Communal Identity and Inter-community Perception: The Case of District Kishtwar

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Abstract

The present paper is based on an M. Phil project on Inter-community Relations and Religious Conflict in District Kishtwar of Jammu and Kashmir. This paper is concerned with Hindu-Muslim relations in general and communal identity formation and perception of one community towards the other in particular. The paper also provides a brief historical background of the region of Kishtwar. The term community in the paper has specifically used for the religious community. For understanding the subjectivity of the people phenomenological approach: Inter-subjectivity has been employed. Inter-subjectivity is a philosophical method of enquiry regarding a phenomenon. The research is based on the fieldwork conducted in district Kishtwar of Jammu and Kashmir State. In all, 20 case studies were undertaken10 from town and 10 from different villages of Kishtwar; Padder, Sarthal, Pochhal, Palmar, Zelna. The paper is hence an attempt to understand the mental terraces which has a larger say in inter-communal coexistence.

KEYWORDS: Hindu, Muslim, community, Communal identity, Perception, Co-existence, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Kishtwar acronymed 'the land of sapphire and saffron' is one of the 22 districts of Jammu and Kashmir State in the north-west India. It was an autonomous hill state during the medieval period. It was one of the eleven states that existed in *Divigrit* (now called Dugger and then Dugger Desh). The other states in *Devigrit* were Chamba, Basohli Bhadu, Monkot, Bindralta, Jasrota, Samba, Chenani, Bhaderwah etc. All these states were on the right side of the river Ravi. Geographically Kishtwar is bordered by Zanskar on the North, Himachal Pradesh on the East, Doda and Bhaderwah on the South and Anantnag and Banihal on the west. Area of district Kishtwar is 2823sq. Miles. The area under forests is 124.23 sq. Miles. It has 156 revenue villages. The plateau of Kishtwar is 1634 metres above the sea level as per the police location. It lies between $75^{°}.25`$ east and $34º 10`$ north[1].

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Kishtwar town, the capital of erstwhile Kishtwar state of present Kishtwar district, has seen many vicissitudes right from the day of its emergence. The first historic king of Kishtwar was Kahan Pal who most likely ascended in the middle of the tenth century.[2] Kishtwar was annexed by Mughal forces in 1620 A.D. during the reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, though its rulers continue to remain in Mughal suzerainty[3]. The Islamic influence started from this time and mainly through the preaching of *Sufi* saints. Muslims from Kashmir were allowed to settle in Kishtwar under an agreement with the then prince Jai Singh (1656-1664) and through him with Raja Maha Singh (1650-56).

Accordingly Mulla Bhadur and Mulla Hussain, sons of Mulla Mahmud Kashmiri, under orders of the emperor reached Kishtwar. They constructed a mosque *'Masjid Khawaja Garib'* in the heart of town.[4] It was during the reign of the Raja Jai Singh (1656-64) that the famous Mohammadan Saint, Syed Mohammad Fariduddin Quadri, popularly known as Shah Sahib, came to Kishtwar from all along from Baghdad. The Islamic influence grew over the centuries, with gradual conversion to the Islamic faith, though the area remained a happy blend of religions. Kirat Singh (1664-1728 A.D.) was the first ruler who converted to Islamic faith under a conspiracy by his Prime Minister when Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb visited Kashmir. The emperor conferred on him the title of Sadat Yar Khan."[5] Conversion of a local ruler to a new faith influenced his followers who too have undergone conversion. The present proportion of the two communities is 58:42. However even after conversion rulers consistently performed Hindu rituals and didn't commit any religious persecution. This was reflected even in the names of the rulers of Kishtwar, for instance Raja Inayatullah Singh, Raja Mohd. Teg Singh. These name are a blend of both Hindu and Muslim names.[6]

Mohammad Teg Singh son and successor of Raja Inayatullah Singh, was the last independent ruler of Kishtwar. Under the orders of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Dogra chief Gulab Singh personally led an expedition against the ruler of Kishtwar in the beginning of 1821 A.D. In this very year Gulab Singh affected the conquest of the Kishtwar more by diplomacy than by strength of arms.[7] In this way Kishtwar become a part of the Lahore Durbar, and in 1846 became part of the Dogra empire and finally in 1947 part of the India.

