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in

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

CONTENTS

25. THE SECULARISM DEBATE IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Surrounding the politics of religious identity, secularism debate has been gaining currency in past decades in India. The concept of secularism is highly controversial and problematic. The Oxford Universal Dictionary defines 'secularism' as a doctrine of moral philosophy which holds that 'morality should be based on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all consideration from belief in God or in a future state' (Srinivasan, 2007). Popularly, secularism is understood as mere tolerance of other people's religions. However, secularism as a philosophical doctrine is not necessarily the same as atheism. It is also an attitude of mind that actively seeks rational understanding of life's phenomena and resists transcendental ex-

planations or beliefs based on authority. Terms like 'secularism', 'secularization' are confusing and often interchangeably used. No doubt they are inter-related, there are some prominent differences amongst them. 'Secularism' is usually understood as an ideology, 'secularization' is seen as a process of a decline in religious activities, beliefs, etc. and 'secular', being an adjective, is often contrasted with religion. In other words, 'secularism' emphasises ideological aspect, 'secularization' emphasises processual aspect and 'secular' emphasises political-juridical.

Therefore, according to T. N. Madan (1991), secularism is a 'multivocal' concept: it says or means different things to different people. Predominantly, it stands for two different things, a policy and an ideology. In fact these two are the popular connotations of the term secularism. When we look at secularism as policy of the State, the latter is seen as being equidistant from all religious communities. Hence there is no State religion as such. But besides being the State policy, secularism should also successfully become the ideology of the people. If this fails to happen, then a secular State, in a communally divided society, is highly problematic.

The primary aim of this module is to provide the reader with an introduction on various aspects on the debate over secularism in India. The module talks about the existing and differing world-views of various persons on secularism that has given rise to ceaseless debate. It is primarily the debate between those who defend secularism and those who criticize it. It, however, also intends to place the concept of secularism in the Western and Indian contexts. With this, one should be able to understand the multiple strands in the various arguments criticizing and supporting secularism in India. It should be noted that this is not a comprehensive collection of perspectives on secularism.

THE CONCEPT OF SECULARISM: THE WESTERN CONTEXT

Secularism is indeed one of the greatest, and most admired, ideologies of our times, which has been equated with moral virtue as well as with scientific temper. As indicated by every dictionary of Western European language, it refers to the doctrine that rejects religion and religious considerations. The concept of secularism was coined by George Jacob Holyoake of England in 1851. Of course the background to the emergence of the modern ideology of secularism, is the conflict between *reason* and *faith* that showed up in the later Middle Ages in Western Europe. In common parlance, it was the conflict between the State and the Church, the breakup of the Christendom.

The Age of Reason or the Enlightenment, by the second half of the Increase Font Size eventually proclaimed the ideology of secularism. In fact, scholars like Peter Berger have put forth the thesis that secularization is a gift of Christianity to mankind. Amongst the early advocates of this ideology, Spencer and Saint-Simon, Comte and Durkheim, Marx and Weber were prominent. Thus, the idea of secularism, often seen as a gift of the Judeo-Christian tradition, was built into Western social theorists' paradigms of modernization (Madan, 1991).

The original usage of the term 'secular' from the Latin *saecularis* of Roman times referred to occasional celebrations. In Christian Latin, it referred to those living outside the regulations of the church, acquiring a negative connotation. However, by the early nineteenth century, the meaning of the term changed radically. Instead of differentiating the worldly from the religious, it vouched for the well-being of human society without any sanctions from the supernatural. The negative connotation slowly gave way to a more positive one (Thapar, 2007). It was in the twentieth century, including the collapse of the Ottoman empire at the end of World War I, a number of countries with significant ethnic, religious and cultural diversity attempted to keep the State and the public sphere separate from the private practice of the religion thereby establishing secular states (Srinivasan, 2007).

However in a more refined understanding, secularism as an ideology is believed to have emerged from the dialectic of modern science and Protestantism, rather than from a simple renunciation of religion and the rise of rationalism. Looking at the cultural reality of India and indeed whole of Asia, with so many existing religious traditions, the secular is rather included in the religious. Precisely for this reason, the idea of secularism yet remains alien to these religious traditions that have not developed the notion of secularism (Madan, 1991; Sathe, 1991). Therefore, one often seems to question the generalizability of the uniqueness of modern Europe's history, as this is situated in time and place.

