

Communal Prejudice among University Students: Patterns, Determinants and Social Implications

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Received: 01 April 2025 Accepted & Reviewed: 05 April 2025, Published: 30 April 2025

Abstract

Communal prejudice continues to be one of the most persistent forms of social bias in multicultural societies, influencing inter-group harmony, academic environments, and the psychological well-being of young people. This paper examines communal prejudice among university students by exploring its meaning, historical foundations, theoretical explanations, manifestations, patterns, determinants, and social implications. Drawing on major social-psychological theories—such as Social Identity Theory, Social Learning Theory, Realistic Conflict Theory, and others—the study highlights how socio-cultural conditioning, media influence, inherited narratives, and identity politics shape students' communal attitudes. It further analyses how prejudice appears on campuses through stereotyping, social distancing, digital hostility, and identity-based segregation. By discussing the broader consequences for interpersonal relations, academic participation, campus climate, and long-term national integration, the paper provides a holistic understanding of the issue. The conclusion emphasises that systematic educational interventions, value-based curricula, inclusive campus policies, and inter-group contact programmes are essential to reduce communal prejudice and promote social cohesion.

Keywords: Communal prejudice, university students, stereotyping, identity politics, discrimination, higher education, social bias, inter-group relations.

Introduction

Communal prejudice refers to predisposed negative attitudes, rigid stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviour directed toward individuals or groups based on their religious, ethnic, linguistic, or caste identities. It involves treating an entire community as inferior, threatening, or fundamentally different, often without any factual basis. Such prejudice is not merely a set of personal beliefs but a socially constructed orientation that shapes interactions, institutional practices, and public perceptions.

Historically, communal prejudice has deep roots in social evolution. Human societies have long been divided along religious and cultural lines, resulting in group-based hierarchies and conflicts. In the South Asian context, the colonial period intensified such divisions through policies of separate electorates and differential representation, reinforcing community identities as political categories. The Partition of 1947 stands as a significant historical moment that reshaped inter-group relations, leaving behind a legacy of mistrust and collective trauma. Even in the post-independence era, identity-based mobilisation, periodic communal riots, and politicised narratives continued to sustain prejudicial attitudes. Modern media and digital platforms have further amplified stereotypes, often presenting selective, sensational, or biased portrayals of particular communities.

Studying communal prejudice among university students is particularly important because this age group represents a critical stage of identity formation, cognitive development, and value internalisation. University campuses serve as microcosms of society where individuals from diverse backgrounds interact, negotiate

identities, and form new social relationships. Exposure to diverse peers, academic discourse, and institutional culture can either reduce prejudice through increased understanding or reinforce it through group segregation and ideological polarisation.

Students are also future professionals, policymakers, educators, and opinion leaders; therefore, their attitudes hold long-term implications for social cohesion and national integration. Moreover, the widespread use of social media among young adults makes them especially vulnerable to communal propaganda, misinformation, and echo chambers that can intensify bias. Understanding the nature and determinants of communal prejudice within this demographic provides valuable insights for designing educational interventions, creating inclusive campuses, and fostering inter-group harmony.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the meaning, historical roots, contemporary patterns, and implications of communal prejudice among university students, while highlighting the social and institutional structures that sustain or challenge such attitudes.

B. Theories of Communal Prejudice

1. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner): This theory explains that people derive part of their self-concept from the groups they belong to. To maintain a positive social identity, individuals favour their own group and show negative attitudes toward out-groups. Communal prejudice among students often emerges when they see their religious or caste group as superior or threatened by others, leading to in-group loyalty and out-group bias.

2. Stereotype and Social Learning Theory (Bandura): According to this view, prejudice is learned from the environment. Children observe and imitate the attitudes of parents, teachers, peers, and media. Over time, these learned stereotypes become rigid beliefs. Students carry these early-learned ideas into college life, which influences how they perceive and interact with people from other communities.

3. Authoritarian Personality Theory (Adorno et al.): This theory suggests that individuals raised in strict, obedience-focused households develop rigid thinking and intolerance toward groups different from their own. Such personalities tend to categorise people as “right” or “wrong” and easily adopt communal prejudices. Students with authoritarian traits may show intense hostility toward out-groups.

