The word 'communalism' derives from 'community' — that ubiquitous entity whose parameters in India are largely religious and casteist. What is this 'ism' that springs from community? Ever since the advent of democratic or quasi-democratic politics in India, even during colonial days, cultural, regional & communal identities have figured strongly both as the subject and the object of politics. But the most visible aspect of communalism is the communal riot, and that too, the riot involving the 2 major communities. Hence, for the public mind, communalism becomes synonymous with the violent clashes between Hindus & Muslims which take place so regularly in this country. Every time a major riot occurs, public interest in it revives, the media discuss it with due 'concern', the intelligentsia express learned opinions on it yet again, and then slowly and inevitably, the subject is allowed to cool off until the next tragedy. The point worth remembering, however, is that communalism is endemic in Indian society, regardless of the occurrence of riots, and that it is a question of much larger significance than the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations.

First, what are the kind of events which in the social view are the chiefest symptoms of communalism? A procession of Hindus may pass down a street, playing loud music in celebration of a marriage or a festival. If they pass by a mosque, and if Muslims happen to be praying at the time, objections will be raised to the music, an altercation may begin, which may end up in a bloody riot leaving behind scores of killed & injured. Muslims may perform a ritual killing of a cow in a locality. Objections may be raised to this by devout Hindus for whom the animal bears a holy significance. A riot may result. The routes taken by processions on religious occasions, or the locations of places of worship, often become the subjects of disputes & tension. Crimes such as kidnappings & rape easily become the focal points of riots if an atmosphere of distrust already exists in a certain area and if the victims & the criminals belong to different communities. Mythologies about the 'character' of this or that community develop out of such incidents.

But apart from the most visible symptoms, other social variables operate within this syndrome. Quite often, class divisions run parallel to communal ones & class tension thus gets a communal colouring. In Bengal & the Punjab, the 2 provinces whose peoples suffered most during the partition of India in 1947; communal tension was fuelled by the fact that in both there were masses of impoverished & indebted peasants who happened largely to be Muslims, and in many cases their immediate oppressors — either moneylenders or landlords—happened to be Hindus. Again, very often the competitiveness of the urban commercial petty bourgeoisie would get reinforced by communal mistrust. During the 1920's & '30's there were also many cases of capitalists using Pathans from the North-West frontier, (who were Muslims) as blacklegs during strikes; this could lead occasionally
to extreme communal bitterness, even though communalism was not as rampant among industrial workers as among other sections of society.

But communalism cannot be defined merely in terms of religious differentiation. (As little can Christian Democracy in Europe be understood merely by noting that most Europeans are Christians). Just as nationalism is the marriage of an exclusivist sensibility with the populist politics of the worldwide democratic revolution, so also is communalism the politicisation of culture. (I use 'politics' in the widest possible sense of the term). To begin with, that well-known atom of western capitalist society, the individual, hardly exists in India. (Even today, this entity can only gradually be said to be coming into existence). Every person belongs to a community, and this includes caste—though the area of a person's life which is determined by communal origin is decreasing for the urban classes, it may be said that on the whole, the community, and the sub-group within it, dominates an individual's life: his/her marriage, social status & operability, his/her occupation. Given this fact, it is not surprising that political mobilization and communal awareness went hand in hand right from the start of democratic movements in India. The entire 'backwardness' vs. 'development' syndrome was situated within this awareness. Castes & communities perceived their backwardness in relation to other castes & communities. Modernity in methods of organizing took the form of caste associations which addressed themselves to the colonial state & society at large whilst working for the 'upliftment' of a particular caste. Many middle-class nationalist leaders had their roots in such communal institutions, & one can even make the generalization that the renaissance of the Indian middle class was largely a communal one. Political parties organized along communal lines were but a short step away from this. Parties such as the Muslim League & the Hindu Mahasabha sprang up in the early 20th century. Of the Congress, too, it must be said that it derived much of its political sustenance from the communal nature of the social environment. The colonial government took advantage of all this, and in 1909, went as far as to institute separate communal electorates within the limited amount of democracy that it allowed to Indians.

The tragedy of the Indian national movement was that these tendencies began to dominate the political scene by the '20s & '30s, politicians began to acquire a vested interest in violent communal rhetoric, (and in mobilizations around communal issues), bloody riots began to take place frequently, and, by the 1940s, India was a land seething with communal turmoil & hatred. The politicisation of culture was not confined to Hindus & Muslims; it extended to all communities: Sikhs, 'Untouchables', tribals, Christians, etc. The population paid dearly for all this, when, in 1947, India was simultaneously declared independent and partitioned into 2 countries: India & Pakistan. This was a colossal tragedy involving the brutal slaughter in riots of nearly a million Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and the displacement from their ancestral homes of millions of people. The
bourgeoisie rode to power, dripping with blood & gore, and till today, the state machines in both countries (now three), celebrate the tragic date with callous pomp & ceremony, while a million skeletons salute their respective flags national flags and the screams of the innocent echo through the endless corridors of history.

Today the scars of these events still remain deeply embedded in the social psyche of the sub-continent. Partition solved none of the problems it was supposed to. There are far more Muslims in India than in Pakistan, even though its raison d'etre was that it was a homeland for Indian Muslims. The number of riots, which decreased in the decade after Independence, began to increase sharply in the '60's, and nowadays, 300 or more take place annually. A vast proto-fascist 'cultural' organization purporting to represent Hindus has grown up—the RSS—, which thrives on the memories of partition and garbled versions of Indian history to retain a hold among the petty trading classes of North & Central India. It carries a definite political weight and was especially active during the coalition Janata government of 1977-'79. Political mobilisations along casteist/communal lines is still common; all parliamentarians have to know their caste arithmetic during election time, and the recent militant emergence of the middle peasantry & kulaks under the banner of the "Backward Classes" (for which read 'castes') movement has taken the countryside by storm. Vicious class/caste warfare is rampant in the Indo-Gangetic plain. Parochial sentiments, regional & linguistic loyalties also frequently become the ideological vehicle for many sons—of-the-soil type movements. The oppression of various communities is still experienced by them as a function of their communal status.

There may often be 'objective', economic factors operating in the midst of all this. In certain urban areas, large sections of the lumpen-proletariat are Muslims, and their struggle for existence (shared, of course, by people of other communities,) may become an attractive bait for opportunist petty-bourgeois communal politicians in search of an easy constituency. Similarly in the rural areas it is often class interest which takes the 'natural' ideological channel of casteist mobilisations. But the very fact that this type of consciousness exists among masses of people, gives it an 'objectivity' of its own and is an evil omen for the future. When people genuinely believe their wretchedness to be a direct result of their communal status, the whole problem becomes a vicious circle, and the communal/class struggle becomes strengthened. When communally minded casteist sensibility becomes strengthened, when communally minded casteist sensibility becomes strengthened, when religious violence becomes rampant in the North (as happened in a northern town in August 1980), killing over 150 people, it is natural that a lifetime of bitterness, founded on communal convictions will be left behind. Similarly when tribals and 'untouchables' are constantly perceived to be the 'outsiders' of Hindu 'spirituality', alongside their subject to the fascist ethos of Hindu 'castes', the communal discourse will continue to devour all shades of And so, the communal discourse on humanity in the dung-heaps of feudal cultures & medieval religiosity will continue to devour all shades of humanity in the dung-heaps of feudal cultures & medieval religiosity, until such time (if at all) a revolution takes place which will discard both capitalism and feudalism and both traditional cultures and communal existences. But perhaps the times are still remote in the future, when humanity will reject the Almighty and find fulfillment in itself and the good earth.