THE CONCEPT OF SECULARISM: THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Sarva Dharma Sambava, is the Indian version of secularism. In the Indian context, Thomas (1991) asserts that the concept of secularism as a political philosophy emerged in the national independence movement. Further, the conceptual understanding of secular State in Indian context comprises two tenets: firstly, the fundamental civil right of religious liberty, while safeguarding religious and cultural pluralism; and sec-

only, emphasis on the modern democratic ideals of freedom, e Increase Font Size

Notwithstanding this, it should be also be remembered that secularism in India does not look at religious communities as static; but rather as active and dynamic and therefore the Indian secular State withheld with it the right to intervene, on certain grounds, in order to safeguard the democratic ideals. Clearly, this is unlike the USA's concept of Secular State (the Wall of Separation) as a complete non-interventionist. Whereas, the concept of Indian secularism envisages a measure of secularisation of Indian society for the sake of forming a national community on common social ideals. In other words, it is the non-discriminatory rejection of all religions. However, this attitude becomes impractical in a nation like ours where religion plays such an important role in almost everybody's life. The Indian conception of secularism only requires that there shall be no state religion and that the state shall treat all religions equally (Shah, 1968). In this context, as the state allows special intervention, it significantly differs from countries like USA and their understanding of secularism.

In reality, it has been, however, often noted that the Indian State is often a helpless arbiter of competing claims of rival fundamentalist contentions (Sathe, 1991). Of course, the reasons to be blamed for it range from lack of political will to vested interests of various political groups. Such situations are often attributed to two seemingly contradictory roles of the Indian State – of intervention and non-intervention – in the various religious matters for the purpose of social justice and equality. Its intervention is contemplated for the purpose of redefining the scope of religion and non-intervention has been contemplated in order to make religious organization autonomous from State intervention, besides concerns for equality and individual liberty. For instance, the intervention aspect of the Constitution includes the positive discrimination it practices in order to uplift the hitherto socially and economically backward communities. The interventionist approach followed by the Indian State in certain cases, is due to the fact that the concept of secularism is quite different in India from that of the western countries. However, there have been strong reactions against such practices (Kumar, 1992). In the context of American Constitution, the word 'secular' acquired a specific meaning, whereas, in the Indian situation demanded elasticity of approach considering Indian history, tradition and culture.

However, there is still no consensus with reference to the existence of various personal laws based on religion. Particularly the status of women is highly subordinated through these laws. Any attempt to rectify this meets a lot of resistance. Even the modernized and secularized laws such as Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, Hindu Adoption

and Maintenance Act, 1956 and Hindu Succession Act, 1956 are in [Increase Font Size](#) religious elements (Sathe, 1991).

The term 'secular' or 'secularism' was not initially incorporated into the Preamble of the Constitution in a written manner, although it existed in the minds of the makers of the Indian Constitution right from the beginning and it was thus assumed that the people would remain secular in their actions and thoughts. It was only in 1976, with the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution that word secular formally became an integral part of the Preamble of our Constitution. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Chairman of the Drafting Committee, while speaking on the Hindu Code Bill, in 1951, in Parliament, explained the secular concept as follows – "It (secular state) does not mean that we shall not take into consideration the religious sentiments of the people. All that a secular state means that this Parliament shall not be competent to impose any particular religion upon the rest of the people...." (Prasad and Anand, 2006, p. 793-794). Thus the meaning of the word secular was clearly expressed. However our Constitution does not build a wall of separation between the state and the religion.

As the Indian Constitution does not conceive of a clear separation between religion and State, it leads to confusion and often promotes bad blood amongst certain communities. One is confused to determine whether it is the intervention or non-intervention of the State, when it imposes sweeping restrictions on freedom of speech and expression, for instance, the ban on Salman Rushdie's book was seen as appeasement of Muslims, Ambedkar's riddles on Rama were held up owing to the Hindus protesting, etc. From these instances one can see how the political leadership selectively appeases both the minority as well as majority fundamentalism on various occasions (Sathe, 1991).

Baxi (1991) calls for a serious reflection on the meaning of 'religion'. Where, he asserts, do we qualify to understand the ideology, as Madan puts it, of religion as well as secularism? In other words, there should be clearer understanding and a somewhat universal interpretation of religion so as to understand and interpret secularism in its specific Indian context.

VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE DEBATE

Considering the multi-religious and culturally diverse reality of Indian society, secularism seems to be a difficult and complex subject. Therefore, with the rise of religious

fundamentalism and cultural nationalism, the debate on secularism is an overheated confrontation of contradictory perspectives (Heredia, 1995). Very clearly, there are two prominent groups of writers, social and political thinkers and scholars on the subject of secularism in India, i.e. the critics and the supporters of secularism. The critics oppose the conceptual structure of the doctrine. Scholars like Madan, AshisNandy and Partha Chatterjee are the main proponents of anti-secular arguments. For example, for Nandy, secularism is part of a larger modernist project. Whereas its supporters consider the viability of this doctrine and suggest to work out an alternative conception of secularism (Bhargava, 1998). Thus, various persons hold differing, often contradictory, views on the failure or success of secularism in India, as a policy and an ideology.

Secularism started posing as a question mark ever since the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri masjid controversy started leading up to the Babri masjid demolition (on 6th December 1992) by Hindu communal fanatics. The incident clearly showed how powerful religion can be and this generated a debate on the existing theories of secularism in India (Engineer, 1995). Thus many different strands of this debate became visible in the due course, with no proper long term solution reached as yet. All what is visible is a name game, whereby a particular community blames the other for communal actions and likewise, political parties blame their counterparts for being communal or rather spreading communal tension.

While secularism, in India, means equal respect to all religions, it should not mean equal encouragement to fundamentalism of all communities (Engineer, 1995) or political parties. Today, secularism is under great threat in many countries, particularly India. There are multiple intervening forces at work the either slow down or hamper the successful functioning of a secular State. Besides, apart from the possible incompatibility of the western concept of secularism within the non-western cultures, there is yet another influential pressure strengthening non-secular elements: the geopolitics. For instance, the US-supported military assistance responsible for the rise of Taliban, also supported by Pakistan (Srinivasan, 2007). In India too, we can see a strange combination of religious fundamentalism mixed with political conditions of the country that is often, deliberately, mistaken for nationalism. For instance, the Hindutva campaign, spearheaded by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) etc. promotes nationalism and Indianness through over-emphasis on *Hinduness*. Such political and religious outfits give undue weightage to the religious aspects thereby intentionally neglecting other important aspects, thus exploiting

people's religious sentiments for vested interests and resorting to religious identities which leads to polarisation among the masses. In this context, we ought to remember the Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya leading to communal violence and riots between Hindus and Muslims. Similarly, a tit-for-tat massacre in Godhra, in 2002, killed many innocent Muslims. With the emergence of the project of Hindutva, the dynamics between religions, especially Hinduism and Christianity drastically changed, with Christians being accused of forceful conversions, leading to Hindutva torchbearers calling for reconversion – '*gharwapasi*' – of those who got converted (Agha, 2014).

One cannot deny that any situation in India can become volatile considering the violent turn many trivial incidents take. Particularly when one looks at the multiple incidences of communal violence between two main religious communities i.e. the Hindus and Muslims. The term "Hindu", however, cannot be an umbrella term to cover all those who call themselves, or rather are identified as by other, Hindu. Hinduism is indeed a conglomeration of different types of beliefs, theistic and atheistic, and practices, many of which are at variance with one another (Prasad and Anand, 2006). In fact, the Indian religion as projected in the nineteenth century to ascertain Indian civilization was highly problematic. It predominantly referred to the religion of the elite and the tendency was to highlight the group of religions that were carefully selected and placed within the rubric of 'Hinduism'. When one looks deeper into this rubric of Hinduism, what appears is actually a vast number of sectarian identities – Vaishnava, Shaiva, Lingayat, Shakta, etc. with caste having its own rigid place in the society. Besides, secularism in India also cannot afford to ignore jati identities. All this makes its comparison with the European experience very problematic (Thapar, 2007). Further, one can also see various other community identities having their stake in various situations. So, while the minorities feel that they are being threaten by the majority, the majoritarian also feel being ignored and exploited due to special assistance given to the minorities at their cost.

However, it is quiet constraining and narrow-minded to think of secularism only in the terms of Hindu-Muslim question (Nauriya, 1989). This over-emphasis on the inter-religious aspects of this passive secularism however shows that it is the Hindu community displaying concessional attitude towards other communities, as clearly highlighted in the recent Hindu revivalist tendencies, for instance RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's controversial statement about India being a Hindu nation with Hindutva as its identity (Wajihuddin, 2014). But this kind of over-emphasis can be very misleading

as one is forced to ignore aspects other than inter-religious questions. Increase Font Size

uni-dimensional passive secularism, multi-dimensional secularization process is usually suggested as an apt way of dealing with problems caused by over-emphasis on Hindu-Muslim issues.

