

UNDERSTANDING VIVEKANANDA'S 'UNIVERSAL RELIGION' IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIA'S PLURALISTIC ETHOS

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Abstract

India and its people have unique diversity in name of religion, cultural practices and tradition. Its socio-cultural and religious ethos is woven with diverse typologies; they express themselves differently through many languages, castes, creeds, cuisines, costumes and importantly faith and belief. What underlines its character is a spirit of mutual interest and tolerance. The people of India over the years have celebrated each of these differences, co-existed and absorbed the best from each other. What hence, defines the Indian pluralistic and secular ethos is mutual respect and tolerance of different religions and faith. The common belief in the goodness of mankind truth, non-violence and peace amongst all beings underlines Indian values. Swami Vivekananda's views on universal religion emphasize on the equality of all religions and the amalgamation of positive values in the Indian context. The paper will examine the nature and the context in which they interact at ideological and practical levels.

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Let us discuss the varied contexts in which secularism is expressed in Western and Indian perspectives. The word 'secular' is defined in the new oxford illustrated Dictionary (1978) as that "which is concerned with the affairs of this world; not sacred, not monastic or ecclesiastical, temporal, profane, lay; skeptic to religious truth or opposed to religious education". Secularism in the west arose in the context of a conflict between the church and the state as a sort of resolution in the form of separation of jurisdiction and power between the two. In the western world, it was desired that there should be a way forward on principles of secularism, which could free people from the tangles and controls of the church. George Jacob Holyoake (1851), for the first time, coined the word "Secularism" and conceptualized it. Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) further elaborated its basic tenets and virtually agreed with Holyoake. These two thinkers gave a new connotations to aesthetic and materialistic perspectives, also summarily rejected supernatural entities, like soul and God. Both of them gave to secularism a wholly materialistic and atheistic connotation thereby rejecting the existence of all

At political level, the western model of secularism means that religion and politics are separate from each other. In other words, politics does not enter in religious affairs and religion in political affairs. This also means that political mechanisms cannot correct the problem inside a religious group.

Secularism as Understood in the Indian Context

When India got independence, we adopted this western concept as a 'basic Feature' of Indian polity and society. But unlike in the west, there has been no conflict between religion and the state. On the contrary, there was a happy symbiosis of the two in this country. Moreover, the Indian mindset is religious basically. Indians are totally ruled by religion (it means rituals, religious beliefs of one's own religion in day-to-day life). Religion is a very cardinal point in the Indian mindset. In a country where the religious ethos is pre-dominant people live every moment of life with religious rituals, mythologies and prescriptions, It was just impossible to apply 'Secularism' in western sense. In India due to different religions being prominent, it developed its own new idea of secularism. As per the Indian tradition, we modified it according to India's age-old philosophy as expanded in scriptures called Upanishads. The idea of secularism developed with times and this gave birth to secularism based on mutual respect and assimilation. Therefore it became 'Sarva Dharma Samabhâva' i.e. equal respect for all belief systems. Indian secularism is conceptually similar to Religious Pluralism. Dr. S. Radha Krishnan was one of the chief advocates of the Indian spiritual Interpretation of secularism. Explaining this he says:

“Secularism, as here defined, is in accordance with the ancient religion’s tradition of India. It tries to build up a fellowship of believers, not by subordinating individual qualities to the group mind but by bringing them into harmony with each otherit (secularism) does not mean irreligion or adhesion or even stress on material comforts...it means we respect all faiths and religion” (Radhakrishnan, 1956, p-107)2

It is based on the belief that all religions are equally good. In a multi-religious society, it tends to connect and link the barriers of diversity. Radha Krishnan puts it succinctly, an extension of the principle of democracy to religion.

Indian Constitution, too, included many provisions which directly or indirectly are secular in Nature (of Indian Type). Though the word ‘Secular’ was introduced by the 42nd amendment act, 1976, yet the spirit of secularism was already prevailed in many provisions of the constitution. Fundamental Rights especially Article. 14-16 and Article. 25-30 are categorical examples of it.

