

Shifting Dynamics of Secularism Form the Ancient to Modernizing India

Dr. Anita Agarwal

Department of Political Science

Dyal Singh College, Karnal

Email: anitadsc@gmail.com

Abstract

The one prominent idea that India is believed to have imbibed since time immemorial is that of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava”, which preaches the respect and equality of all religious beliefs existent in the state. Even before Secularism developed as a concept, it was prevalent in the Indian society which unified the various present diversities into one strong nation. Minorities have always existed within India, or any other nation for that matter. However, what makes India an exemplary study, in this case, is its ability to be accommodating and just to its minorities and not just the majority. With the colonizers coming to India, the threat of differences among existing communities became widespread which also materialized into the Partition of the country on the basis of Communal lines, as a repercussion of the British policy of ‘Divide and Rule’. Through this, it is comprehended how communalism and secularism are inextricably linked and only with the former being curbed can the latter be achieved in its true essence, which is still as far-fetched. Since its inception, efforts have been made to keep the nation united and tolerant of all religious beliefs. This began with the introduction of the terms ‘Secularism’ and ‘Socialist’ by the 42nd Amendment Act in 1976, by virtue of which it was declared that India has no State religion, and that all existing religious identities (Minorities and Majority) are to be equally treated and respected. The major point of contention here, however, revolves around the issue of how well is this concept actually conformed to by the state and its people. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to study the concept and the essence of ‘Secularism’ in India, the shifting dynamics of Secularism across different time periods, and how Secular India is in the modernizing times.

Keywords

Secularism, Constitution, India, Amendment, Modernisation.

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Dr. Anita Agarwal

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Hypothesis and Objective of the Paper

The major objective of the paper is to study the changing trends and the development of 'Secularism' from the Ancient to the modernizing India. Another objective is to find out if the mention of Secularism in the Indian Constitution is enough to consider the nation secular in reality, and if the ideal belief of 'Sarva Dharma Sambhavana' is adequate enough to establish a Secular state in India.

The hypothesis of the paper is thus that 'India is a 'Secular' nation in its true essence, owing to its history and evolution of multiculturalism from the Ancient to the modern times'

Introduction

- **Secularism in the Indian Essence**

In the crudest definition, Secularism is the separation of the State from the religious affairs of the citizens. Therefore it can be inferred that the Secular state is the one with no state religion and the state thus does not either promote or interfere in any religion, for example, India. However, the meaning and essence of secularism, and the politics surrounding it go much beyond the text. Secularism is believed to have been brought to India by the 42nd Constitutional amendment, as a repercussion of which it came to be enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India. This claim however forms a major point of contention after research, which suggests that Secularism was pervasive in the Indian society long before it even developed as a concept. In the history of Indian tradition, Theology and not Theocracy are believed to have been relevant. Among the people then, as Rajeev Bhargava stresses, their only sense of personal identity or self was the social identity that they constantly tried to assert, creating a state of chaos, disorder, and intolerance as we see even today, but in a rather subtle disorganized form. More than anything thus, Secularism in India developed and sustained as a spiritual belief as expressed in the Vedas and Upanishads, the timeline of which is still speculated. Prior to the colonial rule in India, there was very limited religious intolerance, thus separating 'Secularism' and 'Communalism'. With the coming of the British, however, religion became intrinsic and an inseparable part of politics and societal organization, and Secularism started losing its ground. With India being partitioned into two independent entities of India and Pakistan, one of the major objectives of the founding forefathers was the establishment of 'Secularism' that would bind different religious communities together, especially the 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. For this, as we know, several prominent figures contributed their bit in trying to make the nation more tolerant, for example, Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Nehru, to name a few. Though their views could be conflicting sometimes,

