

Challenges and Future of Indian Secularism¹

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Received: 27 January 2023; Accepted: 05 March 2023; Published: 19 June 2023

Introduction

Secularism is a difficult and complex phenomenon particularly in a country as culturally diverse and multi-religious as India. In India, secularism acquires added significance keeping in view the crucial fact that Indians have been deeply weeded to Indian consideration in the past and hold on to such consideration even today.

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of nation, was a great believer in communal harmony, national integration and secularism as "Serva Dharma Sambhava" i.e. equal respect for all religion. In 1946 the communal strife became very acute, he declared: "All those who are born in this country and claim her as motherland whether they are Hindu, Parsi, Christian, Jain or Sikh are equally her children and therefore, brother united together with a bond stronger than that of blood."

During freedom struggle the Indian National Congress held many rounds of debate on secularism and what character the state of India was to assume. No doubt, it was accepted that India, inhabited by many religions, will not discriminate against any religion and will allow freedom of religion to the followers of different religions. Jawaharlal Nehru, the giant leader of freedom struggle, provided a secular and economic base, a truly international outlook on rational and modern basis; to the country he laid the foundation of our democracy and secularism. Throughout his life he fought for secularism. It is hard truth that the religions have blocked the development of our society. They are become the source of communalism, separatism and terrorism. The history tells us that the numerical strength of the dying people in the communal riots remains always greater than those dying in the floods, earthquakes and droughts etc. the only cure of these religion related problems is the secularism.

Unfortunately, the secular traditions have failed to become a part and parcel of our life. We always remain divided into

As and when communal riots take place in our nation, they claim big loss in term of men, property, time and energy. On account of it, our basic needs such as food, cloths, housing, health, education, security and employment etc. remain unfulfilled today. The present paper is an attempt to study the challenges to secularism in India and its future. But it is fact that secularism is a principal of reality, not the myth of the minds of academicians and thinkers.

Meaning of secularism

The word 'Secularism' has been defined by Encyclopedia Britannica as "Non spiritual having no concern with religious or spiritual matter". It further adds "As the word implies, secularism is based solely on consideration of practical morality with a view to the physical, social and moral improvement of society. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word '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 consideration drawn from belief in God or in future state'

The term 'secularism' is made up of the secular word which is derived from classical expression secularism. It means not concerned with the religion, not sacred, not monastic. This term first of all had been used in a theoretical sense in Europe in 1851 after the conflict arose between the church and the state. It is one doctrine which rejects religion or

¹ How to cite the article: Prabhu K.; Jan-Jun 2023; Challenges and Future of Indian Secularism; *International Journal of Development in Social Sciences and Humanities*; Vol 15, 84-90

religious consideration in the state activities.

Indian Concept of Secularism:

Indian concept of secularism is quite different from the western concept of secularism, which implies anti-religious ideology. Secularism in the Indian context means an equal status for all religions. The debate in the Constituent Assembly affirmed that secularism was not a religious or anti-religious concept. Sarva Dharma Sambhava is the central idea of Indian Secularism, which means equal respect of all religious communities by the state.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, while participating in the debate on Hindu Code Bill in 1951 explained the secular concept as thus: "It (secular) 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." Therefore, in India secularism is neither a favour to religion, nor indifference to religion but equal respect to all religion, or mere tolerance but positive respect. In other words, secularism in India means equal opportunity for all religion and appeasement for none.

Jawaharlal Nehru, being a mature and learned statesman, visualized that if India is to remain strong and united, then secularism is must because this is only way when the people of India having different caste, creeds, communities, colours, cultures, languages, customs and traditions can be brought under a single umbrella. The concept of secularism is not the negation and condemnation of any particular or all religions, but to respect all religions, and conduct the affair of state in an impartial manner and having no bias and prejudice in favour or against any religion.* In India, a citizen enjoy equal rights and duties in the public life but is free to practice and believe in his own religion.

Why India needs Secularism?

In a plural society like India with a multiplicity of religions, creeds and culture. democracy cannot survive and much less flourish unless it is based on the principal of secularism. Therefore, by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act 1976, the preamble of the constitution was amended to include the word "Secular". Adoption of the principal of secularism in India owes following factors:

During the national movement of freedom, communal politics developed, resulting in division of India. Taking a lesson from that the constitution makers kept religion and communalism out from the state and politics.

