

Research Paper

Historical Background of Secularism in India

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ABSTRACT

Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and so the list goes on. Indian has often been touted as a melting pot of religions since her ancient past. The constitution of India declares the state, a "secular" nation. But a pertinent question arises, "Is our view of secularism completely different or are we just looking away from the ground realities of our nation"? It is quite tenable to argue that riots and religious conflicts that often mar the headlines of Indian newspapers hardly speak of a secular environment for the citizenry of our nation. As the word is increasingly becoming more & more tolerable towards differences among people with globalization, Indian seem to lag behind or at least not move forward as far as tolerance & secularism are concerned. With a huge and diverse population it is indeed crucial for India to be a harmonious nation for people of all faiths.

Mahatma Gandhi has said: "I swear by my religion, I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare. Health, communications, foreign relations currency & so on. But not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal Concern!!"

Definitions of Secularism:

It is widely recognized that secularism as enshrined in the Indian constitution is different from the western understandings of this concept. In the west. Secularism is seen as the separation between the church and the state, the chambers dictionary definition being that "the state, morals and education should be independent of religion". In contrast. A harmonious construction of all the relevant provisions of the Indian constitution leads us to the notion that all religions-are deserving of equal treatment because all of them are equally necessary for the moral well being of their adherents. The implication is that the state will also support institution promoting minority religions. This conception of secularism is not something that the framers of the constitution slipped into unwittingly. A doctrine that rejects religion and religious consideration. Secularism is the assertion that government practices or institution should exist separately from religion beliefs.

Meaning of Secularism:

The 'Sanskrit' word that is commonly used for "secularism" in Indian is dharmanirapekshata and means "indifference towards religion". The usage itself denotes the understanding of secularism as more policy of political practice than a philosophy in itself. The other Sanskrit word that is used for it is dharmanirapekshavada where the suffix vada is the

same as ism and denotes the philosophical aspect of secularism. However the plurality of religions. Religious pluralism (the view that all religions are equally valid), and cultural (and communal) concerns greatly influence the various ways in which secularism has developed & is looked at on in Indian soil. Secularism is more a subject of politics than of metaphysics or even values. At present. The other philosophical viewpoint that is often confused with secularism is religious pluralism, or the view that all religions are equally valid ways of religious expression salvation.

History of Indian Secularism:

The history of Indian secularism has roots in the protest movements in the 5th century B.C. the three main protest movements were by the charvakas (a secularistic and materialistic philosophical movement), Buddhism & Jainism. All three rejected the authority of the Vedas & any importance of belief in a deity during the freedom struggle, secularism was emerging as the most dominant principle. The leaders of the Indian National congress; Gandhi , Maulana Abdul Kalama Azad , Nehru and others were deeply committed to the ideal of secularism , through each expressed it in very different manners. Secularism become the mantra of the Indian nation, a nation exhausted by partition & sectarian riots and above all the assassination of Gandhiji, did not want any more divisive talk. The founding fathers represented the aspirations of the different section of society and it is due to the struggles of these different people that secular principles got enshrined into the Indian constitution. Under Jawaharlal Nehru & later under his successors in the congress party, the concept of a secular nation- state was officially adopted as India's path to political modernity & national integration. Unlike in the west secularism

come mainly out of the conflict between the church and the state, secularism in Indian was conceived as a system that sustained religious and cultural pluralism.

In the post independent scenario the social dynamics was very complex. The process of secularization\industrialization was going on at a slow pace. Today the biggest challenge to the Indian nation is coming from forces claiming to represent the mainstream majority. There is an emergence of extremist voices that claim to speak for Hindus and they are laying down demands that threaten the very idea of a secular India. The biggest area of concern is that the state has emerged to be complicit. As an actor and player in mounting this challenge to Indian pluralism,

The Indian federation at the center as well as in the states has had elected governments of widely differing political ideologies for over 50 years now. Even so-called right-wing religious nationalists have displayed equal respect for all religions. It appears that the secular credentials of the state are not contaminated by the political or religious affiliations of the party in power. This further dispels the notion, current in some academic circles, that the Indian brand of secularism is a Nehruvian construct. I believe that the Indian notion of secularism as stated earlier is a reflection of a deeper cultural value that has come down over centuries, and Nehru was merely a modern interpreter of this understanding.