they all believed in one greater idea, i.e. “Sarva Dharma Sambhavana”. Interestingly enough, with the advent of politics and as India headed towards modernization, various political parties started mobilizing on account of Religion. Karl Marx appropriately described religion to be the ‘opium of the masses’. In a similar misunderstood fashion, people began polarizing and attempting to supersede all the existent religions, in order to establish theirs as of supreme importance. It is to be noted that India is a society dominated by Hindus in number with the stratification as such, Hindus being 82.7%, Muslims 11.4%, Christians 2.4%, Sikhs 1.9%, Buddhists 0.7%, Jains 0.5%, and other 0.4%. With such a division, it is convenient for the majority, i.e. Hindus to polarize and stand against the minorities making them feel alienated and this is furthered when Political parties come into being on the basis of religion (for example, Bhartiya Janta Party, which is predominantly focused on Hinduism.) Therefore we see, in due course of time, Communalism has started taking over Secularism, a principal enshrined in the constitution, and a new term i.e. ‘Pseudo-Secularism’ has come into the frame. Events like Mob lynching over the years, resulting in widespread violence against a certain community like the Anti- Sikh riots of 1984, the ongoing Babri Masjid case that formerly led to Gujarat riots in 1996 and later 2002, mass exodus of Kashmiri Hindus, and until recently, the ongoing Kashmir militancy whereby Muslims are targeted in other parts of the country as well labeling them as ‘terrorists’ are a testimonial to prove that India is heading towards intolerance and is losing the true essence of ‘Secularism’ now more than ever. These communal forces have become very prominent, and they tend to alienate and oppress the minorities, thus leading to demands such as that of a separate nation for each. However, the sheer fact that India still stands strong as one of the biggest multicultural democracies of the world cannot be forgone. Owing to these contentions, the paper is structured into three parts, the first part deals with the study of Secularism in the Ancient India, followed by the second part dealing with the development and evolution of the Constitution, and the third part focuses on the changing trends in the modernizing India in order to study the evolution and address the questions thereof.

- **Secularism in Ancient India**

In the Ancient times (as even so today), when the society was not yet clearly demarcated on the basis of religion, India still had plural forms of polity, as appropriately comprehended by Professor J.J. Anjaria in his survey on the Ancient Indian polity. In those times, the predominant religion was sacrificial Hinduism, but the thread of understanding and accommodating for different thoughts and opinions existed. The ancient state was recognized by an intricate connection between the state and religion. As the separation of these two entities is almost always talked about but can never

possibly be achieved stands true from those times itself. In those times, the concept of 'Dharma' was more prevalent than religion as a religion only came to constitute a part of Dharma. As it is known, the societal demarcation on the basis of caste was more prevalent than religion back then, in the following order as mentioned i.e. Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The Brahmins topped the hierarchy and were the source of dominance in the society. This can also be substantiated with an example in which it was described how there was a constant friction between the State and Religion and how the Brahmins were the supreme authority that even superseded the King, as a matter of which the King was bound to favor them by freeing them from any sort of taxation or punishments in the society. As mentioned above, Secularism cannot be talked about devoid of Communalism, which is why it is imperative to mention that even the Ancient period witnessed mass-level conflicts based on religion, as is also appropriately cited by Romila Thapar while she talks about the conflicts and abhorrence between the Buddhists and Shaivites. During the Mauryan period, religion was appropriately used to achieve political gains. However, this stands antithetical to what has been mentioned in the Arthashastra that the tradition followed is "a purely secular theory of the state of which the sole basis is power"¹. It is pertinent to note that one of the first rulers which came to be hailed as a secular ruler was Asoka. During his reign, Dharma was considered the most important, which outshined the religious divide existing in the society. After Asoka, however, this came to be followed as a norm in order to garner popular support (as is witnessed even in present times). The Gupta period saw a significant rise in the secular policies of the state, as they followed the policies of greater tolerance across religions, and allowed the sustenance of religious sects other than just the prominent few. Post that, during the medieval times, the concept of Secularism was still considered significant. During this time, the major role to glue the various diversity in the society to keep it intact was majorly the Bhakti and Sufi movements. To name a prominent few who were the flag-bearers of the movement, such as Guru Nanak Dev, who propagated the idea of unity and harmony in all his teachings, and others belonging to different religions and communities like Mira Bai, Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, etc. Therefore, it is appropriate to state that Secularism in India preceded both what's written and known in the history ever.

