

SECULARISM AND ITS CRISIS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Secularism in India is both a tradition and a commitment. As a tradition, it is thousands of years old, dating back to the days of the Indus Valley Civilisation. As a commitment, it is enshrined in the Constitution of India which its people have given to themselves constituting India into a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular and Democratic Republic. The evolution and growth of Indian secularism with all its triumphs and tensions, both as a concept and an ideology, is a fascinating study, a golden chapter in the history of India. Indian secularism is different from the western model. In fact it is diametrically opposed to it. While western secularism rejects all religious systems, Indian secularism accepts and respects all religions. Again while western secularism arose out of a conflict between the Church and the State, Indian secularism unfolded itself from a social necessity which arose out of cultural compulsions. Similarly, while western secularism stands for improving material conditions of human beings, in the Indian model it is the mind which rules the matter enriching the quality of life and the concept of nation-hood at the same time. When a student at Oxford asked Jawaharlal Nehru what he meant by secularism, Nehru who knew secularism much more than many replied: 'Equal protection by the State to all religions'. The definition stands till today.

Key words:- Constitution of India, Secularism, State, country, Religion, everybody, Articles, Threats, Citizens, Communal Violence, Nation, Politicians.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper analyze the introduction, theoretical frame work of secularism and its crisis in India, Ancient India, Medieval India, Freedom Struggle, Independence India and Conclusion. Secularism in India is both a tradition and a commitment. As a tradition, it is thousands of years old, dating back to the days of the Indus Valley Civilisation. As a commitment, it is enshrined in the Constitution of Indian which its people have given to them selves constituting India into a Sover eign, Socialist, Secular and Democratic Republic. The evolution and growth of Indian secularism with all its triumphs and tensions, both as a conceptand an ideology, is a fascinating study, a golden chapter in the history of India. Indian secularism is different from the western model. In fact it is diametrically opposed to it. While western secularism rejects all religious systems, Indian secularism accepts and respects all religions. Again while western secularism arose out of a conflict between the Church and the State, Indian secularism unfolded itself from a social necessity which arose out of cultural compulsions. Similarly, while western secularism stands for improving material conditions of human beings, in the Indian model it is the mind which rules the matter enriching the quality of life and the concept of nation-hood at the same time. When a student at Oxford asked Jawaharlal Nehru what he meant by secularism, Nehru who knew secularism much more than many replied: 'Equal protection by the State to all religions'. The definition stands till today.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Secularism as understood etymologically is derived from the classical Latin expression 'Saeculum' or 'Secyulum' denoting something which is not regularly recurrent or periodical or that which lasts for an age or a century like the secular games of the ancient Romans which they played to honour their principal deities. In medieval Latin the word 'Secularis' pertains to 'this world' or the 'present life' as opposed to eternity and the life to come.

It referred to temporal rather than spiritual or religious affairs, relating to the laity as distinguished from the clergy. The Secular, however, remained within the ambit of the Holy Order although not bound by any monastic vow or rule. A Church Officer in the middle ages who was not ordained was considered a layman as distinct from a clergyman. As an idelogy western secularism is traceable to the burning of Papal Bull by Martin Luther at the Diet of

Worms at Wittenburg in Germany in 1521. As a political system, secularism owes its origin to George Jacob Holycares in England in 1846. In India, however, the cause and effect of the secular secular awakening in society and politics is a different story altogether.

Secularism in India has to be understood against its multi-religious and multi-lingual background with its tremendous diversity. There are 1652 languages in India and people of all major religions of the world live here. As a result of centuries of common living, there is a cultural unity in the country which binds men of different faiths, sects and communities. In a larger perspective, secularism in India has flourished because of the resilience of its democratic traditions and the prevalence of the phenomenon called 'Unity in diversity' in spite of internal un-rest and external invasions.

The cultural continuity of India in the last five thousand years of its recorded history is incredible There are 21 acknowledged civilizations that have existed on this earth so far. Of these only the Indian civilization is extant, all others are today extinct-the Egyptian, the Hellenic, the Babylonian, the Sumerian, the Hittite are dead civilizations-others are either immobilized or swallowed up.

