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An Indian Worldview: Secularism in Plurality

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Abstract: The 'Indian' lives in a land of diverse traditions and histories. The 'we' as a collective, inclusive of multiple identities, both regional and religious, is one that, rooted in the particular, celebrates plurality. Indian secularism is the ideal tool to allow for integration, and poses a challenge to fundamentalism.

However, there are divisive forces that bring to fore the question of the possibility of a diverse people co-existing in free, respectful spaces. It shakes our foundations and leaves citizens questioning the future and the validity of ideals they believed they practiced as a nation. This paper shall explore *an* Indian worldview of secularism in plurality and the threats that are posed to it. An Indian worldview of secularism in plurality, in the final analysis depends on the definition that its citizens, as participatory agents, give to itself.

Keywords: Secularism, National identitry, Nehru, Amartya Sen, Threats to Indian Secularism.

Introduction

No one is born in a vacuum. The Indian is born into, and socialized within a multicultural environment, that also carries within it the riches of a civilization over five thousand years old. Multiple ways of being, understanding, experiencing and searching for meaning present themselves to the Indian. This space, within which the Indian forms his/her identity and

worldviews, engages him/her with diverse beliefs, languages, literatures, cultural and social traditions and value systems. Sen writes that, "We are not unique in being diverse, but there is something quite special in the tremendous extent of diversity in our traditions" ("Indian Pluralism" 41). The 'we' as a collective, inclusive of multiple identities, both regional and religious, is one that, rooted in the particular, celebrates plurality. This paper shall explore *an* Indian worldview of secularism in plurality and the threats that are posed to it.

1. The Indian as Secular

Hart defines worldviews as, "cognitive, perceptual, and affective maps that people continuously use to make sense of the social landscape and to find their ways to whatever goals they seek" (Hart 2010: 2). The Indian in his/her evolution towards a worldview that is both regional and religious, modern and traditional, is constantly challenged and called to reinvent himself/herself. The Indian mind has not been exposed to just one religion and way of life, but is nurtured to accept, respect and accommodate difference. It is an enriching, enlivening exchange of heterogeneous ideas and ways of being. It is in and through dialogue and debate, that is both respectful and inclusive of the other that we can piece together the fragments of who we are and how we see ourselves as a nation. This is a vision that derives from the past, but is born in the present and shapes the future. Her citizens evolve a collective, shared responsibility of her destiny that requires building, in the community, a sense of who they can be.

It is the ideals and ideas that her people hold that take a country forward. One of these ideals is that of a secular nation. India's diversity socially enriches her citizens, she offers multicultural possibilities and in her evolution is a living attempt at secular plurality. The Indian collective unconsciousness allows for secularism to be upheld in a plural

landscape. Transcending the straightjacket of the fixed, India has always been fluid, open and inclusive. She has welcomed into her haven new peoples, religions, and possibilities. To the theist and the atheist, the Hindu and the Muslim, the trader and the colonialist, she has given of her resources and philosophies. Parekh explains that "By and large,…the Indian civilization was plural, and included different currents of moral and philosophical thought…In spite of their occasional quarrels and periods of intolerance, these bodies of ideas enjoyed considerable freedom of expression, engaged in a critical dialogue, challenged or borrowed each other's ideas to create a distinct and internally differentiated composite culture" (Defining India's Identity 2). It is this way of being, that the Indian inherits.

Smith states that, "The religion of the majority in India is Hinduism, a faith which is on the whole favourable to the development of the secular state" (222). Hinduism allows for multiple ways of reaching and experiencing truth. It allows the seeker to journey in search of wisdom and truth, without outlining a prescriptive path; it is open to debate and plural perspectives. "Swami Vivekananda, in his wisdom taught not that everyone must adopt the same worldview, but rather, that we all need to learn from one another: holding fast, each of us, to our respective worldviews, while simultaneously permitting these views to be transformed through the process of dialogue" (Long 17). Dialogue allows for insights, questions and an enriching search for truth. Nandy elaborates on the non-western meaning of secularism stating that "in the ultimate analysis, each major faith in the region includes *within* it an in-house version of the other faiths, both as an internal criticism and as a reminder of the diversity of the theory of transcendence" (327). It is this vision of secularism that guides Indians towards deeper understanding and integration.

2. Secularism: An Indian Ideology

Secularism "is not Indian ideology, but there is an Indian ideology of secularism" ("Images of the World," Madan 76). The postcolonial notion and practice of Indian secularism is an enabling factor in India's integration of diverse beliefs, languages, cultural and social traditions. Rather than a strict separation of state and religion it embraces the idea of religious pluralism and extends equal respect to all. Madan reminds us that, "It is important to note that the Hindi version of the constitution uses *panth nirpeksha*, 'neutral in relation to religious denominations' (that is, non-sectarian) as the equivalent for 'secular'" ("Images of the World," 85). In India, there is no civil religion and the head-of-state takes an oath on the Indian Constitution or on a universal God without referring in any way to any particular religious denomination.

