



SECULARISM IN INDIA: CONCEPTS, HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

India is a land of religions, languages and customs. Many religions are flourishing here since long back, which have their own traditions and beliefs. Therefore India is a multi religious and multi cultural country from its known history. It was never mono-religious or mono-cultural. The number of invasions and incursions from Aryans to Moghals added to religious, cultural and linguistic pluralism. British colonialism also contributed to its cultural and religious multiplicity. Thus with every invasion and incursion Indian society became more and more complex and rich. Perhaps no other society of the world is as multi-cultural and multi-religious as Indian society. It is rightly said that 'here the Aryans, the non-Aryans, the Dravidians and the Chinese, the tribes of Scythians and Huns, the Afghans and the Muguls have all merged into one body'. Indian society is like a mighty river fed with many tributaries and the main stream flows on and on. Hence, Indian society is very rich, and well known for wisdom and great thoughts. Secularism is an important aspect of Indian society, for which it is also well-known in the world. The present paper sheds the light on Secularism, its concept, history and challenges in the context of India.

Key Words- Secularism, Religion, Society, India

ORIGIN OF THE WORD SECULARISM

According to modern literature secularism has its origin in western countries and it is related to the separation of the church from the state, which gives the state a position of neutrality between different religions, while at the same time, it guarantees all citizens right to adhere any religion. According to Gahrana, 1998; Kar, 1998; Sharma, 2000; Talesra, 2002; and Yerankar, 2006, G.H. Holyoake has been regarded as the originator of the concept of secularism because of his important work such as, 'Principles of Secularism' and 'The Origin and Nature of Secularism'. A secular state as defined scientifically, means a state which recognizes every citizen as equal and does not recognize any social or religious stratification for any political benefit. But what is generally projected as secularism is tolerance of all religions with special emphasis on the protection of minorities and preservation of communal harmony. However, in the words of Rizvi, (2005) the essence of secularism rests on two basic principles:

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- (i) Separation of religion from politics.
- (ii) Acceptance of religion as purely and strictly private affairs of individuals having nothing to do with the state.

Sometimes, the word secular is used as a contrast with the word religious, which lead people to believe that secularism is opposed to religion. But in reality rather than remaining opposed to religion, secularism takes a dispassionate view in running the affairs of the state. In the context of India, it basically connotes treatment of all religions on a footing of equality and ruling out any discrimination. Hence, secularism means separation of the state, politics and non-religious areas of life from religions and religions being treated as a purely personal matter (Chandra, 2008). So, when India is said to be a secular state, it only means that the state will not identify itself with any particular religious faith and that no person shall suffer any disability or discrimination on the basis of religion.

SECULARISM IN THE HISTORY OF INDIA

Secular traditions are very deep rooted in the history of India. Indian culture is a composite one which is based on the blending of various spiritual traditions and social movements. In ancient India, the *Santam Dharma* (Hinduism) was basically allowed to develop as a holistic religion by welcoming different spiritual traditions and trying to integrate them into a common mainstream. The development of four Vedas and the various interpretations of the *Upanishads* and the *Puranas* clearly highlight the religious plurality of Hinduism.

Emperor Ashoka was the first great emperor to announce, as early as third century B.C. that, the state would not prosecute any religious sect. In his 12th Rock Edit, Ashoka made an appeal not only for the toleration of all religion sects but also to develop a spirit of great respect toward them. He pleaded for restraint of criticism of other religious sects. He asked people to become perfect in the scriptures of other religions. The religious tolerance expressed by Ashoka more than 2,300 years ago has been one of the cherished Indian Social Value. Ashoka's secular outlook is one of the landmarks not only of Indian civilisation but also of the human civilisation itself (Yerankar, 2006). Even after the advent of Jainism, Buddhism and later Islam and Christianity into the Indian soil, the quest for religious toleration and co-existence of different faiths continued.

In medieval India the *Sufi* and *Bhakti* movements bond the people of various communities together with love and peace. The leading lights of these movements were Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, Baba Farid, Sant Kabir Das, Guru Nanak Dev, Saint Tukaram and Mira Bai. They contributed to the development of a composite culture in such a manner that nobody dares to challenge them. The remarks of Guru Nanak, when he says that '*There is no Hindu and no Musalman, as there is no distinction between man and man*' (Rizvi, 2005), give support to the roots of secularism.

