

Module-22

SECULARISM IN INDIA



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INTRODUCTION

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:

- (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.

THE WESTERN MODEL OF SECULARISM

All secular states have one thing in common: they are neither theocratic nor do they establish a religion. However, in most commonly prevalent conceptions, inspired mainly by the American model, separation of religion and state is understood as mutual exclusion: the state will not intervene in the affairs of religion and, in the same manner, religion will not interfere in the affairs of the state. Each has a separate sphere of its own with independent jurisdiction. No policy

of the state can have an exclusively religious rationale. No religious classification can be the basis of any public policy. If this happened there is illegitimate intrusion of religion in the state.

Similarly, the state cannot aid any religious institution. It cannot give financial support to educational institutions run by religious communities. Nor can it hinder the activities of religious communities, as long as they are within the broad limits set by the law of the land. For example, if a religious institution forbids a woman from becoming a priest, then the state can do little about it. If a religious community excommunicates its dissenters, the state can only be a silent witness. If a particular religion forbids the entry of some of its members in the sanctum of its temple, then the state has no option but to let the matter rest exactly where it is. On this view, religion is a private matter, not a matter of state policy or law.

Finally, this form of mainstream secularism has no place for the idea of state-supported religious reform. This feature follows directly from its understanding that the separation of state from church/ religion entails a relationship of mutual exclusion.

THE INDIAN MODEL OF SECULARISM

Sometimes it is said that Indian secularism is an imitation of western secularism. But a careful reading of our Constitution shows that this is not the case. Indian secularism is fundamentally different from Western secularism. Indian secularism does not focus only on church-state separation and the idea of inter-religious equality is crucial to the Indian conception. Let us elaborate this further.

What makes Indian secularism distinctive? For a start it arose in the context of deep religious diversity that predated the advent of Western modern ideas and nationalism. There was already a culture of inter-religious 'tolerance' in India. However, we must not forget that tolerance is compatible with religious domination. It may allow some space to everyone but such freedom is usually limited. Besides, tolerance allows you to put up with people whom you find deeply repugnant. This is a great virtue if a society is recovering from a major civil war but not in times of peace where people are struggling for equal dignity and respect.

The advent of western modernity brought to the fore hitherto neglected and marginalised notions of equality in Indian thought. It sharpened these ideas and helped us to focus on equality within the community. It also ushered ideas of inter-community equality to replace the notion of hierarchy. Thus Indian secularism took on a distinct form as a result of an interaction between what already existed in a society that had religious diversity and the ideas that came from the west. It resulted in equal focus on intra-religious and interreligious domination. Indian secularism equally opposed the oppression of dalits and women within Hinduism, the discrimination against women within Indian Islam or Christianity, and the possible threats that a majority community might pose to the rights of the minority religious communities. This is its first important difference from mainstream western secularism.

Connected to it is the second difference. Indian secularism deals not only with religious freedom of individuals but also with religious freedom of minority communities. Within it, an individual has the right to profess the religion of his or her choice. Likewise, religious minorities also have a right to exist and to maintain their own culture and educational institutions.

A third difference is this. Since a secular state must be concerned equally with intra-religious domination, Indian secularism has made room for and is compatible with the idea of state-supported religious reform. Thus, the Indian constitution bans untouchability. The Indian state has enacted several laws abolishing child marriage and lifting the taboo on inter-caste marriage sanctioned by Hinduism.

The question however that arises is: can a state initiate or even support religious reforms and yet be secular? Can a state claim to be secular and not maintain separation of religion from state? The secular character of the Indian state is established by virtue of the fact that it is neither theocratic nor has it established any one or multiple religions. Beyond that it has adopted a very sophisticated policy in pursuit of religious equality. This allows it either to disengage with religion in American style, or engage with it if required. The Indian state may engage with religion negatively to oppose religious tyranny. This is reflected in such actions as the ban on untouchability. It may also choose a positive mode of engagement. Thus, the Indian Constitution grants all religious minorities the right to establish and maintain their own educational institutions which may receive assistance from the state. All these complex strategies can be adopted by the state to promote the values of peace, freedom and equality.

It should be clear by now why the complexity of Indian secularism cannot be captured by the phrase “equal respect for all religions”. If by this phrase is meant peaceful coexistence of all religions or interreligious toleration, then this will not be enough because secularism is much more than mere peaceful coexistence or toleration. If this phrase means equal feeling of respect towards all established religions and their practices, then there is an ambiguity that needs clearing. Indian secularism allows for principled state intervention in all religions. Such intervention betrays disrespect to some aspects of every religion. For example, religiously sanctioned caste-hierarchies are not acceptable within Indian secularism. The secular state does not have to treat every aspect of every religion with equal respect. It allows equal disrespect for some aspects of organised religions

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.

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 nondiscriminatory 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 AND THREATS TO SECULARISM IN INDIA

Secularism is, no doubt, an ideal principle. But in practice it is not so easy to follow. The vulnerable point in India is the deep religious sentiment prevailing among its different religious communities. Both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists in India are whipping up this sentiment of the staunch adherents of these religions, most of whom are either illiterate or semi-literate. This is a threat to the Secular principles of India.

India, moreover, has failed to fulfill some of the important conditions laid in the Constitution. Education has not been given the priority that it deserves. The condition of backwardness – poverty, population explosion and environmental pollution – prevails in the country in alarming proportions. The fundamentalists fish in this troubled water.

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.

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