



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religions, democracy and governance: spaces for the marginalized in contemporary India

Introduction

India is a democratic and secular republic with no recognized official religion. However, religion has a significant presence in the country's public and political life. Religious diversity is acknowledged and protected through a framework of enabling constitutional provisions. Religion is also present in India's democratic political process and democratic politics, which in turn influences the way religious communities articulate their interests, aspirations and political agendas.

This research aimed to contribute to understanding of the complex relationships between religion and politics in India, by examining some of the ways in which disadvantaged groups within the major religious communities have sought to improve their wellbeing. Through case studies of marginalized groups within the Hindu and Sikh religious communities in Punjab, and Hindu and Muslim religious communities in Maharashtra, the objectives were to identify and explain

- the strategies adopted by such groups to access political influence and state benefits for disadvantaged groups
- whether and how such groups use their religious identity as a political resource, and
- the implications of their strategies for broader democratic political processes.

The research found that while religious identity remains the bedrock of social life and individual experience, democratic politics leads to the emergence of new configurations and alignments, in which apparently neat boundaries of religious difference are blurred or

overwritten by other identities. Marginalized groups use religion or other identities to articulate their demands for access to opportunities and development possibilities.

Background

Although almost every religion claims to be a cohesive moral system, all religious communities are socially and politically heterogeneous and sections within them interact with democratic politics in diverse ways. Further, individuals and groups have interests and identities other than those based on religion. In the Indian context, caste, class, occupation and residence are also important and these other identities play a role in shaping their interests and aspirations. At times people's different identities are intermeshed.

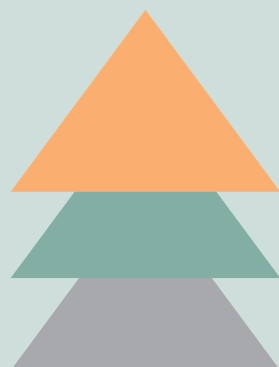
The relationships between religion and politics in India are structured by the constitutional framework. Since independence, the democratic and liberal concern for equal treatment and liberty for all has been pursued, along with a deep commitment to recognizing and protecting religious and cultural diversity. If the former foregrounds the individual, the latter brings in social groups, including religious communities.

Secularism in India is understood as a commitment to the ideal of religious non-discrimination and not as indifference of the state towards religion. Although there is no official religion, the Indian Constitution grants equal religious and political liberty to all religious communities. Instead of restricting religion to the private domain, the Constitution gives each individual, and by extension each community, the right to "profess, propagate and practice"

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The political strategies adopted by members of religious minorities in India show that

- internal differences within religious communities shape the participation of particular religious sub-groups in democratic political processes
- democratic politics provides scope for marginalized groups within religious communities to gain political backing
- such marginalized groups may use their existing or an adopted religious identity to achieve their aims
- when religion is important in the public domain, it changes the dynamics of party politics in complex ways for both secular and religious parties.



their religion. However, while this allows individuals to have strong religious commitments, it is not indifferent to the internal practices of religious communities: religion is not permitted to sanction inequality. The Constitution allows the state to legislate and intervene to promote equal and fair treatment for all, especially the vulnerable sections of society. Similarly, 'religious' political parties are permitted to co-exist with 'secular' parties and to voice the demands of a religious community, as long as they do not encourage inter-community hatred or refer to a candidate's religion when campaigning for votes.

Article 30 of the Indian Constitution also gives all minorities, religious and linguistic, the right to "establish and administer educational institutions of their choice". Thus parents who wish to impart a particular religious education to their children can do so without being disadvantaged. This article aimed to assure minority communities that their identity and distinctiveness would be protected and that they would not be compelled to assimilate into the dominant culture.

As the research reveals, these Constitutional provisions influence the strategies open to and adopted by political parties, religious communities and disadvantaged groups.

This study examined the relationships between religion and politics by considering the interplay between the ways in which religious communities seek to advance their interests and the dynamics of electoral politics in a religiously diverse and socially stratified society. It focused on the relatively prosperous and religiously diverse States of Punjab and Maharashtra. Within these States, case studies of the political strategies of particular marginalized religious groups were undertaken (Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmiki Hindus in Punjab; Muslims and Mahar converts to Buddhism in Maharashtra), to reveal the various ways in which such groups use political opportunities and religious identity to advance their interests.

