

Secularism as an essence of Indian Culture

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Abstract

A Secular state is neutral about the religion and does not impose any restriction or compel the citizens to follow any specific religious practice. According to D. E. Smith, “the secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom to religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with that religion”.

Indian constitution included the word “secular” in the preamble in 1976, through an amendment done in 1976. Although since the known history, Indians were practicing secularism but this natural system was destroyed with the invasion of Muslim invaders who ruled this country for long times. They compelled the subject to follow the practices of Islam and converted the masses into their religion. Those who were unwilling to accept this conversion were brutally killed. Later, when the things got stabilized in terms of power, the Muslim king imposed a tax on all non-Muslims. This tax was known as Jazia.

During the British rule i.e. from 17th – 19th century, the subject had relatively more liberty towards religious practices because the focus of the British rulers was on the transferring the tremendous wealth of India to Britain. However, in 1909, they introduced a controversial system, based on communal electorate, known as Morley-Minto reforms. After independence, Indian government abolished this and explicitly prohibited any taxation for practicing a religion. The Indian Constitution provides the Right to Freedom of religion to all her citizen as a fundamental right. Article 16 of the constitution provides absolutely equal opportunities to every citizen for welfare schemes, education or employment without any religion based discrimination.

“I do not expect India of my dreams to develop one religion, i.e., to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another.” So said Mahatma Gandhi. Secularism is the doctrine that morality should be based solely on regard to the wellbeing of mankind in the present life to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or in a future state. George J Holyoake to whom has been credited the coinage of the word Secularism issued in 1851 a statement of secularist doctrine proclaiming, “science as the true guide of man, morality as secular not religious in

origin, reason the only authority, freedom of thought and speech and that owing to the uncertainty of survival we should direct our efforts to this life only”.

Even Dr. Radhakrishnan, former President of India, had said in his book ‘Recovery of Faith’ page 184. ‘When India is said to be a secular state, it does not mean that we reject the reality of the unseen spirit or the relevance of religion to life or that we exalt irreligion. It does not mean that secularism itself becomes a positive religion or that State assumes divine prerogatives. The concept of secularism is a concept that has developed over centuries as human civilizations and societies evolved. In the early stages of civilization societies had to adopt as a practical measure, codes of conduct and behavior for smooth peaceful development. These got crystallized into traditions. The traditions and codes of conduct had to be observed if a society had to remain peaceful. It follows therefore that there can be no discrimination against anyone on the basis of religion or faith nor is there room for the hegemony of one religion or majoritarian religious sentiments and aspirations.

This research paper deals with the necessity of better understanding of secularism with an Indian point of view, its inherency with Dharma and its role in the Nation-making Process.

Secularism: The Essence of Indian Culture

In India secularism has been the very essence of the ancient society. This is the country, to which, people like Christians, Jews, Parsis and many more, could make their homeland, without any difficulty. Indian culture accommodated all, and that was the culture of true secularism. Almost all major religions of the world flourished in India and their followers have lived in harmony for ages. [1]Swami Vivekananda argued that different religions of the world are neither contradictory nor antagonistic. According to him, “there never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion, there never existed many national religions, there is only one--of universal brotherhood. We must respect all religions.” [2]

Today, when our country extends from Kashmir to Kanyakumari from Kutch to Assam we are again adopting the same principles of toleration. Every religion is at liberty to practice its tenets, to follow its own principles, so long as those principles do not outrage the moral conscience of man or endanger the security of the country. We do not want religious principles and political beliefs to be mixed up. This has caused ruin to the country times without number and we are anxious to avoid this as much as possible. The code of conduct of the unity of the human race and that all men are brethren, was embodied in what is called the God of Dharma. What is Dharma? Dharma is that which holds society together. Whatever divides society, disintegrates society, creates sects and coteries that is adharma.