The situation remained normal to large extent in Kishtwar after partition except for the panic of rumours and some communal clashes in some adjoining areas. After independence Hindu-Muslim relations in Kishtwar were normal by and large except for some differences over the question of plebiscite. With almost cordial relations the region grew till 1988-89, when the region was plunged into the militancy and then situation started changing. The constructions of identities based on religion started ripening by the mid of 1990s which further led to a series of intercommunity conflicts.

However through the ages one of the binding factors between Hindus and Muslims has been Sufism. This has also been witnessed in this part of the world. Sufi saints found equal respect in the hearts of the people of both the communities.

COMMUNAL IDENTITY FORMATION, INTERCOMMUNAL CO-EXISTENCE AND PERCEPTION

The purpose of this article besides providing a brief historical account is to understand the construction of communal identity its formulation and reformulation under different circumstances and also the perception of one community against the other. Also an effort to have an intersubjective understanding of the two communities has been made by the application of phenomenological approach Alfred Schultz and Berger and Luckman. The shared 'commonsense' meanings and 'divergences' of meanings have been studied. By the application of phenomenological approach the intersubjective perception of one community towards themselves and towards the other community has been studied. The discourse has also been supplemented by fieldwork.

The term intersubjectivity has been defined in at least three ways:[8]

>First, in its weakest sense, intersubjectivity refers to agreement. There is intersubjectivity between people if they agree on a given set of meanings or a definition of the situation. For example, Thomas Scheff (2006) defines intersubjectivity as "the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals."
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>Second, and more subtly intersubjectivity refers to the "common-sense," shared meanings constructed by people in their interactions with each other and used as an everyday resource to interpret the meaning of elements of social and cultural life. If people share common sense, then they share a definition of the situation.
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>Third, the term has been used to refer to shared (or partially shared) divergences of meanings. Self-presentation, lying, practical jokes, and social emotions, for example, all entail not a shared definition of the situation, but partially shared divergences of meaning.

Intersubjectivity emphasizes that shared cognition and consensus is essential in the shaping of our ideas and relations. It is thus these meanings in the form of an agreement, commonsense shared meaning or shared divergences which has been employed in this study.

Before moving ahead the concept of 'communal identity' needs to be explained. The word 'communal' in the 'New English Dictionary on Historical Principles,' means something of or pertaining to a commune. Secondly, the word communal in the same dictionary means of or pertaining to a community.[9] The community in the context of the present study is a 'religious community' involving the two major communities: the Hindus and the Muslims which is a common criterion of understanding, which is further in every way a narrow interpretation. Identity is on the other hand, a complex phenomenon and it has recently come under heavy attack. However, Martin Sorefield in his essay "Reconsidering Identity" is of the view that identity serves a functional tool in cross cultural studies[10] which according to him has to be seen in close connection with the concept of the self. Both 'communal' and 'identity' have political implication which has to be taken into account. Identity like culture or tradition is not simply a fact but is a construct; or to put it in other words, identity does not explain anything but it has to be explained.[11]

The communal identity is a constructed category because the communities continuously recreate themselves. Its scope is however limited and its flexibility is not total but relates to the conception of time and space, and the relationship between histories, culture and biographies.[12] Further when communal identity is understood as a dynamic phenomenon it also confirms that identity is no more than relatively stable construction in an ongoing process of social activity.[10] This act of redefinition is not a matter of accident but a process. The articulation of identity is done by highlighting some aspects of their distinctive character, setting themselves new goals and redefining themselves in certain ways. Further, the process of self recreation does not occur in a historical vacuum but it is a matter of slow self recreation within the limits set by its past.[11]