The research drew on secondary material and extensive semi-structured interviews with key informants in the urban centres of the two states: Chandigarh, Jalandhar and Amritsar in Punjab, and Mumbai and Pune in Maharashtra.

Religion and the working of Indian democracy

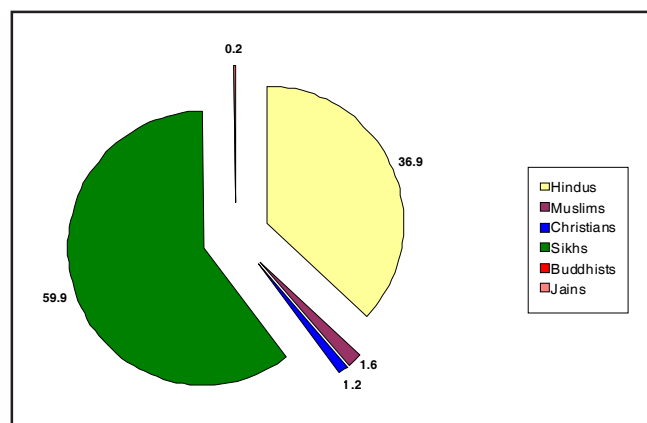
In India's political system, many parties adopt strong ideological stances and competition for votes is intense. Religious communities may seek to advance their concerns through the formation of political parties, but such parties are not the only authentic voice of religious communities. Their concerns are also taken up and articulated by so-called secular political parties. What distinguishes the 'secular' and 'religious' political parties is that the former consciously seek to forge a coalition of interests, appealing to a wide social base that cuts across communities of caste, religion and language.

Identity-based parties appeal to and privilege the concerns of the group they seek to represent. While democratic arithmetic may compel them to reach out to other communities, their core social base, which they try

to nurture, is narrower. However, the presence of 'religious' parties compels the 'secular' parties to take a position on religious issues. The result is that seemingly secular parties may try to edge out a religious party by raising religious issues and at times supporting more extreme religious agendas. Moreover, on occasion they concentrate on divisions within a religious community, attempting to win the support of sections within it by taking up the concerns of marginalized groups.

Punjab and Maharashtra are among the more developed states of India, with strong identity-based political parties. Both have religiously diverse populations (see Figs 1 and 2) and have witnessed not just religious mobilization but also inter-community conflict. However, as elsewhere, there are internal divisions and differences within the religious communities. One important axis of such difference is caste. Even though traditional occupational divisions on caste lines have weakened, caste continues to determine opportunities for social mobility, particularly for the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the ex-untouchable Dalits, and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). SCs and OBCs, each made up of many socially and religiously differentiated groups, are official categories used by the state for various affirmative action programmes. The case studies tried to understand the participation of selected marginalized groups within different faith communities in the democratic process and the manner in which they have managed to get their concerns inserted into political and policy agendas.

Figure 1: Religious Communities in Punjab %



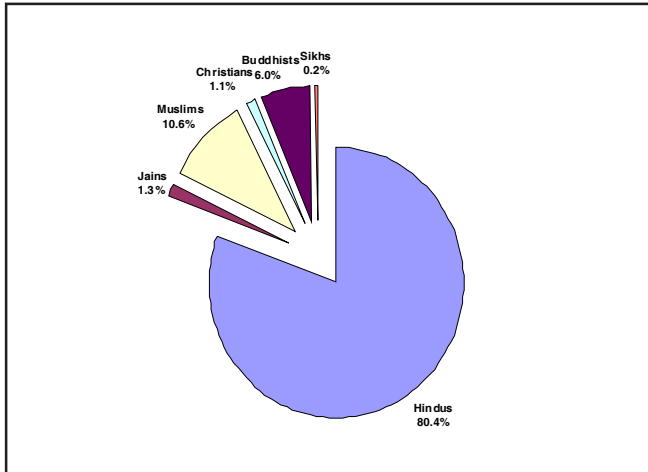
Source: Government of India, 2001 census

Dalits among the Hindus and Sikhs in Punjab

With a population share of 29 per cent, the proportion of SCs in Punjab is the highest of all the Indian states. Officially 37 communities are listed as SCs. These can be divided into three clusters:

- the Chamars, currently also listed and identified as Ravidasis (Sikhs), Ramdasis and Ad Dharmis (Hindus) (around 42 per cent)
- the Chuhra, currently also identified and listed as Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmiki Hindus (also about 42 per cent) and
- all the remaining caste groups (around 16 per cent).