Although the secular character of our constitution has been emphasized by many, in its original form the constitution did not declare India as a secular state. It was however only with 42d amendment that the words ‘socialist’ and ‘secular’ were adopted in the preamble. [3, 4] These terms are further not defused as required, yet one thing is

clear that the application of secularism should not be selective,' that is one form for one believer and the other form for the other believer. In our own times, the poet, Mirza Ghalib, rejected the empty ritualism of religion, and Mohammad Iqbal echoed the enduring strength of our culture thus: "For me, every particle of my country's dust is a deity. Come, let us remove all that causes estrangement, and Let us reconcile those that have turned away from each other, remove all signs of division". [5]. We Indians in general believe in the concept of one nation, one people and regard India as our motherland with a common history and common culture. Whether we worship in a temple, a church, a mosque, we all belong to one nation that is Bharat, that is India and our identity is Bhartiya that is Indian, irrespective of what religion we believe in.

Relation between Religion and Secularism:

It is imperative that the Indian state in a multi-religious, plural society like ours remains distanced from religion. This does not mean that the State is anti-religion; it only means that it will neither have nor assume a religious tinge or character. It will, in this very neutrality and also as a fundamental duty protect the right of each and every citizen or individual living in its territory to his or her individual faith. That is, religion will and must remain in the private sphere.

This is especially critical in our situation where the evolution of the nation-state has been different from the European nation-state. Here, we have always had unity in a vast diversity. This diversity is not just religious, but linguistic and also includes various nationalities. To build a State writ within it, this concept of unity in a diverse situation such as this, requires that the commitment to secularism be all the more firm.

When we look at the historical side, at all times it was a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious society, and there was never any question of saying that this group is the biggest or that is not the biggest. The idea was to accommodate all, and not to obliterate any faith but to harmonies all faiths. Even a very conservative legislator like Manu tells us that all the people should learn their own particular traditions. We all believed in our being the chosen race or the custodians of a chosen religion or a chosen tribe. The historical traditions of each race, of each community, of each tribe, were preserved and taught to them. It was this attitude of acknowledging every path, rejecting none, trying to find something of value in each tribe and in each community, which has been the tradition which governed the history of our country. It is an attitude born of spiritual perception and intellectual generosity. You find something similar in the Koran. There is said: O, Mankind, we created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other, not that you may despise each other." [6]. So, it was a question of what may be regarded as "Sarvamata (dharma)-samanvaya"-integration of all religions or faiths.

In the greatest periods of our history, when we were able to make a mark, we adopted this attitude of toleration and good-will. Ashoka sent missionaries to far countries. He cut out his great principle in rock; "SamavayaevaSadbuh"-concord alone is meritorious. In the next great empire of the country, the Golden Age of the Guptas, Fa Hien, a Chinese traveller who spent ten years in India, was impressed by the toleration of the people. He testifies that he was allowed to go and do whatever he wanted, for the obvious reasons that they never believed in the superiority of their own particular religion. HarshaVardhana also adopted the religion of freedom.

About the great Akbar, it is said: “He established principles of the widest toleration of opinion of justice to all, irrespective of caste and creed; of alleviating the burdens of the children of the soil; of welding together the interests of all classes of the community of the Rajput princes, of the Uzbek and Mughal nobles, of the settlers of Afghan origin, of the indigenous inhabitants.”

However, whenever we surrendered these principles and resorted to rigid, fanatical attitudes, our country suffered and declined. If the misfortunes of our country tell us anything, it is this; the greatest need which we have is of developing qualities of good will and toleration among the people whom we have in this country.

We may adopt secularism, but religion is there, rooted in the nature of man. Man’s impulse is to grow upward, to surpass him, to know more and to love more, to create beauty. But we never said that it is only one particular religion that could help us to reach this conclusion.

Secularism as a toy in the hands of Politicians:

Today we need to discuss secularism in context with the extreme influence of religion on politics. There is definitely tremendous amount of unrest visible in the society related to religion, though more in those parts of the society where education and knowledge, either do not exist or are at very low levels

The various wild and provocative ways of de-linking secularism with its very original soul are been adopted in recent years by various political parties. Visiting religious places by the political leaders, before and after the elections, performing religious rituals, wearing particular religion related attires, sporting tilaks and consulting gurus and other religious leaders, are some of them.