In the context of India's changed socio-economic and political environment, communal identity is a subject of tormented debate.[12] As the modern era brings a multiplicity of identities that revolves around nation, region, class, gender, language, citizenship, identity is always negotiated within a flow of multiple influences. Our identity therefore has two dimensions, 'ontological' and 'epistemological'[13], the former referring to 'who we are' and the latter referring to 'who we think we are'. The two necessarily shapes each other and 'our identity is a constant and dialectical interplay between them'.[14] The modern subject is thus defined 'by its insertion into a series of separate value spheres, each of which tends to exclude or attempts to assert its priority over rest'.[15]

The communal identity in the first place needs to be contextualised in the larger social processes in the nineteenth centuries. The two most obvious ones are nationalism and democratisation. The former implies why communities seek to redefine themselves as nations and what mark of uniqueness does being a nation carry. As an effect to it what is denied to a community and its members if they do not claim their status as a nation? Colonial sovereignty on the one hand rested on denying that India was a nation, the nationalist project on the other hand identify and highlight the distinctive features of a population to justify its claim to nationhood.[16]

A complex and deeper relationship exists between identity and democracy than is generally construed in contemporary discourses on South Asia.[17] Identity politics is about expressing one's agency and creating new form of collective agency. The construction of the communal identity has thus to be viewed in the context of a search for nationhood and/or a distinct place within the nation by those who apparently felt threatened under the prevalent socio-economic configurations.[18] For instance, one of the first serious attempt to establish Indian Muslim as a separate community was made by Rehmat Ali and others in 1933 on the ground of different religion, culture, history tradition, economic system, laws of inheritance, succession and marriage are basically and fundamentally different from those of the rest of the people living in India.

Communal identity is multilayered and diversely textured. However Britishers provided a simplistic interpretation and it was defined exclusively in terms of religion. Drawing upon the cultural differences vis-a-vis Hindus, M. A. Jinnah defended his argument for a separate identity for Muslims. He propagated for the first time, 'the pernicious two nation theory' which poisoned Hindu-Muslim relations as never before. He used every device to emphasize the cultural differences between the two communities. He declared, "Hindu and Muslim as two nations on the grounds that they belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs and literature. They neither intermarry nor dine together, their aspect of life and on life is different. The two communities derive their inspiration from different sources of history.

He further elaborated that Hindus and Muslims have different epics their heroes are different and they have different episodes. Very often the hero of one is the foe of the other and likewise their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so build up for the government of such state."[19]

V. D. Savarkar too sought to construct the Hindu identity by underlying the well entrenched cultural distinctiveness of the Hindus. He defined a Hindu as a person who regards his land of *Bharatvarsha* from the Indus to the seas as his fatherland as well as his holy land. Thus Savarkar's construction of Hindu identity is secular in that it is territorial, genealogical, and religious. In his formulations, Savarkar underlined the importance of a specific territory that he conceptualised through the notion of *pitribhumi* in the construction of the Hindu nation. He had then shifted his emphasis towards 'Hindu' 'sentiments' or 'culture' by arguing that only among Hindus could *pitribhumi* and *punyabhumi* be identical. It was M.S. Golwalkar who tried to construct 'a Hindu society' on the basis of this argument, highlighting the cultural uniqueness of Hindus who 'have set of standards ...prescribed duties and rights and shed their blood in defence of the sanctity and integrity of the motherland'.[20]

The subaltern school articulates the most recent intervention in the debates on communal identity. Challenging the stereotypical descriptions of Hindus as a majority and Muslims as minority, the subaltern school argues that they are historically constituted and thus subject to change. On many political issues, then, Muslims could think and act as Hindu/Sikh or even Christian could think and act, as parts of other communities: those of region, caste, sect, and occupation, or gender.[21] Underlying the communitarian logic, these writers with a subaltern perspective, insist that each of us, as an individual, develops an identity, talents and pursuits in life only in the contest of a community. In other words, the identity of an individual is invariably connected with the community as community is what determines and shapes individuals' nature.[22] The communal identity in the Indian subcontinent is constructed through a complex process of contestation in which local context is extremely significant.