- **Secularism in The Indian Constitution**

After the inception of India as an independent (divided) nation on 15 August 1945, the major task at hand was the drafting of the Indian Constitution. Without going into much detail about the constitution and how it came into being, the focus is to be laid on the principles of 'Secularism' as enshrined in the constitution, and to see

if that was enough to develop India into a Multicultural Secular state. It is to be noted that the omission of the word 'Secular' in the Constitution took place only after by the 42nd amendment act, prior to which the Constitution lacked the mention of the term. However, in order to analyze the plausible reasons for the same, it is necessary to focus on this debate in the Assembly which declared its strong and solemn resolve to recognize India as an Independent Republic, wherein all of its citizens would be granted Justice, Equality, Freedom, alongside adequate safeguards for minorities. These debates emphasized the need for India to stand unified, and although the term 'Secularism' was not used, the secular character of the Constitution was much emphasized whereby the members had an adequate understanding of the same. Another reason why Secularism was not adopted and specified as a concept in the Constitution even though internally recognized was that 'Secularism' especially at that time was recognized as a manifestation of the West, a product of the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment. Due to this reason, most of the leaders within the Constituent Assembly were apprehensive of adopting the term 'Secularism' as it might reflect as a European manifestation, something that they had not long ago gotten themselves out from the clutches of. Thus, questions were posed regarding the applicability of this principle in newly independent India. After the amendment, India, as defined by the Preamble, became a "Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic", and as observed by Justice Ahmadi and cited by V.M. Tarkunde, "As in the case of S.R. Bommai vs. Union of India, the Amendment merely made explicit what was already implicit in the provisions of the Constitution." This can be proven by virtue of how Fundamental Rights were incorporated into the Constitution. In an intriguing testimonial fact, there is an exception to the Freedom of Conscience in Article 25 in Clause 2(b) whereby any religious institution propagating the religious studies would not just be bound to that particular religion. For example, if any law manifests the religious studies and the formation of religious institutions, it has to be of public character and at large, open to all sections. That is to say, if an institution preaches Islamic studies, it would be open to all and not just Muslims. The other motivating principle of Secularism that establishes a state without any state-sponsored religion (unlike Muslim countries, like Pakistan) found traces in the Fundamental Rights, Articles 27 and 28. Therefore, through this, it can be briefly garnered that Secularism in India has been appropriately enshrined and accommodated by the Constitution, and that was even before it was omitted in the Preamble. However, it is pertinent to note that Secularism is an ever-continuous process, and the establishment of the true secular state can only be achieved at a certain stage that is not really known. Thus, In a country like India, though the Constitution and the law

play their part in containing secularism, it is certainly not enough to embody the entire country into a secular nation in its real essence.

- **Secularism in Modernising India**

As previously mentioned, the term ‘Secularism’ was not incorporated in the Indian Constitution for a longest time because it was considered as a Western concept as it had originated there, demarcating the separation of Church from the affairs of the State. After being added to the Preamble, ‘Secularism’ became the unifying force that held the nation together, as it connotes the treatment of all religions equally and the absence of a state religion. However, in the changing trends, India does not seem to be as secular in its essence owing to how various political parties have used the term to their advantage, leading to large-scale mobilizations. As it is known, Hinduism is the largest religion in India. Owing to the same, India has lately been identified as a ‘Hindu’ nation, and not a secular one. It is believed that in practice, the Indian state privileges Hinduism over other religious beliefs which will be demonstrated further. The Indian state has been seen to be overly concerned with the social welfare of Hinduism, as is also demonstrated in the Article 25 of the Constitution. Our constitution does not comprehend as to who is a ‘Hindu’, but it does define the followers of other religious communities like Sikhs, Buddhists, etc as ‘Hindus’ in order to prevent the conversions to other prominent religions, as it seems. In the case of the personal laws, there isn’t a mention of any Buddhist, Jain, or Sikh, thereby categorically putting them all under the HMA to absorb them into a Hindu fold. Certain Articles enshrined in the Constitution also provide for funds to maintain the temples established which makes the entire concept of Secularism redundant. Over time, there have been restrictions imposed by several states concerning conversions from Hinduism to any other religion. In the infamous Babri Masjid demolition case, a huge number of Muslims were targeted and as it is known, state-sponsored mob lynching happened which further alienated the existing minority community. Not just that, the entire ‘Mandir’ debate has become a tool of mobilization for the political parties to flood their vote banks by following the policy of appeasement. It is pertinent to mention here that prior to the 1984 Sikh- riots, the army was adequately deployed to flush out the insurgents but little was done to prevent the riots that followed. Similar stands true of the Ayodhya dispute and many more such. Interestingly enough, the Prime Minister himself asserted building a temple on the site of the destructed mosque. In India, the Ram Mandir moment is more than just an electoral ploy, and heads toward establishing India as a Hindu nation. It is to be noted that the premise on which Secularism rests, i.e. the demarcation of state and religion, seems to be crumbling down in India. Just a few years back, a Harvard- educated senior BJP