Formed over thousands of years as a country of immigrants who brought their own religions, culture and traditions, India's diversity is proverbial (Bhattacharyya, 2003, 153). Therefore, India is regarded as one of the most religiously diverse country in the world, with significant number of Hindu (80.5%), Muslim (13.4%), and Christian (2.3%), Sikh (2.1%), Buddhist, and Jain population (census

2001). Model of secularism in respect of minorities in India is the greatest protector of their interests. That was why, secular state was founded in India. Under the new constitution, democratic system has been established, and in a democratic state, all citizens have a right to equality. If a country is inhabited by the citizen of different religions, and the state give more importance or protection to a particular religion or shows discrimination against another religion, it means the state does not follow the principal of equality among its citizen.

Human rights are basis of democracy. Among these rights individual freedom is very important. Religious freedom is an integral part of individual freedom. It amounts to interfere in the freedom of an individual; if he/she is forced to follow a particular religion or he/she is discriminated on the ground of following or not following a particular religion.

Every citizen has a right to follow the religion of his choice. If the state interferes in the choice of religion of an individual, the state ceases to be a democratic set-up. Above facts clear that there are many communal and religious groups are living in India. Therefore, it has not taken to be good to give special recognition to a particular religion. Secularism is the foundation-stone of our nationality. The essence of our human values is the result of co-existence of different religions for the last thousands of years.

Secularism is a unity in diversity. It is an embodiment of our regard to glorious diversities.

So, in India, secularism does not mean opposition of religion or irreligion. It means equal respect to all religions-whether it is religion of majority or minority. Secularism involves full freedom of worship and propaganda of their

respective religions. The state has no religion, and it prohibits any discrimination against any person or religious group on the basis of religion. It can be said that the secularism serves as the oxygen without which a multi-religious country like India cannot survive.

Constitutional Provision of Secularism in India:

Indian secularism was first defined by the constituent assembly on April 3, 1948 thus, Whereas it is essential for the proper functioning and growth of National Unity and Solidarity that communalism should be eliminated from Indian life, this assembly is of the opinion that no communal organization, which by its constitution or by exercise of discretionary power vested in any officer and organ, admit to or excludes from, its membership persons on ground of religion, race and caste or any of them, should be permitted to engage in any activities other than those essential for the bonafide, religious, cultural, social and educational needs of the community and all steps, legislative and administrative, necessary to prevent such activities should be taken.

Secularism was incorporated in the Indian constitution in the light of above resolution of the Constituent Assembly. The provisions of Indian Constitution make clear the nature of secularism in India. Broadly speaking, secularism in India means four things:

- a. The rejection of theocratic or semi-theocratic state,
- b. The proclamation that religion is of private or group concern,
- c. Equality of all citizens irrespective of his caste or creed, and
- d. The right of the state interferes in the religious practices of various communities in the interest of their peaceful co-existence and cultural development.

In the preamble of Indian constitution, it has been said that every citizen shall have freedom of self-expression, faith, religion or worship. In 1976, 42nd Constitutional Amendment, has made clear that the concept of secularism by incorporating the word 'Secularism' in the preamble of our constitution. The second basis of the secular state is inclusion of religious freedom in the fundamental rights.

Article- 14 of the Indian constitution provides, the state shall not deny to any person equality before law or the equal protection of laws within the territory of India.

Article-15 says no discrimination will be done on the basis of caste, creed, religion, sex, and place of birth, residence or any of them.

Article 16 says no discrimination shall be done on the basis of religion, race, caste, and sex, place of birth and residence of any of them to get any employment or office under the state. Article- 19 of our constitution safeguards the six freedoms our citizens without any discrimination of religion, caste, creed, race, sex and place of birth. They are

1. Freedom of speech and expression.
2. Freedom of assembly.
3. Freedom of association.
4. Freedom of movement.
5. Freedom of residence and settlement.
6. Freedom of profession, occupation, trade or business.

Article -25 give all citizens freely profess, practice and propagate religion of their choice.

Article -26 give right to all citizens free to establish and maintain institution for religious and charitable purposes, to manage its own affairs in matters of religion or own and acquire movable and immovable property and to administer such property in accordance with law. Article- 27 express that the state will not compel any citizen to pay any tax for

the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious institution.

Article-28 says that no religious education shall be provided in any institution which is funded by the state and govern by the state. No one will be forced to follow a religion under the institution which is financially aided by a state.