After having a detailed conceptual understanding of communal identity and its formation the paper regards comprehending mental factor or the psychological factor a pertinent one. This is something that goes to make or unmake a normal communal existence in a society. The foremost fact to be noted is that it is the mind of men that the seeds of every conflict or tension in the world, first germinate. G. Murphy[23], in his study of "Human Behaviour and Social Tensions in India" observes:

"When United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has argued that 'war begins in the minds of men' it has not by way of reduction of emphasis upon factors other than the psychological which bring them in conflict, rather, it is an attempt to make clear that all the forces from which war springs are ultimately passed through the filter of human thought, feeling, and impulse before they led to the decision from which war follows".

The behaviour of an individual and his relationship to the others with whom he happens to live, depend not only on his individual thinking, feeling and imagination, but also on what others think, feel and imagine. However, a community furnishes a large base for one's thought and action. Every community during a course of time fabricates some sort of organisation, to which each individual adheres, both voluntarily and sometimes involuntarily.

The mental attitudes and psychological prejudices can be caused by more than one factor. Communalism hence thrives liberally on the right or wrong assumptions of certain communal values, which germinate grow and flourish, in the minds of men. There are times, when even an objective situation by giving rise to a sense of distress, may be burdened with grave apprehension and fears for the community, ultimately leading to tension in society. Thus, any psychological valuation acts both ways however superficial or genuine it may be. It positively breeds communalism leading thereby to social tension. We cannot ignore the fact of misunderstanding and ill will that the mental maladjustment of correct evaluation and consideration of others' points of view leads to. For instance, in a given society, even the status of being a minority community is sometimes enough stimuli to promote wrong psychological calculations. By its very act, the majority party is liable to being taken for a dishonest and harmful move.[24]

In the India subcontinent Muslims have never been in majority; even before partition they were less than 30 percent of the population. The question is whether Muslim see themselves as a minority during the Mughal Empire, which was finally buried in debris of the uprising of 1857? And even 90 years late in 1947, did the muslim of Hyderabad see themselves as minority as long as the Nizam of Hyderabad had sovereignty? The answer surely is no; a minority is therefore not a function of numbers but of empowerment. In any small struggle in society, to which a number of communities are a party, be that struggle social, political or economic, be it real or imaginary, there is fundamental tendency of communities to fight things on the basis of psychological foundations, having certain standardised pictures, stereotyped ideas, or preconceived notions, all being to a great extent pure and simple mental complexes.[25]

RESEARCH OUTCOME

The present researcher has undergone a thorough analysis of the construction of communal identity in addition to perception of one community against the other. My contention was to understand the kind of attitudes Muslims cherish towards themselves and towards the Hindus and vice versa. An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related.[26] The crucial problem was how to ascertain these attitudes? In some studies a number of characteristics of a particular community are enumerated and subjects are asked to indicate their likes and dislikes for them. Taking clue from them, a section in the interview schedule was dedicated to study it, and the respondents were left free to express their opinions, likes or dislikes and it is their answers which would have any bearing on their relations with the members of other community. In all, a total of 20 intensive case studies were undertaken selecting subjects from both rural and urban setups in 1:1 ratio. The questions in the schedule ranged from understanding of their position, or self esteem to any kind of discrimination or feeling of insecurity, up to their commitment towards Indian nation. The answers which the researcher got were largely qualitative and difficult to put in the tabular form. However, efforts were made to quantify some of the answers which are presented in the Table ahead.