These civilization exist only in their archaeological museums, art galleries or in the pages of their histories. It is only the Indian civilization which is still functioning backed by an equally resilient culture whose chief features are tolerance non-violence, assimilation, absorption, peaceful co-existence and harmony.

It is the last named i.e. Harmony which Brahma, the creator according to Indian mythology tried to create and which Bharata called 'The Fifth Veda'. The 'Fifth Veda' was meant for all irrespective of religion, regardless of caste, enabling one and all, the Creator and the created, the Brahmin and the Shudra, the Guru and the Shishya to live together in tolerance, in balance and equilibrium, in a harmonious state. A secular society is essentially a tolerate society. It is this secular state which the Indian mind has sought and has worked for through the ages.

ANCIENT INDIA

At the dawn of India's history a secular and sophisticated civilization existed here, called the Indus Valley Civilisation, which looks like a modern civilization with all its artistic finery and civic amenities. It seems that the civilizing and secular process must have started here several centuries before to reach that stage of development. According to Sir John Marshall: 'Punjab and Sind, if not other parts of India as well, were enjoying an advanced and singularly uniform civilization of their own, closely akin but in some respects even superior, to that of contemporary Mesopotamia and Egypt'. It is remarkable that India's very first civilization was so succinctly secular.

According to Rabindranath Tagore, the first civilized Indian was secular who lived in harmony with others. The people of Mohenjodaro and Harappa and Ropar and Lothar and Kalibangan and a hundred other sites of Saraswati and Ghagghra worshipped all Gods and Goddesses, mainly the Mother Goddess which it represented in every village as the tutelary deity (Gram Devta) and is known by various secular names such as Mata, Amba, Amma, Kali and Karali. The sweep of this civilization embraced Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Gujarat. The Great Bath found at Mohenjodaro looks like a modern swimming pool of a five-star hotel. It is an engineering marvel even by modern standards. It was meant for common public for secular purposes. The drainage system of the Indus towns was elaborate and scientific. Their games, sports and indeed their amusements were truly secular. The finger-prints found on the Indus toys indicate that they were made as specimens of child's workmanship. It seems as if it were a part of the secular curriculum of their school. Tagore was convinced that the first secular man was from Sapt-Sandhu, the land of seven Rivers, later called the land of five rivers and now reduced to two and a half.

Secularism is, therefore, a part of our history and an integral component of our heritage. The Aryans were secular people and the process of Aryanisation was based on liberal principles of comingling with the non-Aryans which led to the process of amalgamation and absorption. It is remarkable that the Indian mind at the very outset was not afraid of change in spite of the fact that tradition sometimes delayed the process of change.

The Rig-Vedic poetry clearly shows that nature played a very important role in the daily lives of the Aryans. There are splendid hymns in the Rig-Veda, the oldest book of the world, to show their reverence to the dawn, the Sun, the Moon, the Sky, the Rain. On the philosophic plane the doctrine of Karma which is the most outstanding thought of the Indian culture, is binding equally on all Gods and all mortals.

The Rigvedic pantheon which consisted of 33 Gods upheld a moral order rewarding the righteous and punishing the sinful thus the Rigveda is full of prayers for long life, freedom from disease, heroic progeny, wealth, power, abundance of food and drink, the defeat of rivals etc. There is no trace of pessimism in the thoughts of the Rigvedic sages. Whether life was a reality or an illusion, substance or shadow, they want to enjoy it to the full. They do not subscribe to the doctrine that life is a misery, which can end only by eradication the desire – ‘Vasana’, the cause of the ever-recurring cycle of births and deaths-a doctrine that was developed later by the Buddhists and found in Vedanta. Their religions, therefore, betrays a practical streak. And that is secularism.