Figure 2: Religious Communities in Maharashtra %



Source: Government of India, 2001 census

For various historical reasons, those castes included in the first cluster have been much more mobile and politically active than the others. First, they were mobilized by the Ad Dharam movement as a distinct religious community during the 1920s. Among other things, this persuaded them of the value of education (see Fig. 3). They have also done well because they have been concentrated in more prosperous areas within the state.

In contrast, Dalits in the second cluster have been far less mobile. They are concentrated in the less urbanized Malwa sub-region, where the hold of the big landowners is strong and there are few job opportunities outside agriculture. The Mazhabi Sikhs constitute nearly 31 per cent of the entire SC population of Punjab. Although they have been closely associated with farming, they rarely own or cultivate agricultural land, instead working mostly as wage workers or tied servants for big landlords. Even those working in urban centres are generally employed in low status occupations such as scavenging, the traditional calling of their caste, or other informal sector jobs.

Religion has been the dominant idiom of politics in Punjab. The Akali Dal is a communitarian party that claims to represent the Sikhs, who make up around 60 per cent of the State population. However, the Congress, a secular party, also gets support from Sikhs, particularly from the non-dominant caste groups: the urban traders and the 'backward' and 'Dalit' groups. It was to consolidate this vote bank that the State government of Punjab, under the leadership of Chief Minister Giani Zail Singh, himself from a 'backward' caste group, decided in 1975 to divide them into two groups, one of which was given entitlement to apply for public sector jobs reserved for SCs. Half of the reserved jobs were subsequently kept aside for the Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis.

This initiative was taken by the Congress Party, even though there was no strong call for it from the groups concerned, presumably because the Congress felt that it could thereby counter the influence of the religious parties: the Akali Dal over a section of the Sikhs and the right-wing Jan Sangh, which later became the Hindu nationalist Bharati Janata Party, over a section of the Hindus.

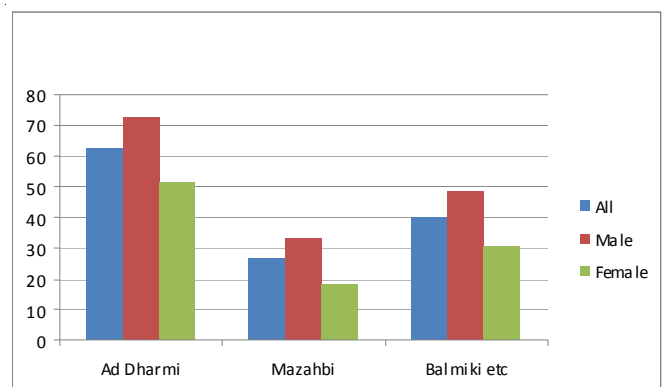
This political initiative to improve the wellbeing of some particularly disadvantaged Dalit groups in Punjab came from above. In practice, even though the groups concerned aspire to better paid and more dignified jobs, their lack of education and experience restricts their ability to obtain such jobs even under the special quota reserved for the SCs. Nevertheless, the sub-quotas have come to be seen as an important source of social and economic mobility by these groups, leading them to mobilize politically to demand extension of their entitlement to the similar quotas for SCs in education and representation in legislative bodies.

Other Backward Class Muslims in Maharashtra

With around 10 per cent of the population, Muslims have been a politically marginalized group in Maharashtra and have often been the victims of communal violence. Like all other religious groups, they are internally differentiated, economically and socially. Although there is a small Muslim elite engaged in business and industry, large numbers of Muslims work in traditional occupations and are poor. Like Hindus, Muslims in India have caste-like divisions, in which those identified with traditionally low status jobs are seen as being 'backward' (the *ashraf*) compared to the elite (the *ajlaf*).