The Dream of Secularism:

On the road to a prosperous and harmonious nation, secularism is definitely a major milestone. There are very few nations in the world with as much religious diversity as India. Unfortunately, this diversity is becoming more of a bane rather than a boon which it ought to be. A country known worldwide for the famous quality of having "unity in diversity" should be doing everything it can for upholding her ideals. Extremism, especially on the basis of religion, has to be uprooted from society. Religious propaganda should be highly condemned and even banning such elements does not seem like a bad option. Authorities like the security forces as well as the election commission should take strict action against factors that may disrupt communal harmony, like political or anti-social elements. On the grassroot level, primary and secondary schools hold the key to religious harmony. Kids need to be taught tolerance and respect for each other's faiths. There are several NGOs working for the cause as well as individuals, corporate organization and the government must surely help them in every way possible. As India is entering the spotlight on the world stage, it is quintessential that such embarrassment must be done away with and religious and communal harmony be achieved. India

has a lot of things to be proud of, we should just hope that the Leaders at the helm of the country realize that and ensure that every Indian can stand proudly anywhere in the world.

Secularism inserted in Preamble (42nd amendment act):

The word secular was inserted into the preamble by the 42nd amendment act of 1976, during emergency. It implies equality of all religions and religious

Tolerance. India therefore does not have an official state religion. Every person has the right to preach. Practice and propagate any religion they choose. The government must not favor or discriminate against any religion. It must treat all religions with equal respect. All citizens, irrespective of their religious beliefs are equal in the eyes of law. No religious instruction is imparted in government or government-aided schools. Nevertheless, general information about all established world religions is imparted as part of the course in sociology, without giving any importance to any one religion or the others. The content presents the basic\ fundamental information with regards to the fundamental beliefs, social values and main practices and festivals of each established world religions. The Supreme Court in S.R Bommai v. Union Of India held that secularism was an integral part of the basic structure of the constitution.

Secularism& the constitution of India:

India has been declared a secular state by its written constitution and it is every Indians duty to stand by and believe in this declaration. And yet recent political and social events have questioned this declaration. Is India a secular country only on paper or does secularism actually exist in India.

The preamble of the constitution of India declares that India is a secular state. The term secularism in politics refers to the governmental practice of indifference towards religion. Though such bifurcation is not tally possible, still, secular politics attempts to prevent religious philosophies or bodies from influencing governmental policies. The philosophy that the Indian constitution upholds on to is a kind of secular humanism made relevant through a historical development of the ideology within the context of religious pluralism in India

Indian constitution is also containing various provision pertaining to religious freedom like Article 25 talks about freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion but these freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion but these freedoms given in the constitution are not absolute and they are given subject to certain restriction like public order, Morality and Health.

Article 26 also talks about freedom to manage religious affairs and similarly Article 27, 28, 29 and 30 talks about religious instruction of religious worships in educational institutions and protection of minority's interests. If we see meticulously in the constitution then we will be able to analyze that one of the better and better and effective provision relating to religion and protection of minorities are enshrined in the constitution.

Nature of Modern secular state:

Secularism introduces science, technology and rationalism in the society and forms the basis of a modern secular state. In the process, it has to oppose and struggle against the clergy and vested forces in the society. And as such, the fundamentalist communal onslaughts are the 'other' of secularism and secularization. The oppressed sections join the secular movements to wrest the accompanying liberal space that can be the base for launching the struggles for their rights. Fundamentalism is the regressive reaction of feudal elements and sections of middle classes in league with the clergy, to crush the aspirations of oppressed class, whose movements for their rights is a big source of tension for them. The secularization process and accompanying movements of the oppressed increase the insecurity of fundamentalist forces. They try to lure these classes into their fold through religion and liberal use of money and muscle power,

The mere survival of India for 61 years with its religious diversity is proof of our secularity. That in spite of communal forces winning at several occasions, the larger battle is still in the favor of secularism. That India has managed to not have a state religion and not let separatist groups split it apart, is a sign of success for secularism. Though a lot has to be done to extinguish the sparks of communalism that threaten to burn the nation, the resilience of our people and the unity of our country in the face of communal divide, assure us all is not lost and the ideal in the preamble speaks of it is still alive.

Conclusion;

It is not so much a question of defending or preserving the existing secular character of the Indian polity, but rather a need to create and build a secular polity in the nation, only. Only the ideal of building a secular democratic nation can stem the tide of communal fascism in the country. Sarva Dharma Sambhav has to operate at the personal as well as the social level. While Dharma Nirpekshata or secularism per se continues to be the state policy. Religious is the heart of every, dogmas and rituals cannot be allowed to guide the state. Secularism begins in the heart of every individual. There should be no feeling of "otherness" as we all have a shared history. India being a traditional society that contains not one, but many traditions owing their

origin in part to the different religions that exist here, has so far managed to retain the secular character of its polity. Ours is a society where Sufis and Bhakti saints have brought in a cultural acceptance for each other. Are we going to let it all go to waste and listen to people who have concern for their careers as politicians or leaders rather than our welfare at heart? Let us instead concentrate our efforts at making India a powerful and progressive nation.

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