences.

7. Summary:

What is important to notice is that religion and identity have become key perpetrators of modern politics. People use it as tools to put forward their vested interests. The concept of secularism remains merely in paper in the true sense of the term as India is not home to only a single religion of the world. One distinctive argument, advanced forcefully by T.N. Madan (1987), is that a secular political structure can thrive only in a secular society, and since a majority of people in India are firmly religious in their views, secularist institutions have an uncertain future (cited by Sudipta Kaviraj, 1997).

Apart from it, the vast intersectional aspects within a particular religion make it even more difficult to classify and meet the latent ideologies behind. At the broader level, it may seem easy to discuss it in totality but in actual terms it is so multi-layered that it

is very taxing altogether. Hence, it is important to understand the multifarious elements in particular and have a meaningful discourse on it.