Table no. 1.8. Understanding perceptions of Hindus and Muslims

	Codes of question	Communities			
		Hindus		Muslims	
		Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Understanding perception	A	4	3	4	4
	B	5	4	4	3
	C	2	3	2	3
	D	4	3	4	2
	E	5	3	4	4
	F	0	0	0	0
	G	1	1	0	1
	H	1	1	0	1
	I	2	5	2	5
	J	1	-	4	5
	K	3	4	2	4
	L	4	3	4	4
	M	3	4	4	4
	N	0	0	0	0
	O	0	0	3	3
	P	2	3	2	4
	Q	1	2	1	3
	R	0	0	2	3
Total		5	5	5	5

Codes used in the Table ahead;

A. Satisfied with their position.
B. Positively evaluated their community.

C. Whether you feel other community is taking your share.
D. Whether you feel other community respects you.
E. Feeling secure.
F. Feeling some insecurity if happened to pass through other community dominated locality.
G. Feeling difficulty in getting your work done because of your religion.
H. Whether feeling any bias in the way government functions because of your religion.
I. Have you ever faced any communal violence?
J. Would you welcome anyone converted to your religion?
K. Feeling bias in the way police functions in case of communal violence.
L. Considering religion while voting.
M. Feeling whether Muslims are pampered in this country.
N. Ever faced any religious based discrimination in schools by your wards.
O. Whether blamed of any distrust or militancy.
P. Do you have any complaint against the other community?
Q. Any objectionable remark used by the other against you.
R. Whether other community feels that you are disloyal.

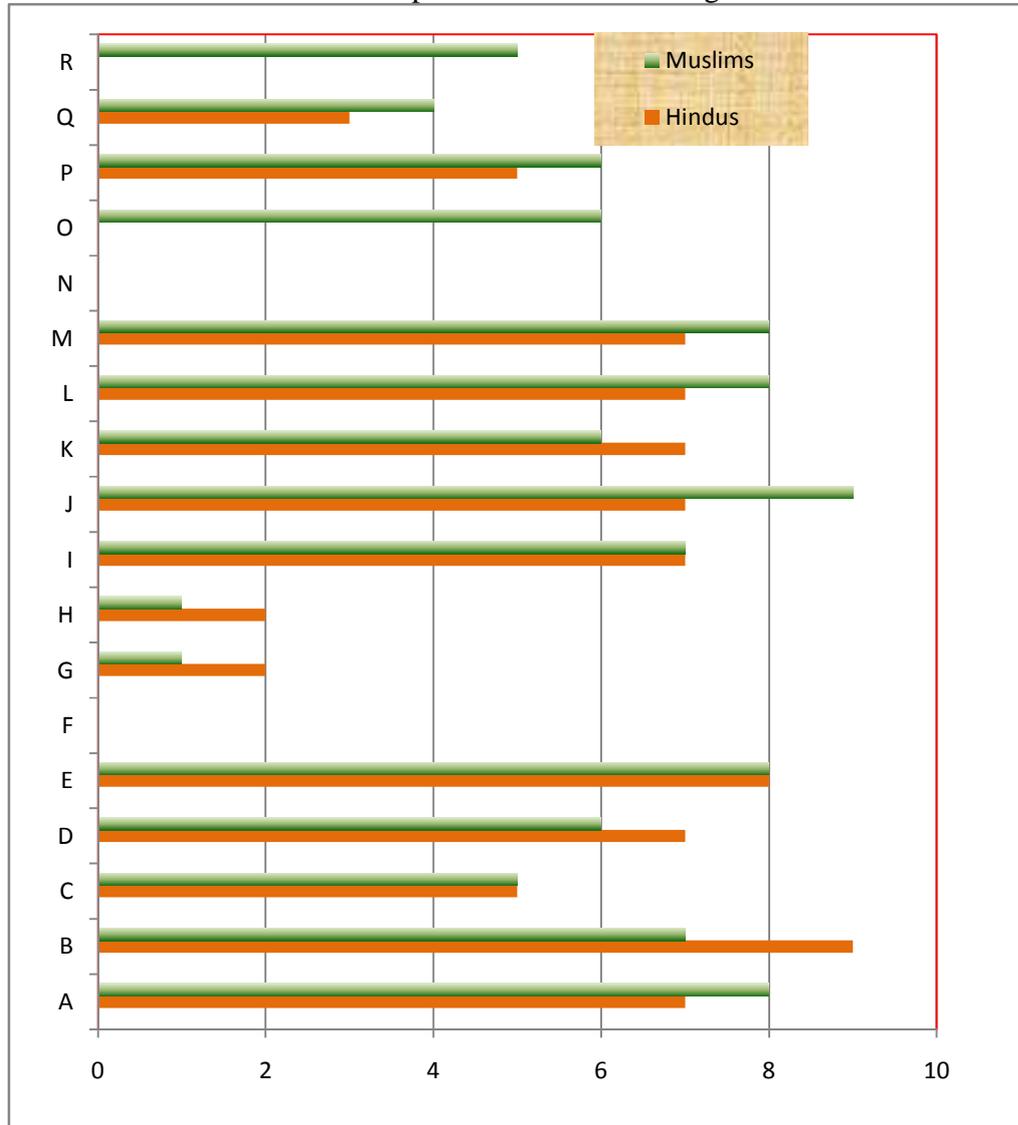The above Table is represented in the bar diagram as under:

Fig. 1.3--Bar diagram showing perceptions of Hindus and Muslims

THE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA:

- The foremost intention of the study was to evaluate the self image of the people. A substantial percentage of Hindu respondents, that is 70 percent of them answered that they were satisfied with their position, the majority of whom were from rural area. In case of the Muslim respondents, 80 percent of them were satisfied with their position with equal proportion from villages as well as towns. When it comes to the evaluation of their own community, they are not plagued by ethnocentrism. They are prepared to criticise themselves. It was only three among ten, which is 30 percent of Hindu respondents who positively evaluated their own community. A majority of them dislike their own community, for other reasons also, such as they consume alcohol, do not respect their tradition, have given up

their religious ways of life among others. A similar kind of picture came from Muslims and only three that is 30 percent among ten respondents were happy with the state of Muslims. Rest criticised them for different reasons such as, they are illiterate, wretched, talk too much of religion, have given up their religious ways of life, and are lifeless and given to vices. This conspicuous self-hatred of the Muslims and Hindus for their community partly explains their keen desire to mix and be friendly with other communities; particularly with those they share no specific dislikes.

- When it comes to the evaluation of Muslims by Hindus and *vice versa* it was ascertained with a number of questions such as whether they feel other community is taking their share of government jobs, resources or any other such thing, whether they feel other community respects them, whether they feel secure *vis-a-vis* Muslims/ Hindus, whether they feel scared if happened to pass through 'other' community dominated locality. The respondents considered all of them with different intensities. The conclusion drawn from the above questions was that 50 percent of the Hindu respondents positively evaluated Muslims; on the other hand 47.5 percent of Muslims have positively evaluated the Hindus. Further the attitude of communities against each other is also modified over a period of time. For instance, a number of Muslims and Hindus confessed that their opinion towards each other has been modified. The contact with some balanced or matured members of the other community neutralizes their hostility and similarly contacts with any fanatic of the other community change their attitude to otherwise.

- In all, 20 percent of the Hindus feel that they face difficulty in getting work done because of their religion and 10 percent of the Muslims feel the same. Similarly 20 percent of Hindus feel differences in the government functions towards them because of their religion and 10 percent of the Muslim respondents feel the same.