4. Realistic Conflict Theory (Sherif): Prejudice arises when groups compete for limited resources—such as jobs, power, or recognition. Even perceived competition can create hostility. Among students, this may appear when identity groups feel they are competing for representation, campus influence, or academic opportunities.

5. Scapegoat Theory (Dollard et al.): This theory proposes that frustration leads individuals to blame an out-group for their problems. When people feel insecure or powerless, they displace their anger onto a community seen as vulnerable. Students experiencing stress or uncertainty may adopt communal biases to rationalise their frustrations.

6. Cognitive Bias Theory: Human beings use mental shortcuts to simplify complex information, often leading to overgeneralizations. These cognitive shortcuts can cause people to categorise entire communities based on a few events or limited information. Students exposed to biased media may quickly form communal judgments without critical thinking.

7. Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan): Prejudice arises when individuals perceive symbolic, cultural, or economic threats from another group. Students may feel that their values, beliefs, or opportunities are being challenged by other communities, leading to fear-based prejudice and avoidance.

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Volume 02, Issue 01, April 2025

8. Cultural Transmission Theory: Prejudice is passed down through generations via cultural norms, community narratives, religious teachings, and historical stories. Students inherit these narratives and may treat them as unquestionable truths, thereby continuing communal biases.

C. Manifestations of Communal Prejudice

Students may develop fixed beliefs about other communities, such as “They are aggressive,” “They are untrustworthy,” and so on.

- Students often stereotype other religious or caste groups based on fixed beliefs.
- Many prefer friendships within their own community and avoid others.
- Identity-based groups form in hostels, classes, and common areas.
- Communal jokes and derogatory comments appear in casual conversations.
- Events and news are interpreted through a communal lens.
- Students share biased or hateful content on social media.
- Some avoid working with out-group members in group projects.
- Minority students may be excluded from social or academic circles.
- Student politics sometimes mobilises support along communal lines.
- Subtle behaviours like discomfort, avoidance, or microaggressions reveal hidden bias.

D. Strategies to Reduce Communal Prejudice

- Promoting meaningful inter-group contact through mixed-group classroom activities, cultural exchanges, and collaborative projects.
- Integrating value-based education that emphasises empathy, pluralism, human rights, and respect for diversity.
- Introducing critical media literacy programmes to help students identify misinformation, propaganda, and biased narratives.
- Encouraging open dialogue sessions, workshops, and sensitisation programmes on communal harmony and conflict resolution.
- Training teachers and faculty to recognise and address prejudicial attitudes in classrooms through inclusive pedagogies.
- Implementing inclusive campus policies such as diverse hostel allocations, unbiased grievance redressal, and safe spaces for minority voices.
- Providing counselling support to help students overcome biases, fears, and inherited stereotypes.
- Encouraging participation in community service and outreach programmes that expose students to diverse cultural and social groups.
- Designing curriculum content that includes multicultural education, peace studies, and ethical reasoning.
- Promoting student-led initiatives, clubs, and campaigns that celebrate diversity and foster unity across communities.

E. Patterns of Communal Prejudice among University Students

Communal prejudice among university students emerges in multiple patterns that shape their social behaviour, peer interactions, and campus participation. One prominent pattern is the formation of identity-based peer groups. Students often gravitate toward peers with similar religious or caste backgrounds, resulting in social circles that lack diversity. Although such bonding feels natural, it reduces opportunities for inter-group understanding and reinforces preconceived stereotypes about other communities. Another noticeable pattern

is subtle social distancing. Many students do not openly express hostility toward out-group members but may avoid sitting with them, sharing accommodation, or collaborating in group projects. This form of silent prejudice is often justified as “personal comfort,” yet it reflects deeper social conditioning.

A third pattern is the emergence of polarised discourses on campuses. During political events, communal incidents, or national controversies, students frequently interpret issues through the lens of group identity. Classroom discussions, hostel debates, and student union activities may take on a communal tone, revealing how deeply identity-based thinking has permeated academic spaces. Prejudicial humour, stereotypical jokes, and insensitive remarks also surface in informal settings, normalising communal attitudes without being critically questioned. Finally, students' digital behaviour shows a distinct pattern: they share posts, memes, and commentary that target specific religious groups, often without verifying accuracy or understanding the implications. These digital expressions mirror and magnify offline prejudices, making communal bias more visible and widespread.