Our constitution strongly upholds the secular state. The state will not give priority to one religion or religious place over the other. Further, the state becomes the protector of all religious communities and is responsible for settling conflicts that may arise. In such cases the state works *with* and *for* religious communities safeguarding their rights. At the same time, the state is expected not to dictate to the individual what faith to practice, what beliefs to hold and what religion to profess and instead gives individuals the freedom and space to make their own choices in these matters. The Indian constitution safeguards the right to freely profess, practice and propagate one's religion subject to state control in the interest of public order, morality and health. (Constitution of India - Article 25)

3. Creating a Secular State

At the time of envisioning an identity for our nation, both Nehru and Gandhi strived to create an inclusive, integrative secular India that could be collectively owned. While Nehru

remained an atheist, Gandhi's very existence revolved around his search for truth. However, they both knew that religious diversity could be accommodated only through even-handed neutrality. "Gandhi proclaimed: 'I swear by my religion and I will die for it, but it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it'" (Gandhi quoted in Tambiah 421). They hoped that this land of many cultures, ethnicities and religions would honour and respect each other while coming together to embrace a shared vision, identity and outlook. Nehru knew that this would be challenging and so, "During the constitutional assembly debates, Nehru held that the establishment of a secular state in this sense was an act of faith; an act of faith above all for the majority community because they will have to demonstrate that they can behave towards other (religions) minorities in a generous, fair, and just manner" (Tambiah 422).

After Gandhi, it was Nehru who dominated the India political scene into the 1950s. Nehru's vision of secularism in India was not one that rejected the metaphysical claims of religion or disrespected religious institutions claiming to create a secular society that was irreligious. Rather, it recognized different religions to be an integral part of the fabric of Indian society and that they were both meaningful and valid. Nehru however, was guarded against politics that propagated religious aims. He saw this as divisive and threatening to the fabric of Indian plurality. "In Nehru's eyes, 'communalism' was 'anti-national'; he declared that a committee member of the Congress could not simultaneously be a member of the committee of a communal organization such as the Hindu Mahasabha or the RSS" (Nehru quoted in Tambiah, 426). However, Nehru focused more on the dangers of communalism rather on elaborating on secularism's *possibilities*.

"Eleven years after independence, and eight years after the adoption of the Constitution, Nehru was visited by Andre Malraux in Delhi and asked what his greatest problem had

been during his years of power. Nehru replied, 'Creating a just state by just means', and, after a pause, 'Perhaps, too, creating a secular state in a religious society.'" (Nehru quoted in Madan, 87).

4. Indian Secularism Challenged

Tambiah begins his article on a somber note by stating that, "In India today, it is widely said in academic and journalistic writing...that the country is experiencing...a 'crisis of secularism', by which he meant a challenge to the Indian state's responsibility and mandate to preserve its 'Secular character'" (418). There are a number of critics that challenge the Indian ideal of secularism and claim it to be inadequate and partial. Two of these critiques shall be briefly dealt with.

a. Critique 1: Favoritism

These critics equate Indian secularism with minoritarianism. For example, it has been claimed that the "the Indian Constitution and political and legal traditions really favour the minority community of Muslims, giving them a privileged status, not enjoyed by the majority community of Hindus" (Sen, "Secularism and Its Discontents" 458). These critics equate Indian secularism with minoritarianism. They demonstrate that Muslims were given special freedom in being allowed to have their own 'personal' laws and 'special privileges'. Nehru in an attempt at cleansing Hindu society of its ills prohibited certain inegalitarian Hindu practices, while he remained large hearted in his refraining from infringing upon inegalitarian Muslim practices.

Rajeev Bhargava responds to this charge by holding that, "to promote religious liberty and equal citizenship the state may have to treat different religious communities differently. Indian secularism is committed to the notion of equal respect, which does not always entail equal treatment; rather it means

treating individuals or groups as equals. Equal respect, it follows, may entail differential treatment" (531).

b. Critique 2: Disrespecting the Cultural Heritage

Hindu Nationalism calls Nehruvian secularism a 'pseudo – secularism', out of touch with the people's religious, cultural and social traditions (Tambiah 418). It holds that Indian secularism ignores the belief that "India is, in essence, a 'Hindu' country… it would be culturally quite wrong to treat Hinduism as simply one of the various religions of India. It is Hinduism, in this view that makes India what it is" (Sen, "Secularism and Its Discontents" 460).

