

NEW INSIGHTS ON INDIAN SECULARISM

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Abstract. The concepts of secularism and religious freedom were significant for the public and leaders both before and after the independence. Among leaders, there were many who belonged to the Indian National Congress (INC), such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, B. R. Ambedkar, but also staunch supporters of “Hindu Rashtra”: M. S. Golwalkar, Veer Savarkar, and many others. In 1928, the right to freedom of conscience, profession and practice of religion was explicitly included in the Nehru Report in order to prevent a community dominate over another. In its original meaning, secularism denotes anti-theism, but not atheism. It was a philosophical and ethical movement, negatively religious, which introduced science, technology and rationalism in the society and generated the basis of a modern secular state. During this process, it had to oppose and struggle against the clergy and vested forces of society. Therefore, the fundamentalist communal onslaughts are not secularism and secularization. During the struggle for freedom and thereafter, the Indian leaders made secularism the mantra of the nation, though each of them expressed apprehensive views in different manners, representing the aspirations of different social strata. Especially Gandhi and Nehru preferred to keep India secular in the sense that if the Indian state will have no religion, the people will be free to follow any religion of their birth or adoption. Secularism in India meant equal respect for all religions and cultures and non-interference of religion in government affairs. This paper aims to go through the different shades of Indian secularism, as found in the Constitution and the public opinion as well. The transitional phase of socio-political phenomenon and diversities in society have made the situation complex and challenging in this fast-changing global scenario of which India is an essential part.

Keywords: secularism, India, constitution, society, religion

INTRODUCTION

India has been declared a secular state in its written constitution but the efforts to secure the inclusion of the word “secular” in the fun-

damental law of the land did not find support from those who drafted its articles. The coming of the so-called “partition” emphasized the great importance of secularism. A large Muslim minority, of one-tenth of the population of India, continued to be citizens. Secularism became the mantra of the Indian nation, a nation exhausted by “partition” and sectarian riots and, above all, by the assassination of Gandhi. In these circumstances, a secular constitution under which all religions could enjoy an equal freedom and all citizens’ equal rights became inevitable. This constitution did not raise any “wall of separation” between religion and the State. While prohibiting religion-based discrimination between the citizens, it did not prevent the state from participating in the people’s religious affairs. It enabled the State to generally “regulate or restrict secular activity associated with religion” (*The Hindustan Times*, August 23, 2003). First, under Jawaharlal Nehru and later under his successors in the Congress Party, the concept of a secular nation was officially adopted as a path to political modernity and national integration. Unlike the West, where secularism came largely out of the conflict between the Church and the State, in India it was conceived as a system meant to sustain religious and cultural pluralism.

The word “secular” is not written in the Constitution, but this does not mean that those who wrote it had any doubt about the Indian state as a secular one. They properly debated about this subject and the religious freedom of the individual. While this fundamental law has been drafted based on secularism principles or *Dharma Nirapekshita*, society stepped into religion. A religious feeling governs our mode of thinking, and we consider the religious festivals and rituals as part of our day-to-day life. In comparison to other countries of the world, here, secularism has a very different meaning. In this regard, Jawaharlal wrote in his autobiography that “no word perhaps in any language is more likely to be interpreted in different ways by different people as the word religion”. That being the case, secularism - a concept that evolved in relation to religion – cannot have the same connotation for all. During the discussions

in the Constituent Assembly on the fundamental rights related to religion, the idea of secularism was extensively pressed into service by the members, as the handiest tool to substantiate various viewpoints, often diametrically opposed. The members of the Constituent Assembly had no doubt that the notion of “secular state” and the terms “secular” and “secularism” refers to the constitutional concept of equality and freedom for all religions, at that they should infuse every provision of fundamental rights.

Several members of the Constituent Assembly, including K. T. Shah, H. V. Kamath, Tajamul Hussain, Lakshmi Kanta Maitra and Loknath Mishra, presented their views and possible modifications. K. T. Shah proposed a new Article 18-A to be inserted under the heading “rights relating to religion”, which would emphasize: “The State in India being secular shall have no concern with any religion, creed or profession of faith; and shall observe an attitude of absolute neutrality in all matters relating to the religion of any class of its citizens or other persons in the Union”. He also added: “All I wish to say is that with the actual profession of faith or belief, the state should have no concern” (*Constituent Assembly Debates*, Vol. VII). Moreover, Tajamul Hussain wanted that caste names, signs and dress be given away. “We should not be a secular state and be recognised by our dress”. While H. V. Kamath warned the Assembly not to adopt any religion, as it would split the country, he made it clear that by this he does not mean that the State should be anti-religious or irreligious. According to him, a secular state is neither a Godless nor an irreligious or anti-religious one. He even advocated in favour of promoting spiritual training in educational institutions. In his turn, Lakshmi Kanta Maitra stressed on the fact that it should be no discrimination whatsoever on the ground of religion, which means that no particular religion in the State should receive any State patronage. On the other hand, he accepted the fact that even in a secular state there is the necessity for religion.