The Mughal emperor the great Akbar also to a great extent promoted the policy of toleration of different religions. His propagation of *Din-e-Illahi* (Divine faith) and *Sulh-e-kul* (Peace with all) were highly inspired by the spirit of secularism. Most of the Mugal kings were tolerant and liberal in their approach. Mansingh a Hindu was the commander of Akbar's Army. There were forty thousand Rajput soldiers and more than five hundred were Hindu Sardar. During the period of Shahjahan 22.4 percent were Hindu Sardar. In Aurangazeb's regime, 31.6 percent were Hindu Sardar. He appointed Raja Jaswant Singh (Rajput) as a head of Afghanistan. His first Prime Minister was Raghunathdas and he remained as a Prime Minister till his death. The Muslim rulers were not as anti-Hindu as pictured by some chauvinist Hindu leaders (Yerankar, 2006). On the other hand Hakim Singh Suri a Muslim was the commander of

Ranapratap Singh's Army and in the regime of Chatrapati Shivaji, Siddhi Halal and Nur Khan both Muslim were Sardars (Tara, 1991).

The spirit of secularism was strengthened and enriched through the Indian freedom movement too. In the initial part of the Indian freedom movement, the liberals like Sir Feroz Shah Mehta, Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishn Gokhale by and large pursued a secular approach to politics. The Brahma Samaj started by Sri Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Arya Samaj led by Swami Dayanand Sarswati never treated other religious faiths with any antipathy. On the other hand, they tried to purify the wrong traditions which had gradually sapped the vitality of Hindu religion.

The constitution drafted by Pandit Moti Lal Nehru as the chairman of the historic Nehru Committee in 1928, had the following provision on secularism as, '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 any preference or impose any disability on account of religious beliefs or religious status'.

The principal advocates of secular ideology in modern India were Mahatma Gandhiji and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru. Gandhiji's secularism was based on a commitment to the brotherhood of religious communities based on their respect for and pursuit of truth. Whereas, Pandit J. L. Nehru's secularism was based on a commitment to scientific humanism tinged with a progressive view of historical change. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has been a leading champion of the concept of the secular state. The creation of India as a secular state has been accepted as one of his greatest achievements. Moreover he was especially concerned with transforming India from a 'caste ridden society' in which communalism constitutes a major threat to all the values that he cherished to a 'national state' which includes people of all religions and shades of opinion and is essentially secular as a state.

At present scenario, in the context of Indian, the separation of religion from the state constitutes the core of the philosophy of secularism. The expression 'secular' has also a special significance in the context of the historical development of Indian polity. It is of pivotal importance in the context of political realities on the ground as they exist now. In India, the word secular is identified with tolerance among the different religions. In a secular state, no one enjoys any special privilege in national life or in any type of conduct for international relations. No group of citizens arrogates to itself the rights and privileges which it denies to others. No person suffers from any form of disability or discrimination because of his religion but all alike to be free to share the fullest degree of freedom in his the common life.

Explaining the notion of secularism in India, Das (1991) quotes D.E. Smith, and writes that, 'The secular state guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion. It is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek to either promote or interfere with any religion'. According to Rizvi, (2005) on a close analysis of the secular state in India, it involves three distinct but inter-related sets of relationships concerning the state, religion and individual. These are (i) Religion and the individual, (ii) The state and the individual, and (iii) The state and religion.

In a secular state, the relationship between religion and individual is an independent variable in the sense that each and every citizen is free to choose his or her own religion or even refuse to adhere any one of them. The state has no business to disturb in the right to conscience. The relationship between the state and the individual is also another independent variable in the sense that it is dispassionately decided under some constitutional guidelines. Thus religion has practically no role to intervene in such a social relationship. The state and religion both are independent to decide their course of action about their own norms. Indian constitution arranges that both keep a respectable distance between each other. Yet in case

of any clash of interests among different religions, the state has every right to arbitrate and even regulate their activities.

SECULARISM IN THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

Constitution of India has adopted a system of political philosophy that all forms of religious faith and worship are of equal status and has accepted the view that public education and other matters of public policy should be conducted without the introduction of religious sentiments. Indian constitution has elaborated the principle of secularism in great detail. It specifies that the state should refrain from either penalizing or favouring any of its people on religious considerations. In fact, India adopted secularism to facilitate the promotion of religious tolerance and cultural co-existence (Majid, 1985).

