

Origin and Evaluation of Secularism in India

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ABSTRACT: The present paper purports to examine and analyse the concept of secularism in the context of world in general and India in particular. India is a secular state in the same way as it is a democratic state. Secularism is the only way of development in plural society like ours. It is not a new phenomenon in India. We find its roots in the reign of Ashok the Great. But the occurrence of communal riots in the recent year indicates that the Indian govt has failed to establish a secular state. Communal politics, religious militancy, poverty. Illiteracy and political corruption are posing serious threats to secularism. But the present turmoil will certainly be over if sincere efforts with more stable secular policy are made, Majority of the problems will automatically be solved and the country will become an abode of peace, progress and prosperity.

Key Words: Secularism, Separation, Discrimination, Freedom, Religion.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"SECULARISM" is a very popular word in the Indian political system next to democracy. In spite of the fact that India is considered and invariably accepted as a secular state, yet secularism is not a settled issue.¹ Secularism constitutes the best principle of civilised living as the life in the society based on equality and freedom for all communities and nationalities living in society.² It advocates absence of discrimination based on religion, culture, language, colour, caste, place of birth and sex.³

The concept of secularism as it has come to India from the west as well as from the east, which implies a separation that exist between state and religion. As per the concept, no religion will be considered as the state religion and no one will be discriminated against on the ground of religion. The American Constitution gave emphasis to state and religion because if the state possesses both religious and secular power it will be dangerous to Individual freedom. Apart from this in India right to freedom of religion is a fundamental rights, the denial of this freedom is a violation of the basic principle of democracy.

II. ORIGIN OF SECULARISM

Secularism as a concept is very deep rooted in the history of India. It has been existed since Ancient times. The people of India have been practising different religions and the ruler by and large abstained from imposing any particular religion on the people. Following by Mughal and colonial era, Ashok about 2200years ago and Harsh vardhan about 1400years ago accepted and patronised different religions. Ellora cave temple built next to each other between 5th and 10th centuries show a co-existence of religions and a spirit of acceptance of different faith⁴. There was also tradition of tolerance between religions due to state policies of various kings since time immemorial from Gupta kings to Ashok and Akbar. Many religious sect and practices kept away rigid intolerant forms. But instances of forced conversion to Islam during tyrant rule of Aurangzeb and other rulers and imposition of religious tax jizya are also known.⁵

India is a country where Religion is very central to the life of people. India's age old philosophy as expounded in Hindu scripture called Upanishad is Sarva Dharma samabhava which means respect to all belief system. The basic trait of Sanatan dharma is what keeps India together despite the fact that India has not been a mono religious country for over two million of Hindu Nationalist school of thought, also proclaim that with Sanatan dharma being the spirit of India, The very concept of western secularism is reluctant and badly imposed.⁶ The history of the Indian secularism begins with the protest movement in the 5th century B.C. The three main protest movements were by Charvakas a secularist and materialistic philosophical movement, Buddhism and Jainism. All three of them rejected the authority of Vedas and any importance of belief in a deity.⁷ However it was in the 18th century when the British East India Company began to gain total control over India that the idea of secularism began to have impact on Indian mind. Until than religi on was considered to be inseparable from political and social life. On the other hand, the British codified laws pertaining to practices

within religions on the sub continents. To this effect they institute separate law for Hindus, Muslim, Christians, Sikhs, Paresis and others as part of their divide and rule policy.⁸

MAHATMA GANDHI ON SECULARISM

Personally Mahatma Gandhi was religious. To, Gandhi ji Religion was a human institution made by human ingenuity to solve practical affairs as well as spiritual matters. For Mahatma Gandhi, religion in intractably woven into the fabric of Indian life. He once said those who thought that religion had nothing to do with politics, understood neither religion nor politics. According to Gandhi Ji-“Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics” (1942).
“Religion is a personal affair of each Individual, it must not mixed up with politics or national affairs” (1947).⁹

NEHERU’S CONCEPT ON SECULARISM

Jawaharlal Neheru wrote to Mahatma Gandhi in 1933-“Religion is not familiar ground for me, and as I have grown older, I have definitely drifted away from it.”¹⁰ He believed that religion itself was irrelevant, backward and superstitious. He never placed his faith in religion.¹¹

Neheru looked at secularism from the humanist and scientific point of view. He looked at secularism as a great cementing force of the diverse people of India. While Gandhi ji stressed on the equality of all religions and religious pluralism. Neheru was more inclined towards modernity of enlightenment. Neheru was the first in the sub-continent to accept the western concept of secularism as opposed to Gandhiji and Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad who spoke of Secularism from the perspective of Religion. Again he says “Equal protection by the state to all religion, He wanted a Secular state to be one that protect all religions but does not favour one at the expense of others and does not itself adopt any religion as the state religion.”¹²