Gautama-The Buddha was silent about God. His Eight-fold Path and Fourfold Truth was a truly secular message to the masses delivered not in classical Sanskrit but the people’s Pali. He left a lasting impact on Dharma. ‘He made on break’: says Dr.K.M. Munshi, in cultural continuity. By his influence the older creeds were re-vitalised and purified. At the same time Buddhism had to develop its Mahayana aspect to win the people’s hearts. Later still the process of absorption was completed when Buddha became an ‘Avtar’ of Vishnu and Mahayana Buddhism was absorbed in Vaishnavism and Saivism’

Ashoka (273- Bc-232 BC), the Mauryan king was drawn towards the message of Sakyamuni particularly after the Kalinga war. He stood for the concord of communities and the harmony of creeds. He stood for Ahimsa, the non-violence towards both men and animals. His Law of piety (Dhamma) was marked by liberalism, charity and compassion. He stood for a moral order where character and conduct played a greater role than rituals and ceremonies. Till today he evokes the highest admiration both as man and monarch mainly because of his secular and humanitarian measures and practices.

- (a) Promotion of what constitutes the essence of all religions as their common ground or root;
- (b) Cultivation of this sense of unity of all religions by the practice of restraint;
- (c) The coming together of the exponents of different religions in religious assemblies.
- (d) Learning the text of other religions so as to become proficient on the scriptures of different religions.

Ashoka himself set an example to this by honouring all sects and making gifts to them. His dedication of the Barabar Hill Caves to the Ajivikas is a noble monument to his catholic spirit of religious tolerance far in advance of his age'. In the history of Indian secularism the name of Ashoka shines like a polestar. He was a model not only in his time but also to future king like Harsha-the Good and Akbar-the Great.

Harsha who ruled in the 7th century (606-647 AD) distributed his favours evenly to all religions. In his 5-yearly assemblies at Prayag he worshipped Shiva, Surya and Buddha simultaneously and gave away his entire wealth to the leaders of religions. His charities were immense so that he even gave away his clothes and would borrow clothes to wear after these assemblies. According to Hieun Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim who participated in one such assembly says, Harsh had banned the killing of animals in his kingdom and, like Ashoka, had established a number of animal hospitals. There was not a single animal hospital. There was not a single case of religious discrimination in his whole reign of about 40 years. At the university of Nalanda, Vedas and Puranas were taught along with the Buddhist texts.

MEDIEVAL INDIA

The cultural continuity of the country was maintained throughout the middle ages in spite of foreign invasions. The Bhakti movement gave a new vitality to the cultural fabric of the people of India who had built around themselves. The Muslim Sufi saints like Amir Khosro, Baba Farid, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, Moinuddin Chishti and Hindu saints like Kabir, Eknath, Tukaram, Tulsidas, Surdas, Raidas, Mira Bai brought a new synthesis through their songs and hymns. Guru Nanak brought Hindus and Muslims closer to each other. He said 'I'm neither Hindu nor Muslim'. The 'Adi Granth' of the Sikhs contains the hymns of both Hindu and

Muslim saints in addition to the Sikh Gurus who enormously strengthened the forces of secularism in the country. The concept behind Bhakti is total surrender to one God. Among the disciples of Ramanand who brought Bhakti from the south included Rai Das, the cobbler, Kabir, the Weaver, Dhanna, the Jat, Sena, the barber and Pipa, the tiller. It also included a woman, Rani Jhali of Chitor. The movement cut across all distinctions of caste, colour or creed. The right order of Kashmir was a secular order. So was the Sufism of Shah Abdul Karim and Shah Abdul Latif in Sind.

It was in that congenial atmosphere that Akbar the great Mughal laid the foundations of the Mughal Empire. Akbar stood for tolerance in religious matters and promoted national solidarity with a liberal outlook. His 'Din-i-Ilahi' (Divine Faith) is a shining chapter in the history of Indian secular thought.

