

# Community Symbols in State Institutions: Presence and Implications

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the presence of community symbols in the state institutions in India. It introduces the idea of symbolic interaction in these state institutions and the exclusionary practice through those symbols, on the grounds of community identities such as religion, caste and ethnicity, is a major focus of this study. Drawing correlations with the ideas of many sociologists and anthropologists like Althusser, Foucault, Emile Durkheim and Mary Douglas who have elaborated the affiliation of identity and symbols and also the social importance of community symbols for unity and seclusion among society from critical sociological perspective. It has been observed that, there is strong nexus of government and the dominant community in the state institutions, and the interdependency of their existence, as the political creates the space through social and religious instruments which communicate through the symbols and on the other hand social gets the power from political, for sustenance and growth. It is also found that social issue of 'exclusion' makes the power relation visible in the democratic-secular state institutions and the tool of exclusion is based on community symbols. So the discussion is about the duality of ideology and the practice in state institutions resultant, how it is visible form of discrimination and exclusion.

**Keywords:** Community-symbols, Education, Religion and practices, Secularism, Social Exclusion, State-institutions, Power and authority.

## 1. Introduction

Being an object symbols does not carry any meaning in itself. They are of empty sense till the time individuals make sense out of it to help and to engage in any interaction. Individuals identify any symbol which is primarily an object or substance and place a meaning on it with relation to its importance to establish particular kind of imaginary connection with something related to the daily life practices. As the symbol gets conceived by the members of society the association with that symbol gets strengthen. The larger acceptance and approval brings the symbol to the fashion of the society and makes it part of the culture. Gradually it becomes an important part of day to day practices and we start idolizing and taking care of it. A symbol and its recognition vary from society to society. Ethnographic work supporting this argument is present in a form that how symbols matter for culture to establish and it vary in form and meanings attached to it. A stone with particular shape may be of worth worshipping for an Indian but the same could be none of any importance for Japanese.. Keeping alive the community symbols at any place is not only reflection of one's devotion to a community but also an attempt to give an impression that the community is more important than its parts or the individuals who make it. Durkheim has explored this dimension and gave the term 'Social fact' and explains that social rules and ritual practices are there to form a common conscience. For him these religious or community symbols are also there to build social solidarity and is a core of any society. Common conscience builds an order in society which makes society better. Here the 'better' can be seen through different frameworks. It can be better in terms of power, economy, culture, living standards and so on. When Durkheim looks at modern society not only the change in ritual and practices are highlighted but also the role of community symbols 'remains the same', which is presented as its feature because they bring social solidarity among the community. G. H. Mead also reflects upon this concept through the idea of 'role-taking'. Mead suggests that a divine personification

may be constructed and experienced through identification with figures portrayed in biblical texts and religious media. Identification with textual figures allows individuals to define their problematic situation in terms of a biblical figure's plight and to perceive their own situation from the point of view of the 'God-role'. Through these processes, analogous to those through which individuals adopt the role of another human, individuals enter the "God-role" and may even "exteriorize" the other to the point where they hear a divine voice and experience a divine presence. It proposes that such interaction may contribute to perceptually restructuring or resolving problematic situations but it also create groups of different belief system. Taking Durkheim's views again to reflect upon the construction of society and through their own community symbol like 'totem' creates a kind of a 'we' feeling in a particular group. The other perspective of such groups is they create boundaries among groups as their supreme belief in their own system.

The community symbols and their use in social life is much more impactful in modern time. It has become an integral part of the state institutions, and most strikingly it is carried from generations to generation. In contemporary time, it is empirically present in some of the state-run institutions like Patna police line and Darbhanga Medical College and Hospital, separate barracks and/or kitchens are maintained based on caste. It may seem surprising, that except a few futile efforts like circulars/orders passed by Chief Minister Mr. Nitish Kumar to dismantle this system, neither the administration nor the government has taken any action to abolish these practices.

Although we study in institutions (school, college, university) run/funded by the state, every year 'Saraswati Pooja' is celebrated at several places that can be identified with religious practices of one community but not for the other. Elaborating the above argument further; 'Morning Prayer' as a practice in schools and colleges carry mostly 'Hindu religious *bhajans*' in those. Some government run institutions have idols of '*Devi Saraswati*' installed in its premises like the one at Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), New Delhi. In Jamia Millia Islamia, the convocation ceremony starts with the *Ayats* of the Quran. The institutions may give several excuses but the fundamental question is remains unanswered. How a person, who does not belong to that community symbol like '*Devi Saraswati*' or '*Quran*', would have the confidence that he is equal to the others in that state institution. There is some empirical realities such that in a police station ( Jamia Nagar Police Station, Delhi, India. observed) where at the entrance itself there is a Hindu temple, what security a Muslim can expect, who is a victim of Hindu-Muslim communal violence. There is a Hindu temple in the premises of the Jamia Nagar Police Station which is clearly visible from outside. As the primary gateway for the justice established by the Indian state, the interaction with the atmosphere of the police station somehow fails to install faith that the justice seeker will get an unbiased treatment if he or she does not belong to the majority religion. For this study it is important to note that the jurisdiction of said police station has Muslims as a major portion of the residents. It must be noted that whenever the police arrest any accused in this police station the people from the community gather for a demonstration claiming that the person has been arrested in a false case. Now the concern is where this kind of mistrust in a state institution comes from? Does the presence of community symbols have any role to be played in these cases?

