



Future of Indian secularism

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Abstract

As we come to the concluding part of the long, arduous exercise, it would be in the fitness of things to have a bird's eye view of the point raised, issue discussed, and finding crystallized here, in the introductory chapter, we threw light, though not in a very focused manner on the issues facing secularism today in India and the doubts and misgivings expressed regarding the secular project in India. We also, referred, albeit in passing, to the spurt in communal events, heightening of religious fervor among the Hindus in recent years. And in the Chapters that followed, the concept of secularism was sought to be put in perspective. In article, we focused on how in the West, secularism emerged after a long drawn out bloody tussle, involving the state and the religious sects. Particular reference was made of the 'no-establishment' clause in the U.S., the ideal norm of separation of state and church. We also saw how, because of the ground realities and pervasive role of religion, it is difficult to divide religion and state into water tight compartments. We examined the roller-coaster ride that the concept of secularism has undergone.

Keywords: secularism, religion, gandhiji and sarva dharma sambhav

Introduction

We can see how, in recent years religion has gone back to square one: from a public role, the concept and practice of secularism, pushed religion into the private domains of life. And in recent years, particularly in the erstwhile totalitarian communist state of East Europe, religion arose like a phoenix from ties ashes and the exploited and suppressed people from the front to sound the death-knell of the communist system itself. Communism, following the Marxian dictum that religion is the opium of the people had sought to banish religion from the lives of people, but it was itself consumed by recrudescence of religious fervor. The corrupt and dictatorial regimes in much of Africa and Latin America were compelled to stereotyped understanding of secularism has called it a beginning of the end of secularism. Ironically, religion which was in medieval Europe identified with the forces of conservatism, orthodoxy, feudalism, has played a liberating, democratizing role. Moreover, after having played that progressive role, it has refused to exercise control or dominance over the instruments of state power. In India, from the very beginning the precept and practice of religious toleration and pluralism has existed paradoxically, under the British, secularism as understood as composite nationalism, in opposition to seminary nationalism and communalism emerged on the fertile Indian soil communalism was encouraged by the British to scuttle the freedom movement, secularism was devised by the leaders of freedom movement, secularism was devised by the leaders of religion in politics. It may be that to broaden and deepen the basis of national movements they used religious symbolism but they were secular to the core.

Gandhiji has been often referred to as a spiritual father of Indian secularism. Strangely enough, today many politician and leaders invoke the name of Gandhiji to support their plea of mixing religion with politics. Obviously, wittingly or unwittingly, they are mistaking the shell for the substance of religion. Indisputably, Gandhiji in this context meant ethics

and morality which is of course, very much missing in today's politics. Moreover, taking cue from Gandhiji's concept of Sarva Dharma Sambhav or equal respect for all religions, government goes all out to support religions. And as we have seen, Gandhiji said in 1940 that any religion which depends for its survival on state aid does not deserve to exist. We have seen the pitfalls of a misinterpreting the concept of Sarva Dharma Sambhav. While a complete separation of religion from politics in neither feasible nor desirable. After all, the constitution, while ensuring non-discriminatory attitude on the part of the state vis-à-vis the citizens, also recognizes the existence of inequities and retrograde features in the religion, and makes provision for their reforms. While guaranteeing freedom of religion, it also recognizes that minorities need to be reassured that their cultural and religious rights would not be trampled upon by the majority. Despite the expression of skepticism by certain intellectuals and leaders secularism should not be written off from the nation's agenda. A secular India alone is an India that can survive. As the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi once said, perhaps an India that is too secular does not deserve the glory of our civilization and the future of our country. In every village of India, in every basti and in every Mohalla, there are people of different faiths, of different languages, of different cultures who live together as neighbors. Secularism is a condition of our existence. It is important that the state maintains strict neutrality among the adherents of different faiths. We have seen, since independence, the virus of communalism has spread across the country. Injection of religion into electoral politics and politics of vote banks pursued since independence by different parties has been responsible for the growing communalization of the country. Minority communalism and majority communal have complemented each other. Minority communalism has given spurt to popularity of the B.J.P, which is popularly perceived to espouse the cause of Hindu. However, B.J.P itself believes that its brand of secularism

means appeasement to none and justice to all. It would appear that communalism has of late become obey to pursue politics of power. The point is that despite occasional eruption of communal riots, the people of the country are by and large secular. B.J.P has realized that it cannot play the Hindu card for all times to come. The agenda of Mandir and Masjid cannot influence the voters all the time. If it had been so, the B.J.P would be securing 85% of the legislative seats because that is the population of Hindus whose interests it claims to protect and promote and it would be in power for perpetuate. There is a belated realization within the B.J.P top brass that, to enhance its popular support and to win new allies and friends, it must not take up communal or religious issues. This is not to suggest that the issues raised by B.J.P, particularly with regard to uniform civil code, or even article 370 is without merit. The compulsion of power and coalition politics may have forced the B.J.P to put those controversial issues on the back burner.

More than one year of stint in power has seen its metamorphosis into a responsible party, Except for the untoward incidents involving attacks on Christians in Gujarat, and a few other communal incidents, the communal situation was not as bad as anticipated by some, However, Mr. Murali Manohar Joshi did create a controversy at the Education Ministers Conference, the singing of Saraswati Vandana created a lot of ripple. However it is argued that this is not the first time is done. T.K. Oomen holds that if the population of the country is drawn prominently from a religious category it is but natural that public functions incorporate some of the aspects of that religion. More controversial than this was the attempt took put on the agenda Vidhya Bharti's recommendations at the Conference of Education Ministry. In order to "Indianize, nationalize and spiritualize" the education system, it proposed compulsory study of Sanskrit from Class III to X as well as ancient texts like the Vedas and Upanishads and amendments to articles 29 and 30 of the constitution which guarantee educational and cultural rights of the minorities. The R.S.S outfit felt that these changes could not invite charges of imposing Hinduism on minorities because the Supreme Court has defined Hindutva as way of life. It was withdrawn in the face of stiff opposition from opposition parties and some of the allies of B.J.P. However K.N. Pannikar says that they helped to focus the nation's attention so that they could use it for political purposes later on. But on the whole, the B.J.P did not attempt to tamper with the secular base of the polity and the constitution. The tie-up with the DMK, known for its atheist tradition, with a party often identified in the past with Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan speaks volumes of the moderation or dilution of divisive agenda of the B.J.P. It is important that the definition of Sarva Dharma Sambhav should not become an alibi for the leaders to visit a temple, a church and Dargah all at the same time. Religion must be kept separate from politics. The government must dissociate itself from all endowments having slightest religious coloring, devasthanas, haj committees, holding of Iffatras by the President, the Prime Minister etc. the government must move in the direction of common civil code encouraging leaders from minority communities to realize its importance. There should be complete ban on use of religious places for political purposes. The legal ban on religion in electioneering should be rigidly enforced. And secular parties and groups should no longer political associate with religious persons such as Shankracharyas, Imams and Maulvis, Priests and Granth's.

Bipin Chandra does not say that all varieties of communication should be targets of critique and struggle; nor can communalism be fought on the basis of what may be called "upside" down "communalism by advocating the consolidation of Muslims on a communal basis and division of Hindus on caste and not political or ideological basis. These are some of the issues of secularism and communalism in India politics. The dichotomy between precept and practice of secularism has been responsible for the growth of communalism. However, one can say without fear of contradiction that, despite the occasional occurrence of communal riots, the overwhelming majority of people are secular in spirit. Therefore, they would not tolerate violation of secularism beyond a certain point.

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