Akbar promulgated 'Din-i-Ilahi' in 1582 after detailed discussions at 'Ibadat Khana' (Hall of Worship) at Fatehpur Sikri, with the Muslims, Sufis, Hindu Pundits, Yogis and Sikh saints, Jains, Jews, Zoroastrians, Portuguese Jesuits and the Catholics. Akbar found truth in all religions and realized that it was not the monopoly of any one religion.

Din-i-Ilahi was neither inspired by revelation nor based on any definite philosophy or theology, a religion without any priest or book or even prescribed forms of worship. Its regulations were intended to raise the ethical standards of its followers, its crux brotherhood of man. He enjoined on its followers abstinence of alcohol, avoidance of meat-eating, simple living and high thinking. He also adopted the practice of sun and fire worship as he saw in them the effulgence of God. His inclination towards non-violence was because of the influence of the Jains and the Muslim Sufis who had been practicing it for long. In fact it was a freemason's society which believed in the ideal of the union of the soul with the divine.

Akbar did his best to synthesise the diverse elements of the Indian society, the Hindu and the Muslim culture to create an Indian ethos. He got the Sanskrit epics translated into Persian and Arabic and Persian and Arabic classics into Sanskrit. An atmosphere of give and take started in the right earnest and the country witnessed a cultural upsurge at the national level. Secular schools such as Indo-Persian schools in painting and architecture developed and Hindustani music flourished. The best of Samarkand and Bukhara features in art were added to the finest of

Ajanta and Ellora. Hindu artists were freely employed to carve out Islamic beauties in architecture. The finest specimen of Indo-Persian school of architecture is Taj Mahal at Agra which has been aptly described as the embodiment of Hindu-Muslim culture.

Akbar's mantle fell on his great grandson Dara Shikoh who symbolized the best of the composite culture of India. His famous treatise 'Majma-ul-Bahrain' (confluence of two cultures) is a landmark in the history of secularism in India. He brought the Hindu Yogi and the Muslim Sufi on the same platform. According to him there was no difference between the Sanyasi of the Vedanta and the dervish of the Sufis. In a larger analysis, the Sufi Movement in Islam and the Bhakti movement of the Hindus stand co-planer. A Muslim Bhakta is a Hindu Sufi for the Sufi is one who possesses nothing and whom nothing possesses except the name of God.

Likewise the Hindus contributed and enriched Persian studies. Raja Todar Mal, a gem at Akbar's court translated Bhagwat Purana into Persian. Chander Bhan Brahmin's Ghazals were a happy blend of Hindu and Muslim thought. One of the greatest Dakhni poets was a Hindu who wrote under the Muslim pen-name of Nurati. He wrote poems in praise of his master Sultan Adil Shah II (1656-72) of Bijapore. The inter-religion marriages also went a long way in strengthening the forces of secularism.

The Maratha rule in the 18th century and the Sikh rule in 19th century India further accelerated the secular march of India's composite culture. Secularism was Ranjit Singh's greatest strength. He trusted the Muslims who stood by him through thick and thin. Punjab Monarchy was a secular monarchy where merit alone was the Criteria for services.

The social and the religious movements of the 19th century such as Brahma Samj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, Prarthna Sabha, Ramakrishna Mission were a continuation of India's moral and secular traditions. Swami Vivekananda's famous statement that he would prefer Indian children who are unable to go to the school he stated : 'Now if the poor boy cannot come to education, education must go to him. There are thousands of single-minded, self-sacrificing sanyasins in our country, going from village to village teaching religion. If some of them can be organized as teachers of secular things also, they will go from place to place, from door to door, not only preaching but teaching also'.