It should be objectively found out, what is the precedent of presence of community symbols in secular spaces. Do institutions have records of origin of these practices? For example if Jamia Millia Islamia follows the practice of starting the convocation with the *Aayats* of *Quran* there should be some circular based on a resolution to this effect taken by competent authorities. Same is there in the case of installation of the statue of *Devi Saraswati* in an educational institutions or construction of a temple at any police station that is believed to be a secular space. What is the justification of presence of community symbols in secular spaces?

## 2.Literature Review

The available literature describes the independent phenomenon like identity, religion, society, composite culture and most important 'symbolic culture' and so on and so forth. However; there is dearth/lack of literature on "Presence of community symbols in the state institutions" but implicitly it is found in the relative forms.

The symbolic interaction and its relevance form the basic argument here as the symbolic practice is an important form to understand the society and the changes. G. H. Mead argues with the analytic expression and the concept of self which he focuses most becomes the core of his theory relates with the concept and further extends into 'role-taking'. The self is important because it creates differences among the individuals. The anthropological work related to symbolic interactionism also focuses on the relevance of the symbols and its practice in the society. Mary Douglas is the one who reflects upon the idea of purity and pollution which is drawn from Durkheim's thoughts. It extended by the symbolic interaction applied to human body which is present in society and through ritualistic practices she explores the possibilities, that how the symbols create these markers or differences. Clifford Geert's ideas are not directly related to ritualistic practice but it is also based on community symbols as it explores the social interaction in society and its values based upon its symbolic practices or activities such as 'Balinese Cock-fight'.

Here the symbols are seems to be the lens to look at the society to understand the practices but the symbolic interaction changes its form with the change in form of society as E. B. Tylor Reflects upon the different stages of society with the different evolutionary process. Religion played an important role with time as Durkheim explores in his work 'Elementary forms of religious life', the practices changing forms with the change in form of society, 'totemism', 'cult' 'animism' and 'naturalism'. The multiple forms of belief, which exist at particular time in society creates symbolic interaction and engagement in society. In the modern form of society the concepts also shapes accordingly. Weber's ideas on secularism or the does not show the use of symbols in practice explicitly rather reflects the form of society and related emerging powers. It further extends the scope to look at the practice of power system and the process to form the power system through symbols. Dumont explores Indian state and gave the statement about its development and change in society with the effect of perverted secularism and caste based model. The 'democracy' had adapted by the state after freedom from colonial rule but the idea of secularism remains as the idea of 'patchwork' given by Rajeev Bhargava. There are lot of literature which argues on the concept of secularism and research work done which argues about its implication in Indian multi-cultural society. Taylor, C. (1994) focuses on the demand for recognition of minorities in a multicultural state. Charles Taylor also refers to the historical origins in modern thought. The major focus of his work was on politics of recognition. It is a pleading in favour of otherness, in favour of understanding minorities, in favour of freedom of education. Hibbard, Scott W., (1962) have done a comparative analysis probes why conservative renderings of religious tradition in the United States, India, and Egypt remain so influential in the politics of these three ostensibly secular societies. Although much has been written about the resurgence of religious politics, scholars have paid less attention to the role of state actors in promoting new visions of religion and society. *Religious Politics and Secular States* fills this gap by situating this trend within longstanding debates over the proper role of religion in public life. This book is an important contribution to the literature on religion and politics, but it does not cater the relationship between the state institutions and religion. It is examination of the contemporaneous policies of the Indian, Egyptian and American governments is as revealing as it is original, but what about the other state institutions?

Sen, & Wagner,(2014), the authors look at the illustrative case of the Hindu-Muslim conflict, with the aim of understanding the dynamics of lived secularism as it exists in traditional multi-faith societies such as India. It begins by giving a brief summary of the historical and cultural background to the present situation in India, then traces complementarities and similarities of opinions across diverse constituencies which cluster around three main anchoring points: communication, representations and operationalizing of a shared dream. Throughout the book, emphasis is on moral

maturity, cultural interpretation in lieu of cultural imposition and creation of a sensitive media policy. The issues raised may help craft interdisciplinary and international frameworks, which address conflict resolution in culturally diverse multi-faith societies. Accordingly, the book concludes with policy recommendations for supporting the peaceful coexistence of secularism and religion in society from a peace psychological perspective.