For historical reasons, during the post-independence period Muslims invariably identified with a larger Islamic identity and accepted the traditional Muslim elite as their representatives and leaders. However, although communal riots affect all Muslims negatively, the poor, living in urban slums, are always more vulnerable. Since the early 1990s, the *ashraf* Muslims have begun to move away from *ajlaf*-led communitarian identity politics and to mobilize around socio-economic concerns. Those who can afford to do so have withdrawn their children from Islamic *madrasas* and moved them to English medium private schools, with the intention of enabling them to compete in the job market. In addition, they have successfully campaigned, on the basis of their identification with certain traditional occupations, for official recognition as members of Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Figure 3: Literacy Rate amongst Scheduled Castes in Punjab in 1991



Source: Derived from Scheduled Caste tables from Census of India 1991, Registrar General of India, New Delhi

The foregrounding of development concerns over communitarian and identity concerns has helped the emergence of 'secular' leadership within the community and enabled poorer Muslims to gain wide political support for their demands, even from parties like Shiv Sena and the BJP, the right-wing sectarian Hindu parties who engage in anti-Muslim rhetoric and target Muslims as posing a danger to the national culture.

Conversion for dignity and development

The Mahar Dalits of Maharashtra adopted yet another strategy in their struggle against the caste hierarchy and their quest for a life of dignity. In 1956, influenced by the prominent Dalit leader, B.R. Ambedkar, they abandoned their Hindu identity and converted en masse to an Ambedkarite form of Buddhism. Thus the Mahars attributed their marginalization and deprivation to a religious ideology associated with the caste system and sought to address it by adopting an alternative religious identity. The movement gained further momentum during the 1960s and today Mahar Buddhists make up nearly 6 per cent of the population of Maharashtra.

Buddhism has provided its Maharashtran adherents with confidence and a basis for unity. Over the years, a network of Neo-Buddhist organizations has developed that provide education, entrepreneurial support and a basis for political lobbying. These organizations maintain strong ties with their international counterparts and mobilize funding for Dalit development. Collectively, they play a critical role in bringing adherents together, campaigning against violence and oppression of the ex-untouchable communities in the State, and accessing the benefits of affirmative action policies. Their alternative culture, active social organizations and ability to tap into the benefits of affirmative action policies have enabled Maharashtran Buddhists to bargain with the political elite and the State government, which has to be sensitive to their concerns if it wants their votes.

Conclusions and lessons

The relationships between religion and politics depend on the political context in which they are played out. In particular, the constitutional provisions for political and religious rights and the practices of democratic politics create spaces for religious and non-religious actors to interact. The political dynamics that arise vary greatly and a locally specific understanding of them needs to be factored into any discussion of religion and politics. Conclusions from this analysis have implications for a variety of political actors:

- Internal differentiation within religious communities shapes the relationships of particular religious groups with the state and democratic political processes.
- The presence of internal differences means that members of a religious community do not always speak with one voice; at least some of their interests differ, which means that secular parties can address the needs of a particular group, thereby weakening the control of religious parties and leaders over it.
- The democratic political process can influence internal discourse within religious communities, providing channels for internally marginalized groups to address their development concerns and weaning them away from religious parties and leadership.
- Marginalized groups may see religion as a source either of their deprivation or of emancipation and the potential for increased wellbeing. Their reactions vary: in some instances, the most promising political tactics involve downplaying or changing their religious identity, while in others, religious metaphors may be used in articulating developmental aspirations or rights and the support of religious groups used instrumentally to attain their goals.
- Even in a secular state, when religion has a conspicuous place in the public domain, different and sometimes contrary processes are set in motion by electoral democracy: on the one hand, it allows the concerns of members of religious communities (such as socio-economic disadvantage) to be forced onto the agenda of mainstream political actors; but it can also push even secular political parties into using a religious idiom when seeking support from religious sub-groups, thereby reinforcing religious identity politics.



This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

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Further information

This brief is based on Mahajan, G. and Jodhka, S.S. (2008) *Religions, Democracy and Governance: Spaces for the Marginalized in Contemporary India*, Birmingham: Religions and Development Research Programme Working Paper 26.

The research was carried out as part of the Religions and Development Research Programme, based at the University of Birmingham and the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies. The project was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

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