It is true that the word 'secular' did not first occurs either in article 25 or 26 or in any other article of Preamble of the constitution. By the forty-second Constitution Amendment Act of 1976, the preamble was amended. Since then India becomes a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic. The constitution says that, there shall be no 'state religion' in India. The State will neither establish a religion of its own nor confer any special patronage upon any particular religion. It follows from this that;

The state will not compel any citizen to pay any taxes for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious institution (Article 27).

No religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly provided by state funds Article 28(1).

According to Article 28, every person is guaranteed the freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess, practice and propagate his own religion, subject only (a) to restrictions imposed by the state in the interests of public order, morality and health, (b) to regulations or restrictions made by state relating to any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice, but do not really appertain to the freedom of conscience, (c) to measures of social reform and for throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus. Subject to above limitations, a person in India shall have the right not only to entertain any religious belief but also to practice the observances dictated by such belief. (Article 25)

PRACTICE OF SECULARISM IN INDIA

After a long struggle against Britain's colonial rule, when the Indian subcontinent gets a status of independent country, then it becomes a pluralistic nation and welcomed religious and cultural diversity. According to Rambabu, (2006) at the time of the partition it was estimated that there were 361 million people living within India's borders; of these people 315 million were Hindus, 32 million Muslims, 7 million Christians, 6 million Sikhs, one million Buddhists, 100,000 Parsians and a small minority of Jews. Therefore it was the need of the hour to save this multi-ethnicity of India, for which later on our constitution have opted the way of secularism.

In real practice too, the governments in India always tried to follow a secular path, although it had some setbacks from time to time. In our country, we had as many as four non Hindu Presidents, three Muslims namely, Dr. Zakir Husain, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Dr. A. P. J. Kalam and a Sikh, Gyani Zail Singh. Supreme Court of India has had Muslims as Chief Justices, one of them M. Hidayatullah, was also Vice-President for a term. Presently Dr. Hamid Ansari, a Muslim is at the position of Vice President of India. Air Chief Marshal I. H. Lateef was a Muslim. Several others have reached very high positions. There have been invariably more than one Muslim minister at the centre and in most of the states. Similarly governors, vice-chancellors, leaders in the field of science and technology, and a number of

ambassadors are from different religious communities. Therefore, in general the Indian government has not been indifferent to religion but has attempt to treat and foster each religion in the country equally (Juergensmeyer, 1994).

The minority communities in India are well represented in the top cadres of the armed forces. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and the other minorities have given the country some outstanding civil servants, artists and sports persons in sixty seven years since independence. The general non-discriminatory climate in the country ensures that ability and performance should be given due weightage and nobody should be held back because of his/her religion.

CHALLENGES OF SECULARISM IN INDIA

Indian is known for its cultural heterogeneity with respect to language and religion. Hindus constitute the majority, while the Muslims constitute the largest minority. The animosity between the Hindus and Muslims was largely the creation of the British rulers. In order to keep themselves in power, they adopted a policy of 'divide and rule' and tried to promote feelings of hostility among the members of these two communities. After a long history of independence, at present too, the lack of proper adjustment between them has often resulted in violent outbursts and communal riots, which unfortunately becomes a serious challenge to the secular identity of our country.

On the other hand, very often the political parties, including the national parties, too sometimes, do not allow secularism to take precedence over their political interests. The electorate in India, guided by tradition, tends to be responsive to appeals based on caste, religion and language. By announcing various schemes favouring a particular community, political parties, openly violate the idea of secularism they claim to stand for. While distributing tickets during elections, nearly all political parties take religion of a candidate into consideration. Such a practices in India poses the greatest threat to secularism.

CONCLUSION

After a long history of communal incident in India, still now, Secularism is seen as the only possible option that would be able to provide harmonious and peaceful survival for the different religions and casts of Indian society.

It is point to note that we need proper educational plan too, to slightly redesign our existing curriculum in the schools and colleges. The text books presenting distorted historical facts have to be changed and secular ideas will have to be inculcated in the innocent minds of our young generation. All religions should get their weightage in the textbooks of history. The culture, traditions and festivals of any particular religion should not be over-projected. The sacrifices and hardships of all religious communities and their contribution towards freedom and development of the country need to be focussed in the books of the history at school and college level. The importance of various culture and traditions of different religions in the peculiarity of the country should have to be discussed properly. At last since, India has been declared a secular state by its written constitution, therefore it is the responsibility of every Indians to stand by and believe in this declaration.

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