Article-29 provides that no citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the state or receiving aid from the state on the ground of religion, race, caste and language.

Article -30 give right to the all minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institution of their choice.

Apart from this in Article - 325 it is mentioned that there shall be one general electoral roll for every territorial constituency for election to either house of parliament or to either house of legislature of a state, and no person shall be ineligible for inclusion in any such role or claim to be included in any special electoral roll for any such constituency on ground only of religion, race, caste, sex or any other claim.'

With the efforts of Nehru, the Constituent Assembly adopted Article 44 under the Directive Principal of state policy which state: "The state shall Endeavour to secure for the citizen a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India"

Nehru was the architect of India's concept of secularism. He sought to separate law from religion. He separated education from religion and insisted on secular and scientific education.

Challenges before Secularism in India:

India is a secular state from ancient period. In this connection, we can easily cite the example of Ashoka the great, who, being a Buddhist himself never discriminated against the follower of the Vedic Dharma. After the independence, Nehru condemned the use of religion for political purposes. He was main architect of Indian concept of secularism. He held the view that organized religion should not have a major role to play politically because religion is a private matter for an individual and could not be exploited for political purposes. He always condemned Muslim communalist as well as Hindu communalist. "Nehru concept of religion was different one, and he believed in clear separation of religion from politics". Nehru not only preached, but practiced the secularism in day to day life.

After the death of Nehru, the fundamental forces are raising head in the country and no religion is exception to this. Now, the nation is facing aggressive fundamentalism and secularism is in a danger due to the religious militancy today. Major challenges can be discussed as follows:

Fear and sense of Insecurity between religions:

Even after sixty-eight years of independence, most of middle class educated Hindu feel that Muslim are responsible for creation of Pakistan. This attitude further strengthened among this class due to frequent occurrences of communal riots. Fresh riots held in 2014 U.P and Delhi clearly shows that our secular mind-set is weakening continuously.

Communal Politics:

The different political parties are using religion as a vehicle to come to power. Recent assembly election held in (2014-2015) Haryana and Delhi used religion for getting power. Various religion-based organization like Vishva Hindu Parishad and RSS thing tank openly has given their support to B.J.P. in Haryana and Delhi, same way Sham Immam of Jama Masjid give their support to AAP party. Akali Dal Badal always used S.G.P.C. to win election in Punjab. In Mijoram, elections are fought in the name of Christianity. For political interest, the country is divided into minority and majority or secular and non-secular parties.

Use Power without Responsibility:

Most of religious leaders & Dera Head in country are enjoying political power without their accountability and responsibility towards public. They give their political support at the time of election or they are permanently in favour of one or another political party like S.G.P.C. is attached with Akali Dal, R.S.S., Hindu Maha Sabha with B.J.P., Sirsa dera supported as per benefit either congress or B.J.P.

Lack of Financial Resources:

Due to poverty and unemployment different caste and community are fighting for their share in national resources. It is generally viewed by the majority that the secularism is being used for the welfare of minority. Hindu populations think that Muslims are increasing their population, because there is no uniform civil code in India. Therefore, Hindu fundamentalist also supporting that the Hindu women should give birth to five to ten children.

History of riots:

The decade of eighties saw rise of religious militancy among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. This decade also witnessed dangerous communal violence in Northern India. Khalistan movement in Punjab, Ram Janambhoomi movement, Shah Banu Case and Babri Masjid demolished which pushed Indian secularism to the brink. It was a great disaster, and was followed by the Bombay riots which shocked the nation. These issues are still misused by different political parties during elections. All political parties aim to get power and in this race the politician exploit these issues every five year during assembly and parliamentary election.

Propagation, Conversion and Re-Conversion:

Gharwapsi or reconversion is a burning issue in current scenario. Most of pro-Hindu organizations believe that in the past lower caste Hindus were converted into Christian and Muslim by force or by inducement or by fraudulent means. Now as per statement of the leaders of pro-Hindu organization these people are coming back to their original home or Ghar Wapsi. These activities of Gharwapsi create fear and terror in the other communities like Muslims and Christians. Historically if we see the case regarding Propagation and conversion, in 1977 Supreme court decided a case of *Stainislaus v. state of M.P.* (1977 sc 908). In this case supreme court laying down the following proposition:

- a. Right to "propagate in Art.25 (I), gives to each member of every religion the right to spread or disseminate the tenets of his religion (say, by advocacy or preaching), but it would not include the right to convert other.
- b. The equal freedom of conscience, belonging to each man, under Art. 25(1) means that he has freedom to choose and hold any faith of his choice and not be converted into another religion by force, fraud, inducement or allurement. He can, of course, voluntarily adopt another religion, but force, fraud, inducement or allurement takes away the free consent from the would-be convert.
- c. Even assuming that a particular religion had the right to propagate its tenets by any means, including conversion-the state has right and duty to intervene if such activity of conversion offended against 'public order, morality or health'."