FREEDOM STRUGGLE

The freedom struggle was unique because people of all religions rallied round the secular banner of the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. According to the sage of sewagram : ‘Hindustan belongs to all those who are born and bred here and who have no other country to look to. Free India will be no Hindu Raj, it will be India Raj based not on the majority of any religious sect or community but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion’. Gandhi rejected the notion of a theocratic state even for the regions where the whole community had one religion. He, however, was not opposed to state schools imparting ethical teachings for he was of the view that fundamental ethics was common to all religions. He further stated : “If officers of the government as well as the members of the public undertook the responsibility and worked whole-heartedly for the creation of a secular state, then only would we build a new India that would be the glory of the world”.¹

Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad who was a close lieutenant of the Mahatma was equally a staunch secularist. A liberal mind fed on liberal traditions, he can be knit in the cultural thread continuing the scholarship of Abdul Faisal and Faizi and the outlook of Dara Shikoh. A great votary of the unity of India he opposed the partition of India on grounds of religion.

The Constitution drafted by Pandit Motilal Nehru in 1928 for India-to-be provided for secularism as a specific provision. Article 4 (ix) of the Draft Constitution laid down : ‘There shall be no State religion for the Commonwealth of India or for any province in the Commonwealth, nor shall the State, either directly or indirectly, endow any religion or give any religion any preference or impose any disability, on account of religious beliefs or religious status’. Article 4 (xii) states : ‘No person attending any school receiving aid or other public money shall be compelled to attend religious instruction that may be given in that school’. Article 4 (xiii) stipulates: ‘No person shall, by reason of his religion, caste or creed be prejudiced in any way in regard to public employment, office or power or honour and the exercise of any trade or calling’. The freedom movement was marked by complete communal harmony till its last phase when Jinnah’s ‘Two Nation Theory’ gave it a big blow resulting into the partition of India. But soon the country recovered itself and adopted secularism as the basic foundation of the new State where the State respects all religions but has no State religion, ‘The Swaraj of my dreams’, said Gandhi, ‘is to keep intact the genius of Indian civilisation’.

Freedom brought new challenges and entirely new responsibilities. The task was two – fold namely to undo the cultural wrongs of the past and to launch a new India without losing its cultural identity through its Constitutional provisions.

INDEPENDENCE INDIA

The Constitution of India is the sum total of the best and the finest in Indian culture. Given by the People of India to themselves, the Constitution was adopted on January 26, 1949 and came into force on January 26, 1950. The five Pillars of our Constitution are Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Justice and Secularism, which was inserted in its Preamble as a result of the Constitution (42nd Amendment) act, 1976.

Articles 25-28 relate to the religious freedom guaranteed to every citizen of India as a fundamental Right. The Constitution also enjoins on every citizen as fundamental Duty vide Article 51. – A ‘to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectoral diversities, to value and preserve the rich heritage of our common culture’. Articles 29 and 30 protect the cultural, the educational rights of religious and linguistic minorities. The last five decades have clearly shown that the people of India have stood by the constitution. Although there have been cases of communal violence the forces of secularism survived and prevailed with the universalisation of education, march of science and technology, inculcation of scientific temper, empowerment of women, elimination of poverty and employment for all. Secularism in India is not only a part of our heritage and is at present a constitutional obligation, it is as well a cultural necessity, a social obligation and a ladder for development.

To talk of secularism only in the context of religion is to misunderstand its true import. Secularism in the context of democracy and democratic way of life has a very wide meaning. In the first place, in a truly secular society there is no room for casteism or parochialism. In our relationship with the state and society, there is no caste save the Indian caste, no parish save the Indian caste, no parish save the Indian caste, no parish save the wider parish of the nation. Unfortunately, casteism has hey its day in India

Elections are fought and won on caste lines. Indian politicians do not feel qualms of conscience in dividing the country into castes and in playing one caste against the other just for

furthering their own narrow ends. Secondly, in a truly secular society there is no room for communalism. The state should not discriminate between the citizens on the basis of community or class. If special favours are to be granted to any, they should be for those who really deserve them irrespective of their caste, community or religion. The needy, the depressed, the down-trodden, irrespective of the community to which they belong, must claim the special attention of the state. Such obnoxious things as the concept of minority, but when taken in the context of the whole country everybody is a part and an integral part of the whole. The state of India should deal with its citizens as Indians and not as members of a minority group. Talking in terms of minority or majority compromises national approach. Thirdly, all citizens should be governed by the same laws. There should be a uniform civil code for all people of India irrespective of their creed or community. True secularism will never develop in India until and unless a uniform civil code is enforced for the people of India. Religion is a personal matter. It should remain limited to freedom of mode of worship of personal beliefs and preferences strictly in religious matters. Secularism is compromised the moment we spare a section of our population from the operation of certain laws, Secularism gets prostituted the moment the claims of separate treatment are tolerated, encouraged or patronized in any way.