official tweeted that the inevitable destiny of India, describing it as ‘Bharat Mata’, is Ram Mandir that will ultimately result in a true ‘Hindu ashtray. Not just this, there have been massive discriminations regarding employment and education favoring Hindus for ages. Across educational institutions in states like Maharashtra and Gujarat, students have been compelled into performing ‘Surya namaskar’, which makes the secular claims in the fundamental rights redundant. In another intriguing mention, it is to be noted that in almost all the social studies textbooks, Hindus are shown to be of utmost significance and have a good character, while the other religions, especially the Muslims, are shown to be demonic and abhorrent. This conditions the children from a very young age to develop hatred for an entire community altogether, sowing the seeds of intolerance further in society. In another interesting example, Yogi Adityanath was appointed as the CM of UP, and happens to be the head of a Hindu religious institution. All the causes supported by the present government of a supposedly secular nation revolve around the reinforcement of Hinduism as the religion of the state, such as reconversion or ‘ghar was (by virtue of the Shuddhi program by Arya Samaj)’, abandonment of slaughterhouses leaving innumerable butchers vulnerable, tacit support to cow vigilantes, and what not. It is imperative to mention the cultural ethos surrounding Secularism. However, it seems as if Hinduism and its culture are conflated with the Culture of India. The entire politics revolving around the cow slaughter ban is preposterous. As a result of this, innumerable people are beaten to death by the Hindu extremists, most of which are not even in the picture. Ban on food which might not be holy to other existing religions within the society in no way goes with the secular character of a nation. All these testimonies and many more, record the changing trends of secularism in modernizing India, making India more intolerant than ever and giving a boost to the extremism of a particular religion to the sideline and alienate the other, disregarding the whole concept and essence of ‘Secularism’ as superfluous.

Conclusion

To conclude, in an essay by Neera Chandhoke, it was appropriately comprehended how Bhikhu Parekh had found the belief of ‘Sarva Dharma Sambhavana’ in the Indian context highly problematic. He expounded how this belief itself was highly non-secular in itself because it is the Hindu belief that all religions are inherently biased and limited in their approach, however, it is not shared equally by all religions. He also believed that different religions had their different concepts and beliefs of God, and that one supreme belief cannot be imposed on all other existing ones. As a result, the hypothesis stands negated since it is read and understood that although there has been adequate representation of Secularism in the constitution

that alone is not enough to ensure that India will strive as a secular state in reality. That said, a secular state cannot strive just by virtue of law. A more important pursuit would be to disseminate the true ideas of Secularism among the public at large through both modernity and tradition in which the political parties can have a major role to play. The extent of intolerance, religious orthodoxy, and fundamentalism is more pervasive in the society today than it ever was even in the Ancient times. With the advent of Globalization and Modernization, it is also pertinent to mention as how history suggests, even before the secular state was set up, the secular society was functioning in the ancient times, and that is what the modernizing India has a lot to learn from.

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