F. Determinants of Communal Prejudice among Students

The roots of communal prejudice among university students lie in a combination of historical, social, psychological, and technological determinants. Family socialisation is one of the most potent sources. From childhood, individuals observe how their family members talk about other communities, and these everyday remarks—whether explicit or subtle—shape their early perceptions. Students entering universities often carry these inherited stereotypes, which continue to influence their behaviours unless challenged by new experiences. Historically entrenched narratives, especially in regions like South Asia, contribute significantly to this mindset. Memories of past conflicts, stories of collective suffering, and inherited mistrust become part of communal identity, influencing how young people interpret contemporary events.

The media's influence is another decisive determinant. Students today are immersed in a digital world where news channels, films, social media content, and online influencers often portray communities in biased or stereotypical ways. Algorithms intensify this exposure by repeatedly showing content that aligns with the user's existing beliefs, creating echo chambers that normalise prejudice and reduce empathy. Political discourses also shape communal attitudes. Identity-based politics, competitive nationalism, and sensationalised public debates deepen the perceived divide between communities. Students in a phase of identity formation are susceptible to political narratives that appeal to fears or pride.

Psychological factors further contribute to the emergence of communal prejudice. The need for belongingness and social approval often pushes students toward in-group conformity, even if it means absorbing prejudicial views. Fear of the unfamiliar or perceived threat to group identity strengthens hostile attitudes toward out-groups. Limited inter-group interaction on campuses also prevents students from challenging these beliefs. Lack of critical thinking, insufficient exposure to diversity in school years, and absence of structured discussions on communal harmony contribute to the persistence of prejudicial thinking. Together, these determinants create a complex environment in which communal prejudice among students takes root and flourishes.

G. Social Implications of Communal Prejudice

1. Breakdown of Interpersonal Relations: Prejudice weakens trust between students of different communities, limiting opportunities for friendship, collaboration, and open dialogue.

2. Social Segregation on Campuses: Students tend to form identity-based groups, reducing inter-group interaction and creating socially fragmented university environments.

- 3. Hostile or Unsafe Atmosphere for Minority Students:** Those belonging to marginalised or minority communities may experience discrimination, exclusion, or psychological distress due to prejudicial behaviour.
- 4. Decline in Academic Engagement:** Prejudice can discourage participation in class discussions, group projects, and campus activities, affecting learning outcomes and intellectual growth.
- 5. Polarisation in Student Politics: Identity-based mobilisation** in student unions leads to ideological conflicts, making campuses more politically divided and less academically focused.
- 6. Erosion of Democratic and Secular Values:** Increasing communal attitudes weaken constitutional principles such as equality, pluralism, and freedom of belief.
- 7. Escalation of Conflicts and Tensions:** Prejudicial thinking heightens the risk that campus disputes will escalate into communal confrontations, especially during national or political events.
- 8. Long-Term Societal Impact:** Students carry their prejudices into future professions, influencing workplaces, governance, social behaviour, and civic life in broader society.
- 9. Reduced National Integration:** Persistent suspicion and emotional distance between communities impede social cohesion and weaken the collective sense of nationhood.
- 10. Obstruction to Peace and Development:** A society divided along communal lines finds it harder to achieve stability, cooperative functioning, and long-term sustainable development.

Conclusion

The overall analysis demonstrates that communal prejudice among university students is not an isolated behavioural issue but a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by history, socialisation, psychological needs, and contemporary media environments. The theories discussed—ranging from Social Identity Theory to Cultural Transmission Theory—offer clear insight into how such prejudice forms and persists. The patterns and manifestations identified in the paper, such as stereotyping, social distancing, digital hostility, and campus segregation, show that prejudice operates both visibly and subtly within student life. Its determinants, including family influence, political narratives, and algorithm-driven media exposure, contribute to an atmosphere in which communal thinking becomes normalised. The social implications further reveal that prejudice weakens peer relationships, induces campus polarisation, affects minority well-being, and threatens broader democratic and national unity.

Connecting back to the abstract, the findings confirm the need for the very interventions the paper proposes: value-based education, inter-group contact, critical media literacy, inclusive institutional practices, and empathetic dialogue. Together, these measures can challenge inherited stereotypes, reduce communal tensions, and cultivate a generation of students capable of contributing to a more just, harmonious, and socially cohesive society.

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Volume 02, Issue 01, April 2025

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