Religious Pluralism

Indian Secularism is the practical aspect of Religious Pluralism. If religious pluralism is epistemology, Indian Secularism can be taken as the practical or ethical aspect of religious pluralism. There can be differences in language, rituals, or even of philosophies but such variations do not give one religion priority or superiority over another religion. It denies a religious exclusive approach which makes a follower believe that only his or her religion is ‘religion’, all others are not valid enough to be considered as ‘Religion’. Religious Pluralism also opposes the ‘religious Inclusive’ approach which gives superior status to one’s own religion and declares ‘others’ as qualitatively inferior.

Religious pluralism, as mainly proposed by John Hick, believes in ‘Democracy of Religions’ where every religion is given an equal status. Hereby equality we do not mean dead equality but ‘equally valuable truth despite variations in the expression’. All religions are equally true in that sense.

Many models of religious pluralism have been offered by different thinkers. Indian Secularism also is a prominent model of religious pluralism.

Religious Pluralism or Indian Secularism : Present Practices

Now, at this point, we can analyze the practice of Religious Pluralism or of Secularism in India. Here, more emphasis has been given to its social aspect. Do people take other religions equally good and have equal respect for them? Has it really been successful in removing hatred for religious ‘others’ from society? Do we respect other religions in a similar way as we revere our own?

A brief introspection on these questions would reveal that, the practice of tolerance and respect for other religions is problematic. 'Children are thoroughly indoctrinated in their own religions by parents'. We don't have any faith in doctrines of other religions, and people of such mindset are easily exploited by some fanatic leaders.

*"while the aggressive elements among the leaders of the so-called minorities raise cries of alarm that India is fast degenerating into a Hindu country, their counterparts among the Hindus cry foul and accuse the Government of minorityism"*³ (Madan, 1997, p-255).

We could not become secular in the western sense because of our tradition but we could not become secular in our own sense, too, and that is because of our mentality of not seeing any good in 'others'. In the words of Vivekananda;

*"The tiger in us is only asleep; it is not dead. When opportunities come, it jumps up and, as of old, uses its claws and fangs. Apart from the swords, apart from material weapons, there are weapons still more terrible -contempt, social hatred, and social ostracism"*⁴ (Vivekanand, 2006, p-364)

So we can say that secularism in India is a maximal failure if not totally. Of course, there are some bright examples of communal harmony but majority of the Indian mindset is too weak to be susceptible to communalism. While each religion does expound the principle of peace, mutual respect of faith and tolerance what passes out as practice is contestations of the dogmas and ideological impositions of righteousness.

Beliefs and Aberrations

We can find certain conceptual errors behind the weak application of 'religious Pluralism' and the breakdown of secularism in Indian society. The real problem lies in ignorance at two levels - Incomplete knowledge of one's own religion and Ignorance of good elements in other religious sects.

According to Vivekananda, each religion can be understood as having three parts. First, there is the philosophy that presents the whole scope of that religion, setting forth its basic principles, the goal and the means of reaching it. The second part is mythology. It consists of stories relating to the lives of men, or of supernatural beings, and so forth. It is abstraction of philosophy concretized in the more and less imaginary lives of men and supernatural beings. The third part is the ritual. This is still more concrete and made up of forms and ceremonies, various physical attitudes, flowers and incense, and many other things, those appeals to the senses, which are basically rituals. Almost every religion of this world has these three in one or other forms. Some lay more stress on one some on another.

As far as , knowledge of one's own religion is concerned, most Indians are aware of basic rituals, beliefs and to some extent certain mythologies as well . A farmer in India might not have a degree nor even schooling but he would be well aware of basic rituals, myths, or basic beliefs of his religion . He would be ready to go to the extent of making arguments to defend his religious beliefs . Every house in India is the training school for religious rituals and prayers , though without going into depth for finding reasons for them. And society unites in different groups in the name of these beliefs, rituals, etc.