GANDHI ON SECULARISM

Gandhi and Nehru had different views on secularism due to the difference between them regarding religion in general. From the beginning to the end of his life, Gandhi was a devoted religious person. It was religion that played a central role in making the Mahatma. To him, religion was the basis of life, for it teaches us how to behave well and shows the way in acquiring deliverance. Gandhi believed that only religion makes a man be a man, in the real meaning of this concept. Nehru, on the contrary, was not so overwhelmed by religion. His ideas were the product of a deep introspection. He thought of religion as a means, not an end. He was a rational and utilitarian thinker to whom political freedom and material development implied something more than the spiritual and moral side of things (Kapoor and Singh 2005, 503). In other words, Gandhi was by his nature a religious man whereas Nehru had a scientifically oriented mind. Gandhi openly praised Hindu religion, while Nehru rarely indulged in such advocacy. Gandhi repeatedly stressed the virtues of religion but practically overlooked its vices, while Nehru did the exact opposite (Sharma and Sharma 1966, 305). However, a close examination also reveals that they have some common views regarding its basic components. Both of them were not fundamentalists in their conceptions, but secular, and believed that religion is a good way to hold people together. They did not believe in state religion and were against the state aid to religious bodies. Moreover, they both regarded religion as a private matter and teaching of ethics as a major concern of the state. Gandhi's secularism implied the following (Chandra, 2002):

1. Separation of religion from politics, economy, education and culture. In his view, the first of them is a personal affair.
2. Neutrality of the State in respect to all faiths.
3. Treatment of all citizens as equal and the absence of discrimination in favour of or against citizens on grounds of their religion.

4. A clear-cut opposition to communalism

Before considering the Gandhian view on secularism, it is necessary to know that he often used the word religion in two different senses: one, in its denominational sense, that is, in terms of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc.; the other in the traditional meaning of dharma, divine moral order, ethics, the moral code which guides a person's life, or social order. Asserting that politics should be based on religion, he clearly meant that it should have a moral foundation in dharma, not in religion in its denominational form, or the sectarian form, in terms of sectional or sectarian beliefs. Therefore, there was no need for separation between the State and religion. He was of the view that the state, while giving fair treatment to all religions, could still maintain an equal distance from them as well as from the religious communities (Marhaz 1946, 121). Gandhi, a deeply religious man, saw a merit and truth in all religions and felt that any form of political association exclusively based on adherence to a particular religion is worse than undemocratic.

Gandhi emphasised the close connection between religion and politics. In his case, his patriotism, his deep social commitment and strong moral character were based on deeply religious beliefs. There is no politics without religion, he said, as "religion is the basis on which all life structures have to be erected if life is to be real". Between 1920 and 1921, for instance, he repeatedly referred to the Non-Cooperation Movement as "a religious, purifying movement and religious effort". But, for him, this close connection between religion and politics was possible only because, in his vision, politics had to be based on morality. In his opinion, any religion is a source of morality, in the Indian meaning of dharma. No secular person would disagree that politics must be moral and that this sense of morality can be absorbed in various ways and forms.

However, during the 1940s Gandhi began to change his linguistic formulations regarding the relationship between religion and politics because he saw that communalists were using religion in its

organised, denominational or doctrinal form. More exactly, they were not using it as *dharmā* or a code of morality, but in the form of Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism to promote communal division and demand religion-based States. As a consequence, Gandhi began to assert that religion and politics should be kept separate and the first should be treated as a private concern of the individual. In his speeches from 1942, 1946 and 1947 he asserted that religion is a personal matter and should have no place in politics. In September 1946, he told a missionary: “If I were a dictator, religion and the State would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it”. Likewise, in 1947, he stressed that the State must be secular and oppose religious instruction as part of the curriculum.