Three state M.P., Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh have passed the bill against forced, fraud, induced, allurement conversion.

Absence of sensitive religious leadership:

Another noticeable feature of the religious fundamentalism is those fundamentalists desperately attempt to make religion a closed system and emphasizing dogmas, advocating obscurantism and exploiting religious symbols in case of real or imaginary threat from government or other religious groups. The opposition of Indian Muslims to any change in their personal law is a proof of this tendency. As we know, many Muslim countries like Egypt and Iran have gone toward modernity after making change in Muslim law.

More importance to Rituals than religions:

Maximum population of our country gives more importance to rituals than the real essence of religion. We observe that maximum people of country do not try to learn from the character

of Lord Rama, Krishna, and Shiva and Sikh gurus. People are always busy in religious yatra and procession. These religious mob and shakti pardarshan always creates tension and terror in other religious communities. Most of Indian public is wasting their time; energy and money fulfill the religious rituals.

Secularism is a policy of appeasement:

A large communal section of Hindu regards the practice of secularism as a policy of appeasement to Muslim fundamentalism, which exhorts Muslim to treat their religion above the country. It is also alleged by Hindus that most of the Muslim give more importance to religion then the nation. Therefore, they feel closer to the Muslim of another country then to the non-Muslim of their own.

The above challenges have clearly shown that our constitution has established secular state, but it has failed to set up secular society. All political parties aim to get power, and in the race the politicians exploit the religious and caste sentiments. Secularism can be possible only when every citizen thinks that first and last, he is and Indian. Live and Let Live.

Future of Secularism in India:

In the present Political circumstances, the future of secularism not seems to be bright. There are some main reasons for this, such as communal based politics, corruption and value free politics, lack of sensitive leadership (both religious and political) poverty and employment.

Apart from this, some other reasons are such as saffronization, Christianization, Islamization and Hinduization processes. These factors motivate the common people for religious superiority and this religious superiority is the cause of communal riots. Religious politics is the most detrimental to the policy of secularism. In fact, all political parties are non-secular.

The Congress party, National Conference and Samajwadi Party always use Muslim vote bank, similarly B.J.P. and Shive sena use Hindu vote bank, Akali dal use Sikh vote bank for capturing power in states as well as in Parliamentary election. The religious and communal affiliation of the present political leaders has been increasing day by day. Not only politicians but also educated elites are divided on the religion-based politics in many states. Despite these, the communist leaders, who oppose religions, are also found involved in the religious politics.

"India has stupendous challenges to meet due to its economic backwardness and unemployment, which increase communal struggle. Unemployment and frustrated youth can easily be induced to think and act communally as he thinks that his unemployment is due more to his caste or community than economic backwardness. Thus chance of secularism will certain brighten with more economic progress and reduced levels of unemployment."2 In the present political scenario, all the political parties are found involved in corruption and value free politics except AAM Admi Party which is emerged by Lok pal or ANNA movement. Today Politics has become a business for politicians to earn money, not to render social service.

Conclusion:

It is hard fact that explosive and exploitative policies are adopted by the politicians and they misuse religious and caste sentiments. The corrupt political structure and absence of sensitive leadership leads to communal disharmony in our plural society. In such a situation, it seems that secularism is not possible in India. But it is true that Indian democracy, which is here to stay, is in itself a guarantee for future of secularism. A pluralist nation as India needs secularism as life -blood. India has been pluralist not since post-modernism, but for centuries. Now, India has passing through very critical phase, but there is nothing to despair. The present communal turmoil is not here to stay. Secularism is the factual truth and reality of this country not merely myth of minds of intelligentsia. If we sincerely follow the path of secularism as shown by Nehru, then majority of our problems will automatically be solved and our country will become an abode of peace, progress, prosperity and tranquility, and all the people from different castes, creeds and religions etc.

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