

Secularism in the Indian Democracy

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Abstract

In the West, particularly Europe, and less so in the case of USA, secularism had its genesis in the (to use a euphemism for confrontation, conflict and tussle) dialects between organized religion epitomized in Catholic Church and the state aided in the process by such forces as renaissance and humanism, spurt in scientific and technological inventions, discoveries, breakthroughs, navigation, international commerce and trade, reformation. We know how the multiplication of faiths and creeds and the consequent religious wars and attendant bloodbath paved the way for the emergence of secular state slowly but surely. We often tend to ignore, willingly or unwillingly, these changes in the West and the context of West while discussing about secularism in India. So form a broad historical perspective the modern secular ideal and concept originated in the West and illustrated as a world view under the impetus provided by the major social changes of the modern age – Religious reformation, Industrial revolution and the Democratic transition.

Keywords: India, Religion, Secularism and Gandhi ji

1. Introduction

In India certain basic ingredient of secularism can be seen in the cultural tradition of India, India's introduction to the ideal of modern secularism was because of Western impact. At the same time, the Western impact which was conducive to the implantation of the secular idea has to be distinguished from the British Colonial impact, which created formidable impediments on the path of transition to secular state and society. The British rulers, despite the fact that their own society and polity was undergoing rapid secularization, pursued a policy which was the obverse of secularism, they pursued a policy, particularly after the 1857 sepoy mutiny, which passes for 'Divide and Rule' and consisted of exploiting one religious group against another so as to scuttle the gathering storm of freedom movement. As historian Daniel Thorner writes, particularly after the 1957 rebellion "The British abandoned their role as social reformers".

On the contrary, they allied themselves with India's backward looking classes and social strata. This compounded by the inadequate dis-association of the masses from religious revivals in and their inadequate mobilization on a class or socio-economic basis created formidable constraints in the secularization of Indian society and polity. Moreover, the consequences of colonial rule in terms of the stagnation of Indian economy and the emergence of a social and economic pattern which was neither traditional nor modern created conditions conducive to the growth of social obscurantism and anti-secularism. The exploitative economic policy pursued by them caused economic retrogression and lopsided and unbalanced pattern of socio-economic change. A vicious circle was generated when the economic retrogression generated and ante-secularist ideological backlash and the ideological disorientation reinforced economic retrogression. Ultimately, the weaknesses of secular consciousness resulted in strains and stresses as a sequel to the colonial model and structure, affecting different communities differently and unequally and

being interpreted in terms of religious denominational categories rather than of political economic categories.

But before coming to Gandhi ji and Nehru, it would be quite appropriate to have a bird's eye view on Lok Manya Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his role in the freedom struggle, for it has been often dubbed as communal. As former President Shankar Dayal Sharma says, Tilak, aware of the reluctance of the British to interfere in the processes of religion by itself, took advantage of this to use Hindu festivals and symbols for organizing and mass awakening against the British. But his approach was always secular and broad minded, never parochial. His defense counsel in the famous sedition trial was none other than Mohd. Ali Jinnah. Tilak's book *Gita Rahasya* and his *Dharmachi Swarup Laxan* clearly explained the secular idealism in the Bhagwat Gita. Moreover he was the principal architect of the re-approchement between the Indian National Congress and Muslim League at Lucknow (Lucknow Pact) in 1916.

For Me, Gandhi ji observed, every, the tiniest activity is governed by what I consider my religion. This for him was a timeless principle and yet he was very sensitive to the conditions and demand of particular times and places in conformity with Kala-desh (time-place) sensitivity of Indian classical tradition. He said that in this age, only political Sanyas can fulfill and adorn the ideal of Sannyasa. Consequently no Indian, who aspires to follow the way of true religion, can afford to remain aloof from politics. He wrote in 1940 that "I cannot conceive politics as divorced from religion. The religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not less, because it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. it does not supersede them; it harmonizes them and gives them reality.

Bhiku Parekh observes that, "There was hardly a Hindu religious category and practice to which (Gandhi ji) did not give a worldly or secular content." In other words, "Gandhi

secularized Hinduism as much as it was possible to do within a spiritual framework.”

Margaret Chatterjee holds that Gandhi seems almost a secularist, but judged by his handling of concrete issues, notably the communal (Hindu-Muslim) problem; he was not secularist if by this we mean an attempt to prune away all religious consideration from political matters.