Apart from the empirical work done on these concepts separately there are some other researches which are also reflecting upon the idea of the symbolic practices at different locations and in India and explores the differentiated dimensions of such symbolic practice in society. Some of them are:

‘Indian communalism and the secular state’ by Larry D Shinn, ‘Battle over symbols: the religion of a minority versus the culture of the majority’ by Lori G. Beaman, ‘The varieties of abandonment of religious symbols’ by Shlomo Deshen, ‘religion as national identity in secular society’ by Lilly Weissbrod, and ‘A secular state: a critique’ by S. V. Puntambekar.

### 3. Methodology

For the above said study, I did a qualitative study of a substantive sample, with historical, sociological and ideological framework to look into the different kinds of processes of evolution and continuation of such practices. Since the list of state institutions is so huge so I selected those which have very extensive interaction for their existence and have a deep impact on their service delivery. For my purpose of study, I will focus on Educational Institutes as my research sites.

For this study, the universe of study was the Educational Institute in New Delhi. I find presence of community symbols in various forms in these state institutions. I tried to find out how far these symbols act as agencies of alienation and what is the extent of alienation.

#### 3.1 Sources of Data

The sources of data on which the researcher relied to conduct the study will be decided after the deep research of literature and case studies and the sources given below are subject to change accordingly. The primary sources of data are the ethnographic study of the state institutions (the educational institutes) and In-Depth Interviews conducted with students and employees working in the selected institutions i.e. Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, Indian Institute of Mass Communication and University Grant Commission (U.G.C.). The Secondary Sources of data are the books, the accessible archival records, accessible official records, abstracts and thesis of former researches, available electronic materials, periodicals, journals, magazines and newspapers. Observation was helped a lot in this study.

#### 3.2 Tools Of Data Collection

**Tools of data collection which was used by the researcher to collect the data are given below.**

- a. *A semi structured in-depth Interview Guide* was prepared to know about the practices which indicate the presence of community symbols at the state institutions, and to explore the first hand experiences of community based discrimination at state institutions. It includes open ended questions which were supported by probing according to the requirements.
- b. *Participant observation* was an utmost requirement for this study as we know about hidden curriculum and practices found in educational institutions mostly reflects the different dimension which I could not have understood without participation.

## 4. Ethical Consideration

Researcher recognized the sensitive nature of the work and he was mindful of the need to pay close attention to ethical considerations and to the welfare of study participants and researchers. The work would be guided by an ethical protocol. In the studies of the potential respondents their personal details are not mentioned in the research report. All those details are confidential. Privacy and confidentiality are essential to the interview process, providing a framework of trust to explore potentially difficult issues.

## 5. Analysis

Analysis of the available records at the institutions as well as collected data related to the research topic was done painstakingly. One who does not belong to Muslim community, could not understand what the 'Ayats' read on different occasions means exactly. That is the one of the most important moment he or she feels alienated in Jamia Millia Islamia. The other respondents who are Muslim consider it (reading the *Ayats of Quran*) as a cultural practice and some of them held the non-Muslims responsible for this alienation as they do not want to get any orientation about the Muslim community as they do not consider Muslims anyhow equal to them and they restrict themselves for this orientation. At the same time there were respondents who said that the orientation is not possible because apart from the ontological reality of these communities and both communities are no way equal or similar to each other one has to accept it as an individual reality. The sense of 'We' and 'they' was suggested to be very strong because of such practices.

One more very strong symbol was highlighted by one of the respondents was the lunch break on Friday. On Friday the lunch break is one and a half hours longer than the other week-days in the Jamia Millia Islamia just because the employees and students can offer the *Jumma Namaz*. He said that Friday one cannot expect them to work after lunch and if you pressurize them they will immediately level you anti-minority. He raised a very striking question that what about those who are not Muslim or those muslim who do not wish to offer *Jumma Namaz*. He said that it is a very strangulating experience for those who are not a practicing Muslim or non-Muslim that the administration allows a two and a half hours of lunch break but the employees hardly come back before three hours and even after that they hardly work.

The respondents also symbolizes with the architecture of the university building. They believe that the construction of the buildings symbolizes a deep association with particular community which is in majority at that particular institution. They said that it took time and effort for them to make an adjustment in the particular kind of atmosphere at the institution. They have inferences that many non-Muslim student avoid to take admission at the institutes like Jamia Millia Islamia. They even said that most of the time the Non-Muslim families seem reluctant to send their children to this institution. With reference to the vacancies as well they have a very similar kind of feelings and even if they apply they stay strongly unhopeful that they will be recruited.