III. USE OF THE TERM IN THE CONSTITUTION

Till 42nd Amendment to the constitution, neither in the preamble, nor in any article of the constitution, there was any direct reference to the term ‘secularism’ to determine the character of the Indian state. Moreover a number of efforts to secure the inclusion of the word ‘secular’ in the fundamental law of the land did not find favour with the framer of the constitution.¹³

Prof K.T Shah, a member of the constituent Assembly, urged in the Assembly “I do not see why the term could not be added or inserted in the constitution itself, once again to guard against any possibility of misunderstanding or misappropriations.”¹⁴ The word secularism was introduced in the constitution first time in the 27th year of Republic. It was added in the preamble at the time of 42nd Amendment.¹⁵

No doubt the word secular is not written in the constitution but it does not imply that the founding father of the constitution had any doubt about the nature of the constitution being secular. In spite of the absence of the word in the constitution, during its formation, some relevant provision is there which gave emphasis to secularism.

1. NO STATE RELIGION IN INDIA :- India is a country where Hindus forms a vast majority of population. Hinduism is not given any special place in the society. All religions are given equal recognition and protection. There is no state religion in India. The constitution of India under Article 25 unequivocally assures freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion. The scope of this article is very wide. It declares ‘The state Govt or the central govt cannot aid any religion or give preference to any religion against another.’ Therefore it is obliged to be absolutely secular in character. As per article 25 it not only guarantees freedom of religion to the people of India but also to Aliens.¹⁶

No doubt, in the constituent Assembly there was general agreement to accept the word secular to profess and practice but there was some opposition to the inclusion of the word ‘Propagate’ particularly to the Hindu member in the Assembly totally disagree with the view that the propagation of religion should be considered a legitimate aspect of religious freedom. But the overwhelming majority members did not agree with this view. In this context K.M Munsu observe even if the word were not there I am sure that, under the article freedom of speech in which the constitution guarantee it will be open to any religious community to persuade other people to join their faith.¹⁷

2. NO TAX FOR PROMOTION OF RELIGION: - Secular character of Indian polity is further evident from article 27 of the constitution which provides that no person shall be compelled to pay any tax for the promotion and maintenance of any particular religion or religions. It means the state will not force anybody to pay such a tax. But it may pay over to such communities. If the communities agree to pay a particular tax for the purpose of imparting religious education.¹⁸

3. NO RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION: -

In the constituent Assembly Prof K.T Shah moved an Amendment which proposed that it should be provided in the constitution that under Article 28 No religious instruction shall be provided by the state in any educational institution wholly or partly maintained by state fund.

However, the above mentioned Amendment by K.T Shah was not accepted. In order to understand the full implication of the Article we can classify the educational institution into 4 types. Firstly, there are purely private Institutions which are neither receiving any aid from state funds nor recognised by it. There is no bar of being given religious instructions in this institution.

The second types of institution are those which are run by the state or wholly maintained by the state. All government school and colleges are coming under this category and no religious instruction can be imparted in this institution. The third types refer to educational institution which are administered by the state but has been established under any endowment or trust. In such institution imparting of religious instruction is not prohibited.¹⁹ So in a nutshell, direct religious instruction is permissible under the constitution in three out of four types of educational institution in India. The ban on such instruction is only in such institution wholly maintained by state funds. Again, it is very difficult to give religious instruction due to multiplicity of religion and a teacher cannot be immune from personal like and dislike about particular religion.

IV. EVALUATION

1. OBSERVE DHARMA NIRAPEKHATA: -

The Indian constitution makes the state to observe Dharma nirapeksh. But our country is steeped in religion. Religious feeling govern our mode of thinking and observance of religious festivals and rituals as part of our day to day life.²⁰

2. UNIFORM CIVIL CODE: - Uniform civil code introduced in the Directive principle of state policy of Indian constitution but unfortunately till now no progress has been made for its evolution and today its adoption appears to be more problematic than it was at the time when the constitution was framed. Some section of minorities claims it is a way of imposing majority view on them. In spite of the case won by Saha Bano against her husband in the year 1978, different religious communities have different personal laws which led to politicization.²¹

3. FAILURE OF THE GOVERNMENT IN EVOLVING A JUST ECONOMIC ORDER: -

The failure of the government to evolve a just economic order and eliminate poverty also gave a serious setback to secularism. The common masses suffering from poverty could not develop any faith in polity which failed to provide them basic necessities and consequently did not attach any importance to secular value.²²

4. POLITICAL PARTIES: -

The decade of eighties saw the rise of religious militancy among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. It also witnessed dangerous communal violence in North India. On the one hand there were the Shah Bano case and Ramjanma bhumi movement and on the other Mandal commission disputes. The main challenges before the Indian secularism are religious and communal politics, caste leadership. The religious based organisation like Viswa Hindu parisad (V.H.P), Sivsena, Muslim league use these cards to gain political mileage. So, it can be said that all political Parties are secular in theory rather than in practice.²³

