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| **Secularism in India**  Secularism in India has very different meaning and implications. The word secularism has never been used in Indian context in the sense in which it has been used in Western countries i.e. in the sense of atheism or purely this worldly approach, rejecting the other-worldly beliefs.   India is a country where religion is very central to the life of people. India’s age-old philosophy as expounded in Hindu scriptures called Upanishad is sarva dharma samabhava, which means equal respect for all religions. The reason behind this approach is the fact that India has never been a mono-religious country. Even before the Aryan invasion India was not a mono-religious country.  There existed before Aryan invasion numerous tribal cults from north-western India to Kanya Kumari most of whom happened to be Dravidians. Thus certain languages in North West of Pakistan even today contain some words of Dravidian origin. However, with the invasion of Aryans people of Dravidian origin were driven down south and today we find all Dravidian people in four southern states of India.  Aryans brought new religion based on Vedas and Brahmins dominated intellectual life of north India. But a section of Brahmins also migrated to south and evolved new cults marrying Vedic cults with Dravidian ones. Thus it is said that Hindu Indians worship more than 33 hundred thousand gods and goddesses.   Thus even before advent of Christianity and Islam India was multi-religious in nature. Christianity and Islam added more religious traditions to existing Indian traditions. Thus it would be correct to say that India is bewilderingly diverse country in every respect – religious, cultural, ethnic and caste.  India is one country where caste rigidity and concept of untouchability evolved and still plays a major role in religious, social and cultural matters. Caste dynamics in Indian life, even in Christian and Islamic societies, plays larger than life role. Since most of the conversions to Christianity and Islam took place from lower caste Hindus, these two world religions also developed caste structure. There are lower caste churches and mosques in several places.  Under feudal system there was no competition between different religious traditions as authority resided in sword and generally there were no inter-religious tensions among the people of different religions. They co-existed in peace and harmony though at times inter-religious controversies did arise. However, there never took place bloodshed in the name of religion.  There was also tradition of tolerance between religions due to state policies of Ashoka and Akbar. Ashoka’s edicts clearly spell out policy of religious tolerance and Akbar used to hold inter-religious dialogue among followers of different religions and he also followed the policy of tolerance and even withdrew the jizya tax (poll tax on Hindus which was an irritant. Thus both Ashok and Akbar have place of great significance in religious life of India. No doubt they have been designated as ‘great’ i.e. they are referred to as Ashoka the Great and Akbar the Great.  Also, India had Sufi and Bhakti traditions in Islam and Hinduism respectively. Both Sufism and Bhakti traditions were based on respect for different religions. The poorer and lower caste Hindus and Muslims were greatly influenced by these traditions. Unlike ‘ulama and Brahmans the Sufi and Bhakti saints were highly tolerant and open to the truth in other faiths. They never adopted sectarian attitudes and were never involved in power struggles. They kept away from power structures.  Nizamuddin Awliya, a great Sufi saints of 13-14th century saw the times of five Sultans but never paid court to a single one. When the last Sultan of his life sent a message requesting him to come to the court, he refused. Then he sent the message that if Nizamuddin does not come to my court, I (the Sultan) will come to his hospice. He replied that there are two doors to my hospice; if Sultan enters by one, I will leave by the other. Such was the approach of Sufis and Saints to power structure of their time.   Dara Shikoh, was heir apparent to Shajahan, the Moghul Emperor but had sufi bent of mind and was also a great scholar of Islam and Hinduism. He wrote a book Majmau’l Bahrayn (Co-mingling of Two Oceans Islam and Hinduism) and quoting from Hindu and Islamic scriptures showed both religions had similar teachings. The difference was of languages (Arabic and Sanskrit) and not teachings. Thus Dara Shikoh also contributed richly to inter-religious harmony in India.  Most of the conversions to Islam and Christianity took place through Sufis and missionaries with a spirit of devotion. Even today in India most of the Christians and Muslims belong to these lower caste strata. Even centuries after conversion their caste status and economic status has not changed.  **EMERGENCE OF COMPETITIVE POLITICS** However, the entire social, economic and political scenario changed after advent of the British rule in 19th century. Differences between Hindu and Muslim elite began to emerge for various reasons – socio-cultural, economic and political. The British rulers adopted the policy of divide and rule, distorted medieval Indian history to make Muslim rulers appear as tyrants to the Hindu elite. This distorted history was taught in new school system, which was established by the British rulers.  Also there developed economic and political competition between Hindu and Muslim elite leading to communal tensions. The Hindu elite was quick to adjust to new realities and took to modern education and commerce and industries. The Muslim ruling elite resisted new secular education system and also could not take to commerce and industry. They were thus left far behind in the race for progress.  Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had a perceptive mind. He understood importance of modern education system and founded Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College (MAO College) which became fulcrum of modern education for North Indian Muslim elite. The orthodox Ulama, however, vehemently opposed modern secular education and declared Syed Ahmad Khan as kafir (unbeliever) as he was supporting modern secular education.  Initially Hindu and Muslim elite cooperated with each other and Syed Ahmad Khan always emphasised Hindu-Muslim unity but the competitive nature of political and economic power drove wedge between the two elites and communal tensions began to emerge. When Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, it adopted secularism as its anchor sheet in view of multi-religious nature of Indian society.   India could not head towards Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) as India was not merely a Hindu country. In pre-partition period Muslims were 25% besides Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains. However, Hindu society was highly fragmented society and far from monolithic. The dalits (low caste people) refused to call themselves as Hindus (subsequently their leader B.R.Ambedkar) adopted Buddhism in protest).  Muslims too, though not monolithic, had semblance of unity and this was used by communal Hindus to try to unite Hindus as one community. However, it is also true that the Hindu elite was more confident than the Muslim elite in the emerging new power-structure and felt more secure. Muslim elite felt less secure and they hitched their wagon with the British rulers. They wanted to share power-sharing arrangement before the British left the country.  Thus secularism in India was more a political than philosophical phenomenon. The Indian National Congress adopted secularism, not as this worldly philosophy but more as a political arrangement between different religious communities. As power-sharing arrangement could not be satisfactorily worked out between the Hindu and Muslim elite the country was divided into two independent states of India and Pakistan, Muslim majority areas of North-West going to Pakistan.  After independence and partition a large body of Muslims were left in India and hence the leaders like Gandhi and Nehru preferred to keep India secular in the sense that Indian state will have no religion though people of India will be free both in individual and corporate sense to follow any religion of their birth or adoption. Thus India remained politically secular but otherwise its people continued to be deeply religious.  In India right from the British period main contradiction was not between religious and secular but it was between secular and communal. In the western world main struggle was between church and state and church and civil society but in India neither Hinduism nor Islam had any church-like structure and hence there never was any such struggle between secular and religious power structure.  The main struggle was between secularism and communalism. The communal forces from among Hindus and Muslims mainly fought for share in power though they used their respective religions for their struggle for power.   Even after partition communal problem did not die. It raised its head again within few years. The RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh), which is mainspring of Hindu right remained in existence and at its instance a new political outfit, which was communal in nature came into existence called Jan Sangh. In independent India the Jan Sangh was mainspring of communal problem and it kept on denouncing secularism as western concept alien to the Indian ethos.  Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India was great champion of secularism and secular politics. Theoretically speaking the Congress Party was also committed to secularism. However, the Congress Party consisted of several members and leaders whose secularism was in doubt. But it was due to Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and B.R.Ambedkar that India committed itself to secularism and its Constitution was drafted on secular lines.  Secularism in India, as pointed out before, meant equal respect for all religions and cultures and non-interference of religion in the government affairs. Also, according to the Indian Constitution no discrimination will be made on the basis of caste, creed, gender and class. Similarly all citizens of India irrespective of ones religion, caste or gender have right to vote. According to articles 14 to 21 all will enjoy same rights without any discrimination on any ground.  According to Article 25 all those who reside in India are free to confess, practice and propagate religion of one’s choice subject of course to social health and law and order. Thus even conversion to any religion of ones choice is a fundamental right. But the BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party) and RSS are opposed to all this. According to them there should be Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) in India and Muslims and Sikhs should be secondary citizens without any political right.  Since the BJP is a political party it cannot say so openly and publicly. It also has to take pledge of secularism for contesting election. But since it is integral part of RSS ideology it is also responsible for RSS beliefs. In fact all secular forces in India consider the BJP as a communal party. It always takes anti-minority stance and accuses the Congress, supposedly a secular party, of ‘appeasement’ of minorities. It also describes the Congress and other secular parties as indulging in ‘pseudo-secularism’.  The RSS and BJP also known as the Sangh Parivar, not only reject secularism but provoke violence against minorities. Since independence several major communal riots have taken pace in India. The first such riot took place in Jabalpur in Central India and last major riot took place in Gujarat in Western India in 2002 in which more than 2000 Muslims were killed and several women were raped. When the Gujarat carnage took place in 2002 BJP was ruling over Gujarat.  