NEHRU AND OTHERS

Explaining his view on religion, Nehru stated: “Probably it consists of the inner development of the individual”. There can be no doubt that this inner development strongly influences the outer environment. But it is equally obvious that the outer development influences the inner development (Nehru 2001, 379). Unlike Gandhi, Nehru held that regardless of the characteristics of different religions, economic development and scientific culture provides a sufficient basis for secular tolerance. He was an agnostic who believed that the State has nothing to do with religion (*The Hindu*, January 21, 2003). Also, he considered that the creation of India as a secular state may be accepted in the words of Chester Bowles as “one of his greatest achievements”. Nehru was especially concerned with transforming India from a “caste-ridden society” in which communalism constitutes a major threat to all values that he cherished to a state which includes people of all religions (Smith 1958, 147). The government of a country like India, Nehru declared, “with many religions that have secured great and develop followings for generations can never function satisfactorily in the modern age ex-

cept on a secular basis" (*The Hindu*, September 13, 1950). Just like Gandhi and Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad expressed his view in favour of making India a secular state.

In addition, the Indian views and expressions on secularism were influenced by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Dr S. Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda. Explaining the concept of secularism, Ambedkar said during a debate: 'It does not mean that we shall not take into consideration the religious sentiments of the people. All that a secular state means is that this Parliament shall not be competent to impose any particular religion upon the rest of the people. That is the only limitation that the constitution recognises' (Pylee 1947, 127). In India, no one can deny the importance of religion in personal and social life. Religion is the major concern of man. Each man has religious quests, which makes him a restless creature even beyond the satisfaction of his physical needs. Religion revolves around man's faith in supernatural forces. Thus, President Radhakrishnan emphasised the significance of secularism in the following words: "When India is said to be a secular state, it does not mean that we reject the reality of an unseen spirit or the relevance of religion to life or that we exalt irreligion. It does not mean that secularism itself becomes a position religion or that the state assumes divine prerogatives. Although faith in the supreme is the basic principle of the Indian tradition, the Indian state will not identify itself with or be controlled by any particular religion". India has adopted the concepts of positive secularism and composite Indian culture, concepts which allow differences but eliminate division and bring forward the harmony of unity in diversity. When positive secularism accompanies the practice of multiple religions, it helps to promote national integration and communal harmony (Rao 1984, 61-63). The essence of Vivekananda's teaching on religion is the universality of God and his accessibility both in form and without form, the divinity of man, as well as respect and understanding for all religions.

HINDU-ORIENTED VIEWS

In a multi-religious society, if politics is not directed on problems but on identities, it becomes divisive. The medieval society of India was religiously tolerant and non-competitive. The modern Indian society has proved to be more divisive as it is based on competition. Even before the independence, the supporters of Hinduism and Hindutva, the RSS/VHP/BJP, sought the formation of a “Hindu Rashtra”. Among them were V. D. Savarkar, M. S. Golwalkar, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. They wanted to construct an independent India based on the religious denomination of its people. This vision had a twofold expression. One was the demand for a “Hindu Rashtra” advanced by the RSS, and the other the creation of an Islamic state advanced by the Muslim League. While the latter achieved its objective through the cruel partition of our country, the former was rejected by the majority of Indians. Savarkar, in his presidential address to the Hindu Mahasabha from 1938, said: “India cannot be assumed today to be a unitary and homogeneous nation but, on the contrary, there are two nations, namely the Hindus and the Muslims” (Yechury, 2003). Thus, in the pre-independence period, the three visions of what should constitute independent India were voiced by Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League and the Indian National Congress. The last wanted that India to be a democratic secular Republic. In the struggle for freedom, while the Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League remained poles apart, the INC continued to adhere to the secular spirit.

Thus, opposed to Mahatma Gandhi’s tolerance was Savarkar’s violent Hinduism. Both Veer Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar wanted India to be a sovereign Hindu State. In *Hindutva* from 1923, Savarkar stated: “We, Hindus, are bound together by the tie of the common homage that we pay to our great civilization - our Hindu culture. (...) We are one and the same because we are a nation, a race, and own a common Sanskrit civilization”. He reiterated his view in 1937 and 1938 when he said that we, Hindus, are a nation by ourselves

because of the religious, racial-cultural and historical affinities (Noorani, 2003). The same sentiment was expressed by Golwalkar in his *Bunch of Thoughts*. He spoke about the concept of cultural nationalism, as opposed to territorial nationalism. Then, in his treatise *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, he pleaded that the non-Hindus from Hindustan must adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion and not to promote other ideas apart from the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, that is, of the Hindu nation. They also should renounce their separate existence to merge in the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen's rights. However, the views and visions made public by Savarkar, Golwalkar and others did not find much appreciation at that time. In fact, as Gandhi said, we need religious values in politics but certainly not the politicization of religion. A state should never prioritize a particular religion at the expense of others, particularly in a secular country. India is a secular country as per the declaration in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution made at the time of independence, on January 26, 1950.