However, if we discover deeper, it becomes clear that we Indians have knowledge of our respective religions but only at the surface level. From person to person there might be differences in their levels but if we ask about basic philosophy or gist of any religion, rarely do we find followers. *'If you asked people what they had learned or expressed through participation in such rituals, they would find the question rather strange. In most human groups people have all sorts of rituals but no good explanation of why they should be performed'* 5(Boyer, 2002, pg-266). Here, Religion works only at emotional level, rational satisfaction is not sought for.

The result of such a mindset is two-fold in Indian society-communalism and lack of religiousness. Emotional people are always prone to exploitation by the clever ones. People, who follow religion by emotions, are the first who attack the so-called 'others' in society. How is it that instead of hearing its sweet music of harmony, we hear only strains of discords? A lot of religions of the world that have succumbed to these evils, have functioned in a way that they have changed its whole quality, the very fabric. Through the ages, dark evils have been perpetrated in human society in the name of religion. True, Religion has been a source of light, strength, hope and peace to mankind, but it is also an undeniable fact that, because of religion millions of men or women have to pass through unspeakable horrors, humiliation and sufferings. And behind these sufferings were those people who did not reach to even basic philosophy of their own respective religions. The reality is that without the deep embalming effect of philosophy any religion would find it difficult to survive or flourish . The other drawback attached with this 'surface- epistemology' of religion is that it denies the followers to learn the true essence of religion. The aim of any religion is to keep us united in the name of certain moral prescriptions . Rituals, mythologies work as conveyers, transmitters of this religious essence from one generation to others. Common man cannot reach the heights of any religion, beyond the traditional knowledge and rituals , these rituals and stories serve the great purpose to keep religion flourishing. If we study the great religions of the world, we find these external, concrete symbols

have played a very important role in spreading the religion from one part of the world to other. *'Through rituals , people perhaps grasp or express important messages about themselves, their relationship to each other and their connection with gods and spirits'*⁶ (Boyer,2002,p-266). In India , it can be observed easily that Hinduism is alive because of women and Islam because of men. The reason behind this is that in Hinduism women and in Islam men follow rituals strictly. But religion is not all rituals or mythologies, when we give utter emphasis on these external symbols of religion we forget to pursue the real essence of it i.e. influx of religiousness in nature. Morality can be inculcated in nature through religion only when we can go deep inside it. Rituals or mythologies might bring unity or sometimes brotherhood but this would be only at surface level . When situation is opposite, this unity or moral behavior proves very fragile. True religion dawns in one's life only when he or she understands the core values of religion.

The other conceptual mistake behind the failure of Indian secularism is negative or neutral attitude towards 'other' religions. This problem is related to 'Religious Pluralism' as well. Like religious pluralism, Indian secularism, too, conceptually requires a positive mindset for other religions. But how can this attitude be inculcated in the minds of people? Indian Secularism does not prescribe any practical path. Only by preaching does nobody become liberal from religious point of view. In our lives, we respect those with whom we feel a positive connection. Without knowing the good values in somebody how can we have respect for him? And if the respect comes from outside, something superimposed, it can create at most religious toleration in society. 'Why should people practice toleration? 'Toleration' means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to co-exist, it's a negative term. But this 'forceful love' is inevitable in any society where people are not aware of good aspects of each other. And in the absence of knowledge of other paths of religion, generally religious leaders make absolute claims.

*"We have been like a company of people marching down a long valley, singing our own song, developing over the centuries our own stories and slogans, unaware that over the hills there is another valley, with another great company of people marching in the same direction, but with their own language and songs and stories and ideas; and over another hill yet another marching group -each ignorant of the existent of the others."*⁷(Hick, 1982)

Singing the song in the glory of our own religion only and seeing all truth in it, is the basic reason for religious fanaticism. The extremists or zealots commit all sin under the name of religion. Indian secularism requires a society where people have a positive approach to 'others' religions and this would be possible

only when we interact with each other's , just to learn something good from them. Knowledge of positive, universal aspects of other religions is prerequisite condition for generating regard for them.