Now coming to the institutes like IIMC or UGC where the statue of 'Devi Saraswati' is installed which has strong association with Hindu religion only. It was emphasized that 'Devi Saraswati' has nothing to do with the religion because she is goddess of knowledge and whosoever is seeking knowledge he or she will be blessed by her. That was how this installation was justified by many of the respondents who belong to different communities in the beginning but with the help of probing many of them who had given this justification gave totally different responses. They said that being part of this institution everyone will have to accept it no matter how he feels. If they do not like 'Devi Saraswati' no one is asking them to come here, they are free to leave this space. Many of the non-Hindu respondents said, they offer donations for the 'Saraswati Puja'. When asked why they said that it gives an impression that we are not against Hindus and it helps us to survive and finish our study here without any trouble. They mentioned that they paid more money than paid by their Hindu friends to show their pseudo-devotion.

There was a belief in state institutions; in Jamia Millia Islamia it was highlighted that the Hindus and the Muslims are two entirely different communities and have no other similarities than the ontological one. It was mentioned by some of the Hindu respondents that the non-Hindus do not respect the Hindu culture which they should. On the other hand contradictory to that some respondents said that giving respect is totally reciprocal and there are people in every community who do not respect the culture and ethos of the other community and at the same time there are others who wholeheartedly respect the culture of others and love to live with social harmony. They also mentioned the alienation because of these types of the community symbols and said that being minority they have get immune to these kinds of encounters and they have adapted the fact that they will have to see and face these situations in their everyday life and they cannot help it but are bound to live with it. The minorities are never been asked to participate in prayers and have never been forced to worship the god and goddess of the majority religion but the symbols and its interaction forcibly indicate a requirement of respect from them. It also gives an impression that if they wish to live here with peace and harmony they must stay in degradation. This degradation gives a strong inference of dual citizenship and a sense of inferiority gets strengthened by every new interaction. A Major chunk of the minorities are already living with all these interactions and they have been induced to adopt a depreciatory image of themselves. They have internalized a picture of their own inferiority but at the same time with the virtue of 'identity politics' there has been assertions for equal rights from different communities which has received support and appreciations from different agencies including the people from majority religion. A portion of the respondents highlighted that India has accommodate people from different communities and they lived a harmonious life since time immemorial, but humans have a tendency to develop a sense of 'we' and 'they' so they differ to each other and maintain a gap among themselves. At some places this gap has been widen with the course of time and the differences has been sharpen because of which we see incidents of violence between two communities. It has been noted that these violence are momentary in nature and somehow it is an interpretation resulted out of the symbolic interaction that was going on there with the help of symbols.

## 6. Conclusion

In contemporary modern societies it is clearly evident in the state institutions, which has direct public interactions as purpose of its existence and these institutions adhere to the values adopted by the state which is a democratic and secular state. Over the period of time, the society adapted democracy with secular belief system in its modern form, but the old religious belief has also deepened in society at the same time. Following Dumont, Madan argued that secularism was 'impotent' because South Asian religions were 'totalizing' and subordinated political power to religious authority (1987: 753). In a series of articles Nandy argued that both secularism and communal violence (its double, according to Nandy) are built on imported Enlightenment ideas espoused by the urban middle classes who live in secularized worlds marked by 'distorted or perverted versions of religion' (Nandy 1998: 284).

I have mentioned about the presence of community symbols in various forms in these state institutions so far but it is another dimension emerged from the research, that how these symbols act as agencies of alienation and the extent of alienation which creates these symbolic interaction prominent. The modernity of the Indian state is often emphasized in its rational and secular practices but at the same time, if one looks a bit critically, one inevitably comes across the harsh reality which is a dual nature of state ideologies and its apparatus in a form of community symbols, both religious and cultural. The circumstances that shape the presence of these symbols are different. Firstly, the institutions of the Indian state themselves might articulate their identity and programs using community symbols. Secondly, community symbols operates within the domain of these institutions without these institutions taking notice of those symbols as not belonging to Indian secular state rather to community. Thirdly, the community symbols also force their way into the very self of these institutions.

Although India adopted the term 'Secularism', but it never had the similar fertility for this practice as the west rather it has come up as the 'patchwork' as Rajeev Bhargava explains the concept

by pointing out the approach of adopting a vague concept for India which comes from the west. India has a vast level of diversity, which further results into the grounds of exclusion. Secularism was to separate the state affairs from the influence of the church. Countries like France, England, etc. had no such diversity like India. So, in India it took a different shape. It was explained as considering all religion equal, respecting every religion equally, which was never reflected through any of its institutions rather one dominant form always reflects in these state institutions. Whether it is school, college, police station, court room, hospital or may it be a space research center, everywhere one can see the existence of some symbols of particular community. By saying community, I mean the group with a common conscience, rather than the common vernacular sense.

*“For me there are no politics without religion. Politics bereft of religion are a death trap because they kill the soul.” - (M. K. Gandhi).*

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