5. RELIGION OCCUPY A CENTRAL POSITION: -

The traditional nature of Indian society in which religion occupies a central position has also hampered the growth of secularism. Indian Secularism has been imposed in society which is basically unsuited to its growth. Too much conscious of their religious and social identities, the Indian people in general present a country emotionally balkanization. To impose secularism on such country and then expect it to grow is likely to prove as successful as making "omelette out of hard boiled eggs".²⁴

6. THE DEFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: -

The defective educational system which has encouraged the people to think in term of groups and communities has also failed to inculcate secular ideas and minds of young students and promote feeling of mutual give and take.²⁵ It is however apprehended that since no instruction is given about any religion in schools, student will remain in dark about different religions. They will not have any idea about their own religion nor about other. The consequent of general ignorance and misunderstanding about various religions may create conflict and tension among the citizens.

7. GROWING COMMUNALISM: -

The growing communalism has also greatly hampered the growth of Secularism. The increasing incidence of communal riots and caste conflict indicate that the various section of the people have grown more

communal and separatist localities. In critical situation authorities have either failed to take prompt decision or delay them to avoid responsibilities. There is only political interest behind it. For political interest, the country is divided into majority, minority group. Communalism is a serious problem, If the state cannot protect the life and prosperity of citizens from communal riots, than Secularism becomes a mockery. Constitution has established a secular state but it has failed to set up a secular society. All political parties aims to get power and in this race the politician exploit the religious and caste sentiments. Mandir and Masjid disputes effect national life. Secularism can be possible only when every citizen thinks that first and last he is an Indian live and let live.²⁶ India posses to be a secular state but we often find communal politics in the country. Even now and then we witness communal disturbance and riots in one state or other. The supreme court judgement in Shah bano case and the Muslim women protection of rights of divorce Bill 1986 raised a nationwide controversy between secularism on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other. Secularism and Communalism seemed to be opposed to each other.

8. DISTORATION OF CONSTITUTIONAL AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTION: -

The distortion of constitutional and democratic Institution has also greatly contributed to the weakening of secularism in India. The constitution and political institution have not worked the way they were enriched by the framer of the constitution. For example though the use of religion is not permitted for votes. Yet certain religious political parties have made free use of use of factors like religion, caste etc to secure votes.²⁷

9. PSEUDO SECULARISM

BJP maintain that our present Secularism is pseudo secularism, as it is appeasement of the minorities. Our political leaders have been help less prisoner of electoral politics and vote arithmetic. Their first concern has been to create favourable vote bank .According to their understanding Muslim constitute the biggest vote bank as they generally vote as a community, while the Hindu consciousness at political level gets fragmented along caste, linguistic and regional lines. Therefore these politicians under the covers of secularism try to appeal to religious sentiments of Muslim by raising bogey of majority communalism and Hindu chauvinism etc. Their secularism has always been negative in character.²⁸

V. CONCLUSION

Secularism is not just a word; it is an idea that was espoused by founding father of Independent India and architect of India's constitution. It refers to number of norms and values regarding the way of plural society and its state should be organised. For India, Secularism is not a simple point of view; it is a question of survival and safeguard of peace, order and sanity in the society. Hindu, Muslims, Christians and several other groups were quite successful in living together in relative peace for a long period of time and nobody had heard the word secularism. Therefore the task ahead is to examine the ways of living together by making adjustment within the bound of their religious beliefs, Internal pluralism exist within every religion and their traditions.

It is a hard fact that exploitative policies are adopted by politicians and they misuse religious and caste sentiment. The corrupt political structure has been increasing religiousness and loyalty towards their religions which indirectly lead to communal disharmony in our plural society. In a pluralist Nation secularism is a life blood. If all the people follow the path of Jawaharlal Neheru the majority of our problem automatically solved and our country will become an abode of peace, progress, and prosperity. And tranquillity, Secularism is the only way of development of the country.

VI. SUGGESTION

Last but not least Question raise in our mind that how to promote secularism? Till the masses become a force behind secularism, the elite and political leadership has to take the responsibility to lead them in a right direction.

There should be complete overhaul of the socialisation process like the education system to help to promote secularism

There should be complete separation of religion and politics as well as education and politics.

Mass media must be fully utilised to educate the people for Secularism.

The economy system should be restructured to do away with concentration of wealth and resources in the hand of particular classes and communities.

The constitution which has many non secular provisions has to be amended in order to make it truly secular Secularism can be maintained only when a large number of people take part in strengthening it. In other words, only the people can uphold the principles of positive secularism, falling which it is likely to revert to worst form of fundamentalism.

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