Here we realize that a number of arguments could be put forward to challenge the inherent inadequacies in this line of thought. Such a stand is confronted with the task of defining what it means to be a 'Hindu'. We know that a number of different beliefs, worldviews, value systems and traditions, theism, atheism and pantheism are included under the umbrella of Hinduism. A Hindu identity, although disputed upon, could possibly be inconclusive. Smith adds, "Furthermore, Hinduism lacks the ecclesiastical organization and centralized authority that would be essential for any kind of theocratic challenge to the secular state" (Sen, "Secularism and Its Discontents" 223). Additionally, claiming to call India a Hindu nation would be blatantly claiming to ignoring and disrespecting our historical and cultural heritage. Sen writes, "The cultural inheritance of contemporary India from its past combines Islamic influences with Hindu and other traditions, and the results of their interaction can be seen plentifully in literature, music, painting, architecture, and many other fields" ("Secularism and Its Discontents" 482). Thus, our cultural heritage displays influences from different religious traditions and diverse groups of people and secularism in the Indian context, recognizes and upholds these traditions.

5. Threats to Indian Secularism

The opposite of pluralism is fundamentalism that seeks to destroy possibilities and harmonious coexistence. It works in subtle and not so subtle ways, cajoling minds to follow divisive and communal agendas. The 'clear stream of reason' (Tagore in *Gitanjali*) meets with an impasse and what follows is bloodshed and destruction of the unified whole. In a country like India, there are bound to be differences and clashes in beliefs and value-systems. Rather, than looking at ways to bring communities together, some politicians seek to gain personally from these differences, highlighting and encouraging conflict. Religion becomes politicized and is made a tool to achieve political ends.

"Gandhi thus concurred with the need to separate the state from the patronage or support of the temple, church, and other institutions of worship" (Tambiah 439). Yet, in the name of Hindutva crowds demolished the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya on 6th Dec 1992 in defiance of the stay order of the supreme court in allowing the building of a Shri Ram Mandir on the site of the mosque. The "RSS, VHP, and Bajrang Dal, which, along with the BJP, had mobilized the *kar sevaks* to assemble in Ayodhya in the days preceding the demolition" (Tambiah 445). Today, RSS volunteers are encouraged to think of themselves as a brotherhood dedicated to the eventual creation of a Hindu *rashtra* or a Hindu nation.

Nandy writes, "two ministers of the central cabinet in India and a number of individuals in the higher echelons of the ruling party have been accused of not only encouraging, organizing and running a communal riot, but also of protecting the guilty" (331-332). Such divisive forces bring to fore the question of the possibility of a diverse people co-existing in free, respectful spaces. It shakes foundations and leaves citizens questioning the future and the validity of ideals they believed they practiced as a nation. Yet, we know that it is

not religious differences in themselves that cause strife and discontent, but some politicians who work on building divides that are used to achieve their own interests. Madan highlights Nehru's insightful comment, "As long ago as 1936 he said, 'The communal problem is not a religious problem, it has nothing to do with religion'" (301).

Dealing with the Babri Masjid demolition case, in a landmark judgment, the supreme court stated that, "No political party can simultaneously be a religious party. Politics and religion cannot be mixed. Any state government which pursues unsecular policies or unsecular course of action acts contrary to the constitutional mandate and renders itself amendable to action under Art. 356" (Justice S. C. Agarwal & Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy)" (Tambiah 449). Today BJP is in power on the development mandate, can it be forgotten however that it grew in popularity and won its first elections on the Hindutva agenda? Will the BJP allow the separation of religion from its politics? Madan ends his essay on *Secularism in India, Predicaments and Prospects* on a grave note stating that; "The future of India as a civic society, and the character of its polity in the years to come, are as yet far from settled issues. All those who cherish the values of democracy and cultural pluralism – of human freedom and dignity- can hardly afford to be complacent" (104-05).

Indian secularism is the ideal tool to allow for integration, and challenge fundamentalism. However, in the face of a relatively rigid social order and an "inegalitarian and hierarchical self-consciousness" there is an emotional disconnect between people and an uneasiness to be identified as similar ("An Alternative Vision" Parekh). A shared Indian identity and worldview that we can be proud of becomes a challenge in the face of gaping dissimilarities and inequalities. Madan writes that, "A Nehruvian answer to the question why secularism has run into difficulties in India, would then be that

the people are not yet ready for it. It requires a level of general education that is yet beyond them, and a liberal outlook on life and scientific temper which unfortunately they lack" ("Images of the World," 88).

6. Conclusion

Secularism in plurality remains just '*an*' Indian worldview, one of many 'Indian worldviews', an ideal that fails to take flight. Like a human person, a country too is shackled by her own 'givens', haunted by her own memories and limited in her own possibilities. Parekh states that "Like personal identity, national identity involves a delicate and judicious balance of continuity and change" ("Defining India's Identity," 2). A country's worldview is also formed when its citizens allow for practices and definitions of who they are, to be accepted without critical engagement. It is enlightened citizens who become the guardians of secularism. Parekh states that political "freedom is not just a choice between available alternatives; it is also about determining the range of these alternatives. We must reclaim the country from those who seek to hijack it allegedly in our interest" (Defining India's Identity 14). An Indian worldview in the final analysis depends on the definition that its citizens, as participatory, give to it.

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