A distinction may here be made between religion and culture. Religion is a continuous process and its is a matter of the present, while culture is our relationship with the past. No special favours should be allowed on the basis of religion, and no discrimination on grounds of religion. The state should, however, do everything possible to protect and preserve its cultural heritage, historical monuments etc. irrespective of the fact whether they are related to one religion or the other. Taking due care of old temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras does not compromise secularism of the patronage is limited for their upkeep as legacies handed down to us from our past. In fact such monuments do not belong to any religion or community; they are national monuments from which we can work out the currents of our national history

Fourthly, in a truly secular state no political parties should be recognized, which tend to in cline towards communalism or parochialism or regionalism. All political parties must have national character. Those which try to represent certain interests, particularly religious or communal, should have no place in the scheme of a democratic country. The upshot of the whole

argument is that Indianism should override all other considerations. The nation will be delivered only if every citizen of Indian develops a national outlook. Indeed, an enlightened and broad national outlook is another name for secularism. Fifthly, in a truly secular state no quarter is give to fundamentalists. Progressive legislation for the progress of one and all is the hallmark of true secularism. In our country the Shahbano case and the manner in which the legislation was enacted to deal with the matter are a matter of utter shame to those who brag of their secular credentials. It was a gross rape of the secular character of our polity. The existence of two types of divorce laws – one type for Hindu women and another for Muslim women-does not redound to the credit of a secular society.

Threats to secularism in India emanate from a number of factors, among factors, among which the politics of vote is a very important one. We tend to appease a section of our population in the same of secularism if it helps us to secure votes. Sectarianism indeed has become the bane of Indian politics. By pandering to emotions of a solid block of population, the election balance can easily be tilted. In one's favour. The damage occurring to the secular fabric of the body politic appears to be nobody's concern. We would divide our population into the forward castes and the backward castes deliberately sidetracking the fact that the poor and the depressed are found in every caste. The spectre of communalism raises its head in India every now and then. The bosom of mother Indian has been badly bruised by the frequent ourbreaks of communal violence. In the form of the blood of the innocents is shed the secular character of our polity. The gravest threat to secularism emanates from the ascendancy of fundamentalism, be it fundamentalism of one religious faith or that of another. A very potent threat to our secularism is posed by foreign interference, particularly by Pakistan. In a bid to derive a political mileage out of it, such foreign interference whips up the passions of a section of the population by misguiding the people that they are being ill-treated by the majority community at the behesat and connivance of the government. Some time back, the Sikhs of Punjab were successfully induced to believe that step-motherly treatment was being meted out to them and that their real local activities of these elements have not only menaced the delicate structure of our secularism but have also threatened the unity of India as a nation.

CONCLUSION

India, a multi-racial and multi-religious society, cannot afford the luxury of theocracy, whether Hindu theocracy or Muslim theocracy. Secularism is the ideal road which it has to tread. It has no other alternative if it really wants to make progress as a modern nation. We have to promote and strengthen secularism at all costs. The enforcement of a uniform civil code for the entire population of India is the primary need of the hour. The state must deal with individuals as citizens and not as members of a religious group or community. There is indeed need to redefine religious freedom. Religious freedom does not consist in claiming different sets of laws for a particular section. It consists in pursuing or practicing any line or religious faith undisturbed unhindered and unfettered subject to social morality and the requirements of law and order. Above all, we will have to reorient our educational system in such a way that the roots of true secularism get strengthened and the secular way of life is nurtured. Secular India is our pride and secular India must be our pride.

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