Secularism is no more a concept, belief or faith for these political parties. It has become a toy for them, with which, they are playing with, or say, controlling the masses. It is a pity that these parties are deeply concerned about secularism, communalism, minorities and human rights, but nobody is concerned about the economic condition of the country, unemployment and population growth, the illiteracy and education system, and the very serious problem of brain drain. The contemporary issues are being neglected openly and are choking under the pressure of secularism and communalism game plan. Whether it is communal riots or secular- communal debate, it is the common citizen of this country who is suffering. Due to this flawed approach by the ruling political sections, whose practice post-Independence did not conform to what secularism must mean in terms of the modern Indian state, we are witnessing crude digressions today.

The importance of the secular temperament is the weapon that citizens in democratic, multi-cultural societies have to use against attempts by motivated parties to convert religious or ethnic communities into political communities; such politicization in time leads to the general communalization of religious or ethnic communities. My emphasis at this point is that however pervasive our national values and however widespread the popular support to them, they still need to be repeatedly reaffirmed, nourished and reinvigorated. Every political order, but particularly a democratic political order, has within itself individuals, groups, and movements that have alternative visions of history and of the future; they march to a different beat and sing a

different tune The battle for the preservation of our core and founding principles is therefore a battle that we have to fight every day.

India has not been immune to this challenge. There are those within our body politic who reject the version of our popular history which exalts our composite culture, and, instead, define our history and our nationhood in exclusivist terms that enhances the status of one particular group at the expense of others. But this challenge cannot be met through emotive sloganeering: it should be taken seriously and confronted with the full force of our intellect, and our deep commitment to and our broad engagement with the political and social processes of our country. In the debate pertaining to the idea of India, we are all denied the luxury of academic detachment. We have to enter the debating hall and vigorously combat elements preaching the exclusivist ideology with all its passionate simplification and alluring appeal.

Much of the discussion in India regarding secularism ultimately ends up with becoming a discussion about the nature of the secular state. However, much more important than a secular state is a secular citizen, the secular temperament of an individual. As long ago as 1948, Pandit Nehru raised this issue with the students of Aligarh Muslim University in his Convocation Address, when he stood at this podium and said: “You are Muslim and I am Hindu. We may adhere to different religious beliefs or to none; but that does not take away from the cultural inheritance that is yours as much as mine. Do you believe in a national state which includes people of all religions and is essentially secular... or do you believe in a religious, theocratic conception of a state which regards people of other faiths as beyond the pale?”

How are we to develop this secular temperament, this spirit of tolerance, goodwill and understanding? Indian tradition, suffused with lessons from Islamic tradition, provides clear answers to this. Humanism and scientific knowledge are the natural legacy of mankind; they are not the exclusive preserve of the West. Just as in the past, the Dark Ages led to the Age of Reason and Enlightenment in Europe (substantially due to the influence of Islamic science, technology and culture), we Indians too, with a modern, forward-looking spirit, can transform our lives and bridge the knowledge-gap between us and other advanced societies.

In India we have adopted a secular Constitution and our state is secular. The principle of secularism has been interpreted in different ways. As I understand it, secular means that religious considerations do not prevail, or are not taken into account or considered as relevant when policy decisions for the governance of a state are undertaken by the government. Religion is basically a matter of private belief. The second aspect of secularism as I see it is that a multi ethnic multi religious country like India cannot remain peaceful unless there is tolerance and unless the government practices the basic concept of equality before the law and equal protection before the law as articulated in Article 14 of the Constitution. The state upholding the principle of secularism ensures that every citizen will get equal treatment from the government and before the law.

Conclusion:

National Integration cannot be built by brick and mortar, by chisel and hammer. It has to grow silently in the minds and hearts of men. The only access is the process of education. This may be a slow process, but it is a steady and permanent one. This rich composite culture of ours continued to be nourished in succeeding decades. It was the strength and endurance of our composite culture that laid the foundations of India's contemporary secularism, which finds expression in our Constitution. It is true that in the events that led to our freedom, discordant notes were sounded, which culminated in the partition of our country on a religious basis. Now, with the wisdom of hindsight, certain obvious truths can be reiterated and reaffirmed. First, that the forces promoting partition on a communal basis were consistently supported by our imperialist masters, who saw in this division a long term value in terms of their strategic interests in South, Central and West Asia. Second, recent history has clearly demonstrated that nationhood needs stronger and more enduring values than mere religious identity; and, third, in spite of consistent challenges, the Indian people have continued to adhere to and vigorously uphold the core national values of democracy and secularism to which we are always committed.

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