

Abstract

This short contribution outlines the history of secularism in India and the particular form it has taken, based on popular religious notions of inclusivity and pluralism. Any failures of secularism in this context are blamed on political struggles for power rather than religions themselves.

Introduction

Secularism in India has very different meaning and implications. The word 'secularism' has never been used in the Indian context in the sense in which it has been used in Western countries i.e. in the sense of atheism or purely this worldly approach, rejecting the other-worldly beliefs.

India is a country where religion is very central to the life of people. India's age-old philosophy as expounded in Hindu Upanishad scriptures is *sarva dharma samabhava*, which means equal respect for all religions. The reason behind this approach is the fact that India has never been a mono-religious country. Even before the Aryan invasion India was not a mono-religious country.

There existed before the Aryan invasion numerous tribal cults from north-western India to Kanya Kumari most of whom happened to be Dravidians. Thus certain languages in North West of Pakistan even today contain some words of Dravidian origin. However, with the invasion of the Aryans, people of Dravidian origin were driven down south and today we find all Dravidian people in four southern states of India.

Aryans brought a new religion based on the Vedas and Brahmins who dominated the intellectual life of north India. But a section of Brahmins also migrated south and evolved new cults marrying Vedic cults with Dravidian ones. Thus it is said that Hindu Indians worship more than 33,000,000 gods and goddesses.

Thus even before the advent of Christianity and Islam, India was multi-religious in nature. Christianity and Islam added more religious traditions to the existing Indian traditions. It would be correct to say that India is

bewilderingly diverse country in every respect - religious, cultural, ethnic and caste.

India is one country where caste rigidity and the concept of untouchability evolved and still plays a major role in religious, social and cultural matters. Caste dynamics in Indian life, even in Christian and Islamic communities, plays a larger than life role. Since most of the conversions to Christianity and Islam took place from lower caste Hindus, these two world religions also developed caste structure. There are lower caste churches and mosques in several places.

Under the feudal system there was no competition between different religious traditions as authority resided in the sword and generally there were no inter-religious tensions among the people of different religions. Though at times inter-religious controversies did arise, there was never bloodshed in the name of religion.

There was also a tradition of tolerance between religions due to Ashoka and Akbar's state policies. Ashoka's edicts clearly spell out a policy of religious tolerance and Akbar used to hold inter-religious dialogue among the followers of different religions and he also followed the policy of tolerance and even withdrew the *jizya* tax (a poll tax on Hindus) which was an irritant. Thus both Ashok and Akbar have a place of great significance in the religious life of India.

Also, India had Sufi and Bhakti traditions in Islam and Hinduism respectively, which were based on respect for different religions. Unlike Ulema and Brahmans, the Sufi and Bhakti saints were highly tolerant and open to the truth in other faiths. They never adopted sectarian attitudes and kept away from power structures. The poorer and lower caste

Hindus and Muslims were greatly influenced by these traditions.

Nizamuddin Awliya, a great Sufi saint of the 13-14th century saw the times of five Sultans but never paid court to a single one. When the last Sultan sent a message requesting him to come to the court, he refused. Then he sent the message that if Nizamuddin does not come to my court, I (the Sultan) will come to his hospice. He replied that there are two doors to my hospice; if the Sultan enters by one, I will leave by the other. Such was the approach of Sufis and saints to the power structures of their time.

Dara Shikoh was heir apparent to Shah Jahan, the Moghul Emperor but had a Sufi bent of mind and was also a great scholar of Islam and Hinduism. He wrote a book *Majmau'l Bahrayn* (Co-mingling of Two Oceans Islam and Hinduism) and quoting from Hindu and Islamic scriptures showed both religions had similar teachings; the difference, he felt, was of languages (Arabic and Sanskrit) and not teachings. Thus Dara Shikoh also contributed richly to inter-religious harmony in India.

Most of the conversions to Islam and Christianity took place through Sufis and missionaries with a spirit of devotion. Even today in India most of the Christians and Muslims belong to these lower caste strata. Even centuries after conversion their caste status and economic status has not changed.

Emergence of competitive politics

However, the entire social, economic and political scenario changed after the advent of the British rule in the 19th century. Differences between the Hindu and Muslim elite began to emerge for various reasons - socio-cultural, economic and political. The

British rulers adopted the policy of divide and rule, distorted medieval Indian history to make Muslim rulers appear as tyrants to the Hindu elite. This distorted history was taught in the new school system, which was established by the British rulers.