SECULARISATION OF POLITICAL CULTURE

In the 1980s and 1990s, they were violent secessionist movements in Punjab and Kashmir and an upsurge in the use of religious symbols and terminology in politics (Mohanty 1989, 1219). Afterwards, secularism has been challenged by the ascendance of the forces of communalism, fundamentalism and religious revivalism, accompanied by violence. The communal riots continued to act unabatedly. Meerut, Bombay, Bhiwandi, Ahmedabad, Surat and Hyderabad and most recently, Gujrat, are examples of them. The ostensible reason for this fury was the burning of a train coach that was carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya. Fifty-nine people including women and children died in the fire. The post-Godhra incidents

in 2002, communal revolts accompanied by arson, theft, and murders in the urban and rural areas of Gujrat, as well as in the rural areas of Haryana and Maharashtra, have affected the image of Indian secularism and the reputation of Hinduism as a tolerant faith. As a climax, during the conference at Bangalore from May 2002, the RSS passed a resolution according to which the security of the minority community should depend on the goodwill of the majority (Ashok 2007, 607). The resolution was seen as an open threat against the minority, though the spokesman of the RSS tried to explain that it was not meant to be so.

In consequence, the political culture of India is still unstable and underdeveloped. Political culture depends on the people's attitudes, emotions and beliefs towards the political system of the country, whether it is homogeneous or heterogeneous. Besides, it is not a static entity but dynamic and, therefore, it envisages different needs of the political system inside or outside. A pragmatic orientation in this direction is known as the secularisation of political culture. The secularisation of political culture is the process whereby men become increasingly rational, analytical and empirical in their political actions. It is the process of increasing the political awareness of the masses, enabling them to have growing information about their political system and their role as political actors of it (Khobragade 2007, 38). The secularisation of political culture has two attributes. Firstly, the pragmatic and empirical orientation. Secondly, the movement from diffuseness towards specificity. With the passage of time, the beliefs and values of the peoples change. The political socialisation through its agencies like family, schools and educational institutes, peer groups, working and informal relations, mass media, government and political parties or leadership have a significant role in the strengthening of secularisation. Within the political systems of different states of the world, developed or in development, political culture promotes political stability and social change.

The political culture of India, like in the case of other developing countries, is in the formative stage and continues to evolve. It is a

mixture of historical, geographical, socio-economic structures, contemporary and ancient social structures, old and new political ideologies and, more importantly, the practice and tradition of political apathy and non-violence. In the Indian political culture and its commitment to religious values are strong. The political and socio-economic changes produced a response along caste lines. Although the Constitution outlawed castes, political institutions continue dividing the country into many castes and sub-castes. As a result, the Indian political system has become the hub of irrational politicians who manipulate the state machinery to advance their personal power and economic gain by disseminating the seeds of social conflict. The secessionist movements, caste assertions, Hindus nationalism and majority-minority schism on cultural identities has been entrenched, being inspired by political parties and leaders for electoral gain. The politics of Hindus-Muslims - Dalits vote bank and more importantly the blame-game become the part and parcel of the Indian political culture. The political system of India is facing many problems such as corruption, extensive centralisation, political criminalisation, declining secularism and the rise of national chauvinism based on religion. The Indian political culture has failed to prevent communal violence, ethnic conflicts and political insurgency. Secularisation does not mean that religious institutions will cease to exist. It only means that they will cease to encompass or regulate all the other institutions of society.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE ACTIVITIES

Unlike the West, where the philosophy of secularism came into existence as a result of the struggle for power between the religions and the state, secularism in the Indian context should imply respect for pluralism and a non-coercive and a voluntary recourse to change. The respect for diversity not only embodies the democratic spirit. It is the real guarantee for unity. No democratic society is allowed to downgrade diversity and pluralism in the name of unity.

Shortly after gaining its independence, India adopted a new constitution which provided the basis for a secular state and a new concept of citizenship. Secular ethics can be strengthened only if the acts of vandalism are sternly dealt with and the guilty are made to pay for them. With secularism, which insists on the inalienable rights of citizens and the rule of law, it will be easier to mount public pressure against sectarian killers and those who promote hatred. Secularism rests on the feeling that we share a common history. It is not only the basic tenet of India's ancient civilization but also the hallmark of the modern age of globalisation. The new age requires us not to waste our time in religious disputes but rather move ahead by using science and technology to make our lives better, richer and fuller. It is time for researchers and analysts to seek new ways to make society more rational and directed towards common welfare.

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