According to the filed evidence Chief Minister of BJP party Mr. Narendra Modi was involved along with the entire governmental machinery in the carnage and on this basis the US Government denied him visa in early 2005. The BJP was directly involved in high pitch propaganda against the historic mosque called Babri Mosque and ultimately demolished it claiming it to be a birth -place of Lord Ram, a Hindu god.   Mr. Lal Krishna Advani who was then the President of BJP spearheaded the campaign against Babri Mosque and the mosque was demolished right in his presence. He later became Home Minister in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) ministry. He is known as hardliner Hindu. Shri Vajpayee who became Prime Minister of India in NDA Government, is known as the moderate face of BJP though one can say there is hardly any ideological difference between the two.  **SECULAR AND UNSECULAR PEOPLE** Now question arises how many Indian people are secular and how many unsecular? Since secularism does not mean being this worldly in India, one cannot say how many are believers and how many unbelievers? On the contrary in Indian context what it means how many people are against people of minority religions like Islam and Christianity and how many people respect them.  In fact in India an overwhelming majority of people are religious but tolerant and respect other religions and are thus ‘secular’ in Indian context. Even Sufis and Bhakti Saints are considered quite secular in that sense. The followers of RSS and the BJP are very few, not more than 5-10 per cent. India has remained secular and democratic for its entire post-independence period (more than 58 years).  There is no doubt India has witnessed much communal violence but only due to involvement of RSS and BJP and occasionally the Congress in some places. Communalism is a powerful political weapon used by politicians of different hues. The Hindu masses are generally not to be blamed for such violence. However, few fanatics under the influence of RSS ideology are involved along with anti-social elements.   It is also true that on certain major issues like birth place of Ram people get misled by powerful communal propaganda and may side with the BJP but that does not mean they are for violence and bloodshed. If they are properly informed they withdraw their support. However, secular forces are not as pro-active as communal forces are. Communal forces are actively working spreading communal poison round the year whereas secular forces become active only after communal violence and once peace is established they become nonchalant. It is their nonchalance which, benefits communal forces.  The communal forces thus came to power through false propaganda but were exposed during this five-year rule and were voted out of power as they were perceived to be behind communal carnage in Gujarat in 2002. No less than a person like Vajpayee, the former Prime Minister of BJP, himself admitted that people rejected us because we were held responsible for the Gujarat carnage.  This confession on the part of ex-Prime Minister of BJP itself clearly establishes that people of India are by and large secular and do not like killing of others just because they are not Hindus. Not only the BJP lost the election but also its allies, which are otherwise considered secular. The BJP is today being deserted by its former allies as they realised that association with communal dispensation is not approved by the people of India.  There are some rationalists and secularists who reject religion in its entirety but such rationalists or secularists are extremely few. Though there are no census figures available but one can safely say they are less than 0.1% in India. Also, there are extremely orthodox people who exhibit rigidity and intolerance towards other faiths though of course not on communal grounds but on the grounds of religious orthodoxy but they too are in miniscule minority. Tolerance in India among people of all religions is widely prevalent. It is perhaps due to influence of ancient Indian doctrine that truth is one but is manifested in different forms, and on the other hand due to the Sufi doctrine of wahdat al-wujud (Real Being is one) that implies that there is only One Real Being and all of us are mere manifestations of that real being.   As the ancient Hindu doctrine leads to inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence so does the Sufi doctrine. For peaceful co-existence another Sufi doctrine of sulh-i-kul i.e. total peace and peace with all is very important. Sufism left deep influence on Hindu masses as much as on Muslim masses.   Thus the real spirit of secularism in India is all inclusiveness, religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence. However, it is politics, which proved to be divisive and not religion. It is not religious leaders by and large (with few exceptions) who divide but politicians who seek to mobilise votes on grounds of primordial identities like religion, caste and ethnicity.  In a multi-religious society, if politics is not based on issues but on identities, it can prove highly divisive. Politicians are tempted to appeal to primordial identities rather than to solve problems. The former case proves much easier. The medieval society in India was thus more religiously tolerant as it was non-competitive. The modern Indian society, on the other hand, has proved to be more divisive as it is based on competition. This competition becomes more acute if development is uneven and unjust.  Thus in case of India one can say by and large it is secular in as much as it is religiously plural and tolerant but there are politically divisive forces quite active and create communal pressure and widen the gap between religious community thus bringing Indian secularism under threat. *(Secular Perspective)* |

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