Also there developed economic and political competition between the Hindu and Muslim elites leading to communal tensions. The Hindu elite was quick to adjust to new realities and took to modern education and commerce and industries. The Muslim ruling elite resisted the new secular education system and also could not take to commerce and industry. They were thus left far behind in the race for progress.

Muslim intellectual, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had a perceptive mind. He understood the importance of a modern education system and founded Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College (MAO College) which became the fulcrum of modern education for the North Indian Muslim elite. The orthodox Ulema, however, vehemently opposed modern secular education and declared Syed Ahmad Khan a *kafir* (unbeliever).

Initially the Hindu and Muslim elites cooperated with each other, and Syed Ahmad Khan always emphasised Hindu-Muslim unity. But the competitive nature of political and economic power drove a wedge between the two elites and communal tensions began to emerge. When the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, it adopted secularism as its anchor in view of multi-religious nature of Indian society.

India could not head towards Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) as India was not merely a Hindu country. In the pre-partition period Muslims were 25% besides Christians, Sikhs,

Buddhists and Jains. Hindu society was also highly fragmented and far from monolithic. The Dalits (low caste people) refused to call themselves Hindus (subsequently their leader B.R. Ambedkar) adopted Buddhism in protest).

Muslims too, though not monolithic, had a semblance of unity and this was used by communal Hindus to try to unite Hindus as one community. However, it is also true that the Hindu elite was more confident than the Muslim elite in the emerging new power-structure and felt more secure. The Muslim elite felt less secure and they hitched their wagon to the British rulers. They wanted to ensure a power-sharing arrangement before the British left the country.

Thus secularism in India was more a political than philosophical phenomenon. The Indian National Congress adopted secularism, not as this worldly philosophy but more as a political arrangement between different religious communities. As a power-sharing arrangement could not be satisfactorily worked out between the Hindu and Muslim elites, the country was divided into two independent states of India and Pakistan, most of the Muslim majority areas of the North-West going to Pakistan.

After independence and partition a large body of Muslims were left in India and hence leaders like Gandhi and Nehru preferred to keep India secular in the sense that the Indian state would have no religion though the people of India would be free both in the individual and corporate sense to follow any religion of their birth or adoption. Thus India remained politically secular but otherwise its people continued to be deeply religious.

In India right from the British period, the main

contradiction was not between the religious and the secular but between secular and communal. In the western world the main struggle was between the Church and the state and the Church and civil society, but in India neither Hinduism nor Islam had any church-like structure and hence there never was any such struggle between secular and religious power structures.

The main struggle was between secularism and communalism. The communal forces from among Hindus and Muslims mainly fought for a share in power using their respective religions in their struggle for power.

Even after Partition, the communal problem did not die. It raised its head again within a few years. The RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh), which is the mainspring of the Hindu Right remained in existence and at its instance a new political outfit, which was communal in nature came into existence called the Jan Sangh. In independent India the Jan Sangh was the mainspring of the communal problem and it kept on denouncing secularism as a 'western concept' alien to the Indian ethos.

Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, was a great champion of secularism and secular politics. Theoretically speaking the Congress Party was also committed to secularism. However, the Congress Party consisted of several members and leaders whose secularism was in doubt. But it was due to Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and B.R.Ambedkar that India committed itself to secularism and its Constitution was drafted on secular lines.

Secularism in India, as pointed out before, meant equal respect for all religions and

cultures and non-interference of religion in the government affairs. Also, according to the Indian Constitution no discrimination will be made on the basis of caste, creed, gender and class. Similarly all citizens of India irrespective of one's religion, caste or gender have the right to vote. According to Articles 14 to 21 all will enjoy the same rights without discrimination on any ground.

According to Article 25, all those who reside in India are free to confess, practice and propagate the religion of one's choice subject to social health and law and order. Thus even conversion to any religion of one's choice is a fundamental right. But the BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party) and RSS are opposed to all this. According to them there should be Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) in India and Muslims and Sikhs should be secondary citizens without any political rights.

Since the BJP is a political party it cannot say so openly and publicly. It also has to take pledge of upholding secularism in order to be able to contest elections. But since it is an integral part of the RSS ideology, it is also responsible for RSS beliefs. In fact all secular forces in India consider the BJP a communal party. It always takes an anti-minority stance and accuses the Congress, supposedly a secular party, of 'appeasement' of minorities. It also describes the Congress and other secular parties as indulging in 'pseudo-secularism'.