Secularism becomes highly debatable in the Indian context when one considers its Western origins, thus ignoring its historical specificity. Undeniably, the debate on secularism gets structured by the historical preponderance in Indian academia of the kind of critiques of the West, modernity and science. It is then argued that the real debate of secularism rarely touches the actual secular practices of the Indian state, what secularism means to ordinary people in India, how it is practised on the ground and so on (Hansen, 2000). In fact, these are very important questions one must attempt to answer so as to not to ignore its actual practical conditions that exist in day-to-day real situations. Mohanty (1989) differentiates between hegemonic secularism and democratic secularism. In India, he asserts, the State resorts to hegemonic kind of secularism through strengthening their grip on power. It only serves the interests of the ruling forces by manipulating various religious groups. *Sarva Dharma Sambava*, or the potentiality of Hinduism to accommodate all religions, i.e. a notion of multi-religious harmony actually contributes to the continued predominance of Hindu religion in society and the State. It is in deed a monolithic view of Indian tradition as a Hindu tradition. Such a glorification of Indian tradition by ignoring the contradictions and multi-stranded character, only to build an alternative theory, may also contribute to a trend of Hinduisation of the State. Democratic secularism, on the other hand, is part of a wider struggle against socio-political domination. It is a democratic struggle against class, caste and ethnic domination (*ibid*). This implies that reason and rationality are important in assessing the role played by religious institutions in socio-political domains of the society. This kind of rationality is in deed the base of a secular outlook; however, this rationality should not be dictated by the rulers of the State, often done for luring their prospective vote banks or for maintaining a status quo and thereby avoiding a confrontation.

India is currently struggling to negotiate between its secular doctrine and the communal forces that are dividing the nation. This brings us back to the aforementioned ongoing debate – whether is India really practising secularism, as a policy as well as an ideology, or is secularism simply camouflaging the political appeasement done for communal vote banks? Although there are many such issues, a few are particularly grave, forcing us to rethink our understanding of the term secularism. These issues

are as follows: firstly, the issue of certain sections demanding statehood on the religious, ethnic and linguistic bases, like the demand for Khalistan, Gorkhaland, Vidharbhand the just fulfilled demand for Telangana. The situation in the North-East is no better, or rather worst, with constant ethnic strife, like the on-going Assam border issues. Secondly, the Kashmir problem, where we do not see any deliberate political will to solve the issue. Thirdly, disharmony between the Hindus and Muslims, which aggravated since Babri Masjid demolition. In fact, communalism is one of the biggest threats to secularism in India. This sole problem has the potential of discarding and jeopardising the idea of secularism altogether. Fourthly, the caste political or caste-based political parties and associations are not working in the direction of eradication of castes, but instead promoting caste differences, adding fuel to discrimination. This problem also directly connects to the contentious issue of positive discrimination, i.e. the reservation policy. Fifthly, the highly controversial debate surrounding the Universal Civil Code, beginning almost with Shah Bano case in 1985.

In Indian secularism, there exists a paradox. Despite being modernized at one level, the Indian society is still incapable of challenging the very basis of loyalties which are based on primordial ties (Chakrabarty, 1990). So although we openly present a highly modernized and scientific outlook towards everyday problems, there are powerful contexts in which the primordial traditional ties and identities become extremely decisive and violent, negating all otherwise valid, scientific and logical arguments.

A careful inspection of school textbooks, leaving aside other multiple problems that these textbooks have, will reveal how the history is manipulated. Knowledge and power are two highly problematic domains. Persons holding power are known to subjugate the dissemination of knowledge for their various vested interests. Certain textbooks are known to glorify the religious and historical heroes of particular communities, i.e. promoting communal agenda in education through manipulating history. The result is that children of different communities do not have a common view of the history of our country (Shah, 1968). Bipin Chandra, renowned historian, also believed that the secular nationalism India experienced before independence was a far cry from the kind India has been witnessing today (Roy, 2014). The distorted perspectives about one's history can be very damaging in the long run, with children having no respect for the leaders or institutions of 'other' communities.