It is true that Gandhi ji wanted that the individual and the Congress should show equal respect for all religions. The above statement of Gandhi ji would go to prove that there was no contradiction between his credo of Sarva-Dharma Sambhav (equal respect for all religions) and neutrality of the state towards all faiths. This is, according to Bipin Chandra, attested by the fact that the famous 1931 Karachi resolution on fundamental rights declaring that “The state shall observe neutrality in regard to all religions was moved at the Congress session by Gandhiji.”

However, T.N. Madan says that a Gandhian would have to say that secularism has run into difficulties in India because the modern state is too much with us, and intrudes into areas of life where it has no business even to peep. That state is best which governs the least. The ideal to strive for is that of morally sensitive individuals actively promoting civil society.

Indith Brown says, “In Gandhi’s eyes men and women were human in virtue their capacity for religious vision this was stifled by the individual or by political and economic structures then people were degraded and de-humanized. This was so strong and striking an attack on secular materialism as could be made. However, this perspective ignores the fact that it is erroneous to look upon religion and secularism in contradictory terms; this is re-cognized even in the West where secularism arose as an outcome of struggle between organized church and state. In any case, ethics and religion were unseparable from one another for Gandhi ji.”

Most of those who think that secularism in Indian today are in crisis put the blame at Jawahar Lal Nehru’s door step and his brand of secularism which often passes for “Dharmanirpeksha” in Hindi. The fact that Jawahar Lal Nehru was a prominent member of the constituent assembly and the Prime Minister of the country for about seventeen years his views, policies and practices cannot escape critical scrutiny if secularism in India is to be studied in any meaningful way.

Prof. T.N. Mahan says that by intellectual preference Nehru’s concept of secularism was a kin to Western type which arose in, the context of enlightenment. At least in the period of twenties and thirties of this century, he was clear in his mind that secularism meant secularism of the Western variety where religions was to be totally separated from politics and was certainly not to be confused equal respect for all religions. He was against institutional religion, ritual and mysticism and did not consider himself to be a religious person, though he admitted its humanistic and cultural values. Any impressions of his boyhood experiences of Brahmanical beliefs and ritual were erased by the powerful impact of his father’s personality and, later by his reading of the words of Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell and other similar thinkers. Nehru’s study of world history and his encounters with the Indian masses made him feel very negative about the rule of religion in human affairs. He was an agnostic who subscribed to a rationalist and even a historicist world view. These concluding words underlined Nehru’s radical secular position and his socialist conviction. No wonder, he looked upon communalism as “side issues”

and in 1928 said, “It (communalism) may be against today, but it has feet of clay it is really the creation of our educated classes in search of office and employment. He again said that “Religion, though it has undoubtedly brought comfort to innumerable human being and stabilized society by its values, has checked the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society.”

Nehru approvingly quotes a modern definition of religion according to which religion is whatever introduces genuine perspective into piece meal and shifting episodes of existence or again any activity pursued on behalf of an ideal end against obstacles, and in spite of threats of personal loss, because of a conviction of its general and enduring value. Nehru is prepared to be a humble camp follower of this kind of religion. The upshot of above discussion is that Nehru’s view on religion was “highly elitist” which may not be popular neither in his time or today. “To that extent there was a sort of dichotomy in his view and the actual ground situation”. It was and enlightenment view of religion, which was against revelation and dogmatism rather than religion as such he nevertheless recognized that religion stood for higher thing in life and was a moral force which supplied a deeper miner cravings of human beings and which has brought peace and comfort to innumerable tortured souls.

Incidentally, Nehru formulated his views on secularism during the twenties and thirties as reflected in the Karachi resolution of the Congress party on fundamental rights (1931); wherein he had insisted upon the inclusion of freedom of conscience and of the profession and practice of any religion. Further, all citizens of free India would be equal before the law, irrespective of religious (and other similar) differences and the state would have neutrality with, regard to all religion, (Dharma nirpeksha). This, Nehru’s biographer S. Gopal tells us, was the first breakdown in concrete terms of the concept of secularism in the Indian context and formed the basis of the relevant articles in the constitution many years later. It is true that keeping in mind the existence of multiplicity of religions and sects in India and the overriding influence of religion, Nehru later on started laying stress on religious pluralism. For instance, after the partition of the country he posed the question. Do We believe in a national state which includes people of all religions and shades of opinion and is essentially a secular state, or do we believe in the religious theoretic conception of the state his answer was unequivocal we shall proceed on secular and national lines.

Prof. Madan further says that the paradox of Indian secularism lies not only in that religious pluralism is meaningless in the absence of a positive attitude to religion, but equally significant in that the idea of its articulation is trapped in a double bind. Ideas like socialism and secularism should be communicated to people in the language of the mind and the heart of the people. In short, we can say country like India which have much diversity within herself; is good than Western countries.

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