The RSS and BJP, also known as the Sangh Parivar, not only reject secularism but provoke violence against minorities. Since independence several major communal riots have taken place in India. The first such riot took place in Jabalpur in Central India and last major riot took place in Gujarat in Western India in 2002 in which more than

2000 Muslims were killed and several women were raped. When the Gujarat carnage took place, the BJP was in government in the state of Gujarat.

According to the filed evidence, BJP Chief Minister Narendra Modi was involved along with the entire governmental machinery in the carnage and on this basis the US Government denied him entry to the US in early 2005. The BJP was directly involved in high pitch propaganda against the historic mosque called Babri Mosque and ultimately demolished it claiming it to be a birth -place of Lord Ram, a Hindu god.

Lal Krishna Advani, who was then the President of the BJP, spearheaded the campaign against Babri Mosque and the mosque was demolished right in his presence. He later became Home Minister in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) ministry. He is known as a hardliner Hindu. Shri Vajpayee who became Prime Minister of India in the NDA Government, is known as the moderate face of BJP though one can say there is hardly any ideological difference between the two.

Secular and unsecular people

Now the question arises as to how many Indian people are secular and how many unsecular? Since secularism does not mean 'being this worldly' in India, one cannot say how many are believers and how many unbelievers. On the contrary, in the Indian context what it means is how many people are against people of minority religions like Islam and Christianity and how many people respect them.

In India an overwhelming majority of people are religious but tolerant and respect other religions and are thus 'secular' in the Indian

context. The followers of RSS and the BJP are very few, not more than 5-10 per cent. India has remained secular and democratic for its entire post-independence period (more than 58 years).

There is no doubt India has witnessed much communal violence but only due to involvement of RSS and BJP and occasionally the Congress in some places. Communalism is a powerful political weapon used by politicians of different hues. The Hindu masses are generally not to be blamed for such violence. However, few fanatics under the influence of RSS ideology are involved along with anti-social elements.

It is also true that on certain major issues, like disputes over the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, people get misled by powerful communal propaganda and may side with the BJP but that does not mean they are for violence and bloodshed. If they are properly informed they withdraw their support. However, secular forces are not as pro-active as communal forces are. Communal forces are actively spreading communal poison round the year whereas secular forces become active only after communal violence and once peace is established they become nonchalant. It is their nonchalance which benefits communal forces.

The communal forces thus came to power through false propaganda but were exposed during this five-year rule and were voted out of power as they were perceived to be behind communal carnage in Gujarat in 2002. No less than a person than Vajpayee, the former BJP Prime Minister, himself admitted that people rejected the BJP because they were held responsible for the Gujarat carnage.

This confession on the part of the BJP ex-

Prime Minister himself clearly establishes that the people of India are by and large secular and do not like killing of others just because they are not Hindus. Not only the BJP lost the election but also its allies, which are otherwise considered secular, suffered defeats. The BJP is today being deserted by its former allies as they realised that association with communal dispensation is not approved by the people of India.

There are some rationalists and secularists who reject religion in its entirety but such rationalists or secularists are extremely few. Though there are no census figures available but one can safely say they are less than 0.1% in India. Also, there are extremely orthodox people who exhibit rigidity and intolerance towards other faiths though of course not on communal grounds but on the grounds of religious orthodoxy but they too are in miniscule minority. Tolerance in India among people of all religions is widely prevalent. It is perhaps due to influence of the ancient Indian doctrine that 'truth is one but is manifested in different forms', and on the other hand due to the Sufi doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (Real Being is one) that implies that there is only One Real Being and all of us are mere manifestations of that real being.

As the ancient Hindu doctrine leads to inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence so does the Sufi doctrine. For peaceful co-existence another Sufi doctrine of *sulh-i-kul* i.e. total peace and peace with all is very important. Sufism left deep influence on Hindu masses as much as on Muslim masses.

Thus the real spirit of secularism in India is all inclusiveness, religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence. However, it is politics, which proved to be divisive and not religion.

It is not religious leaders by and large (with few exceptions) who divide but politicians who seek to mobilise votes on grounds of primordial identities like religion, caste and ethnicity.

In a multi-religious society, if politics is not based on issues but on identities, it can prove highly divisive. Politicians are tempted to appeal to primordial identities rather than to solve problems. The former case proves much easier. The medieval society in India was thus more religiously tolerant as it was non-competitive. The modern Indian society, on the other hand, has proved to be more divisive as it is based on competition. This competition becomes more acute if development is uneven and unjust.

Thus in the case of India one can say by and large it is secular in as much as it is religiously plural and tolerant but there are politically divisive forces quite active and create communal pressure and widen the gap between religious community thus bringing Indian secularism under threat.

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