Nanda (2007), while offering a comparative study of secularism in India and US, attributes its failure to the absence of secular cultures and also the inadequate secular-

ization of cultural common sense. She points to how, in both the Increase Font Size been a visibly steady merger of the majority religion with the affairs of the State. And therefore, she asserts, that “the great ‘wall of separation’ between the church and the state could not keep the two apart in the US. Neither has the great Indian ‘wheel of law’ model of secularism prevented the rise of an intolerant variety of Hindu nationalism (p. 40). This she refers to as “religionisation” of the State and public sphere. Through this assertion she rejects the popular conventional thinking that a secular State can emerge and thrive easily in deeply religious societies by way of only committing itself constitutionally to secular ideals.

In a similar vein, Thapar (2007), while asserting that the idea of secularism is not alien to the Indian society, tries to examine how secularism has been imposed as an ideology, without having evolved as a process of secularization of Indian society, which is linked to inclusive nationalism thereby creating a modernized nation-state. Based on her assertion, in India, we can see two popular approaches on the relationship between religion and secularism: one arguing that secularism confronts religion leading to a rupture; the other defines secularism as co-existence of all religions with equal respect for all. However, this does not represent the Indian reality to its fullest as again its meaning is drawn on the medieval European context.

A. B. Shah (1968) argues that the Indian State has half-hearted attitude towards secularism and looks at the Indian society itself being anti-secular when it comes to the dealings with two major communities – Hindus and Muslims – which are equally sceptical about each other. It is here that modernizing the personal laws of certain communities becomes highly precarious situations for resistance. The State, it appears, is not committed enough to create public opinion and rather only tries to either appease certain groups or suppress dissatisfaction, resulting in further major violent outbreaks.

The composite Indian culture is being destroyed by the various types of revivalism, narrow religious concerns and invocation of primordial loyalties. Although the State does not involve itself in any religious matters, unless in special cases with provisions in place, yet many political parties are formed on the communal – religious and caste – basis that often seek to work against the communal harmony of the nation. In such a scenario, it is ironical that such political affiliations being coloured by religious/communal sentiments are automatically linked to the State that is supposed to be secular in principle.

The issue of secularism cannot be treated in isolation as it is linked to the nature of the State. Therefore, for proper understanding of the functioning of secularism, it is important to examine how those who control property relations handle the issue of secularism. This is because there is a difference between the dominant elite and the masses at large in their approach to the problem of secularism. In order to perpetuate their control, the elites manipulate religious sentiments and symbols, whereas, the situation at the level of the masses need not be as bad as it appears from the elite's level. To further complex the situation, in India, caste, religion and politics all overlap miserably. Caste and religion form communities that operate between individual and society, as they provide a sense of identity to its members (G. Shah, 1991).

CONCLUSION

Secularism has an element of activism rather than representing merely a passive belief. It involves as much denial as acceptance. Secularism does not argue against personal beliefs- as long as these beliefs are not institutionalized or imposed on anyone else.

With particular reference to secularism, we have plenty of laws, but lacking the will amongst its executors. Because of which, off late we are becoming more and more communal and narrow minded. The popular perception towards secularism looks at it as a 'philosophical necessity'. However, it is a very basic and practical requirement in order to keep India culturally and religiously united.

Although as an articulate theory, secularism is only a hundred years old and the western experience of separating state and church is less than four hundred years old. But the experience of identity groups living together is even older and is true of all civilisations. Therefore, it is inappropriate to dismiss secularism as a western idea, even though in none of the Indian languages there is an appropriate equivalent term (Mohanty, 1989). For a real positive change to happen in the direction of secularism, there should be a change in the attitude and thinking processes of every Indian, so as not to give religious significance to issues concerning other citizens and secular institutions at large. As already suggested by Nanda (2007), in order to attain secular state, we should first acquire secularisation of the civil society and the consciousness of its citizens.

Secularism has to involve itself with contending the politics of religion and religious organizations playing a political role (Thapar, 2007, p. 105). Secularism as a policy will not be successful as long as it is a result of an imposed ideology, without changing the structures supporting the status quo. Besides this, and most importantly, the reflection on secularism such include cross-references from Western countries as modern Western societies do not have a static and universal understanding of secularism. It is constantly undergoing change. This should be noted and acknowledged while considering its Indian context.

There is no harm in advocating secularism as well as religion at the same time. However, the correct balance should be achieved so that the religious institutions do not interfere with the secular ones, thus affirming the smooth functioning of the secular State in a multi-religious Indian society.

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