Vivekananda's Universal Method : A Perfect Approach

Now question is, do we have good elements in all religions? When asked "What is good in Islam?" Vivekananda replied—"If there was no good how could it live? The good alone lives. Muhammad was the prophet of equality, of Brotherhood of men'. The same answer can be given about all other religions. According to Vivekananda, each of these different religions has excelled in one or another part of spirituality. There come ups and downs in every great religion but that soul of religion is never lost. 'Each religion as it were, takes up a part of the great Universal truth, and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth". If one continues to work on these values no religion can be lost. We all should know about that ideal, that mission of other religions .

As hinted above, in Islam ideal for which almost all energy has been spent, in the eyes of Vivekananda, is 'Brotherhood'. Islam makes its followers all equal and it is the peculiar excellence of this religion. There is no feeling of higher or lower, no feeling of Black and white. 'Once I accept Islam, every Muslim will receive me as his own brother.' And what Islam comes to preach to the world is practical brotherhood of all belonging to their faith. Here, there is no empty talk; they make it possible by their behaviors. Islam is the champion of equality; here everybody is equal irrespective of his/her status, caste, place of Birth. The only condition is being a Musalman. In a lecture delivered in a church in California Vivekananda said:

"As soon as a man becomes a Mohammed , the whole of Islam receives him as a brother with open arms, without making any distinction, which no other religion does. If one of your American Indian becomes a Mohammedan, the Sultan of Turkey would have no objection to dine with him....." 8 (Vivekananda, 2006, p-371)

The central idea in Christianity is 'purity of heart and Mind' by the means of 'Service of mankind'. Christ taught: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". Holiness or purity in man is that attitude in a man's spirit manifested in his thoughts, desires and actions, which make him, do only such things which he knows and believes to be God's will for him to do. To keep this spirit alive, Christians all over the world are always ready to bring themselves nearer to God by helping others. They open Charity hospitals, schools etc. for the welfare of humanity. In India, the Contribution of Mother Teresa is an indelible part of our history? She became the mother of thousands of poor children and she took care of them with

true spirit of service. She did not hesitate in serving even leprosy patients. We should recollect that the Christians are, even in the darkest days, even in the most superstitious Christian Countries, works for the betterment of mankind , by trying to help others, building hospitals, and so o, as this would help him on the day of judgment. These values and sanctity help Christianity to flourish.

In the same way, Hindu's central idea lies in its spirituality. According to Swami Vivekananda, there is emphasis on defining, and practicing the spirituality through religion. They tried to define the ideal of soul so that no earthly touch might mar it. The spirit must be divine; and spirit understood as spirit must not be made into man. 'Renunciation and spirituality are the two great ideas of India, and it is because India clings to these ideas that all her mistakes count for so little. Yes, in the name of religion, thousands of poor people are being exploited by high-profile religious leaders, but all this happens because Hindu Mind is religious by nature and it is easy to make them fool in the name of religion. But this is the religion that gave one of the highest spiritual philosophies. Upanishads, Gita and many of the spiritual leaders are treasures of Hinduism. India was considered 'Vishwa Guru' in the field of religion and stood firm on its ground because of spirituality. Meditation or Yoga, still, is the propagator of Hindu Spirituality in the world. We can say, it is Ahimsa (Non-Violence) with Jainism, with Buddhism it is Dhyana (Meditation), with Sikhism it is great regard to Guru (teacher), and their entire activities move around these central Idea.

Here, we can safely conclude that each religion has contributed towards a better understanding of and growth of true religious ethos. '*Each one represents a great truth; each religion represents a particular excellence something which is its soul*'. Compassion, mutual respect and peace are Universal beliefs that are emphasized by all major religions and find a place in the Universal religion of Swami Vivekananda. Perhaps, in the present world, such ideas and ideals find more resonance and relevance. Everybody should be benefited from these excellences; it is the beauty of the world that we have so many paths of spirituality and religion. Only by recognizing and respecting this diversity Indians will witness a true secularism of its own type. In the course of action for Indian Secularism, we need to focus on the positive and universal aspects of others . Meaningful and acceptable secularism can only flourish if the narratives we choose empathize on common elements rather than on issues in which there are contestation and ideological differences. The philosophies of Swami Vivekananda are real guides in bringing 'Indian Secularism' and 'Religious Pluralism' together in a true sense.

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