- A total of 70 percent of the Hindu respondents have faced communal violence, the majority of which came from urban area. All the respondents interviewed from the town had faced communal violence during some or the other stage of their life. Same is the proportion of Muslim people who have faced communal violence. 100 percent of the Muslim respondents interviewed in the town had faced communal frenzy. Only 20 percent of the Muslim respondents from the villages have faced any such kind of violence. When asked whether they feel any bias in the way police functions at the time of such violence, 70 percent of the Hindus answered in affirmation and 60 percent of the Muslims also feel that they feel biasness in the functioning of police in case of communal clashes.

- When the respondents were asked whether they would welcome the other community converted to their religion, a majority of the Hindu respondents denied it. Only 10 percent of the Hindu respondents were willing to accept Muslim converted to Hinduism. On the other hand, a majority of Muslim respondents were willing to accept Hindus converted to their religion. In all, 90 percent of the Muslims agreed to accept them.

- The role of religion in the politics was also enquired to some extent. Respondents were asked a number of questions from which it was ascertained whether they give consideration to religion while voting or not. It was found that religion

played an important role while voting 70 percent of the Hindu and 80 percent of Muslim respondents considered religion while voting.

- Upon enquiring whether Muslims in India are pampered, it was found that 70 percent of the total respondents feel that they are being pampered. 70 percent of the Hindus and 80 percent of the Muslims answered that they feel Muslims are pampered.

- It was however found that none of the wards of the respondents have ever faced any religious based discrimination in the schools.

- It was again found that 60 percent of the Muslims were blamed for any disturbance or militancy during any stage of their life. Such allegations were prominent during the nineties of the last century. Such allegations are not being made often now.

- Upon enquiring whether they have any complaint against the other community or the people of the other community have ever made any objectionable remark against them, it was found that 50 percent of the Hindus have some sort of complaint against Muslims and 60 percent of the Muslims have some sort of complaint against the Hindus. Regarding the use of objectionable remarks 30 percent of the Hindus replied in affirmation, and 40 percent of the Muslim respondents replied that they have faced objectionable remarks.

- Lastly, it was enquired whether other community feels that you are not loyal to nation it was found that about 50 percent of the Muslims feel that Hindus feel that they are not loyal to India. A Muslim intellectual on interviewing replied that our Hindu brothers complain that the Muslims are unwilling to become part of the national mainstream. The claim is partly true and partly not. We are proud of our Indo-Islamic identity. However, the problem has its own complexity and ambiguity, and should not be viewed exclusively in religious terms, as frequently happens.

CONCLUSION

- A substantial number of Hindus and Muslims have healthy self-esteem. They are not ethnocentric as they are ready to criticize their own community and have positive feeling to a large extent towards the other community. Phenomenological approach helped in understanding what Hindus and Muslims think of themselves and their perceptions towards the other community.

- The perception formed after militancy was different from those of the past. Because of the crystallization of the perceptions based on religious differences, the boundaries of the two communities become more defined and the two communities start identifying that their secular interests besides their religious interests are becoming different.

These perceptions then went through transition to a phase where communities feel that their secular interests are against the other community. Finally, one community wants to get its interest fulfilled at the cost of the other. This leads to the stage of inter-community conflict or communalism.

- Militancy has occupied prominent place in the construction of such perceptions. As militants were largely from Muslim community, large number of Hindus identified them with Muslims in general. Hence the resentment against militants led to antipathy against Muslims and the outcome was communal conflict.

- Moreover opinion towards each other has considerably changed. The significant outcome of this section was the apprehension that Muslims are being pampered in India and a majority of Hindus feel that Muslims are not loyal to the nation.

This perception of one community towards the other becomes a base for the construction of communal identity which occupies different shapes under different circumstances. These perceptions are not found to be stagnant and change considerably in different situations of inter-community relations and incidents of conflict. Conflicts occurring over a period of time further consolidate the already assembled perceptions. This, in a situation of intercommunity conflicts is an ongoing process. Phenomenological approach holds key to understanding the intersubjective state of the individuals and it was found that these mental constructions go a long way in the making and unmaking of inter-communal existence.

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