

Growth of secularism in the Indian society

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Abstract

We have seen how in the West, particularly Europe, and less so in the case of U.S.A, secularism had its genesis in the (to use a euphemism for confrontation, conflict and tussle) dialects between organized religion epitomized in Catholic Church and the state aided in the process by such forces as renaissance and humanism, support in scientific and technological inventions, discoveries, breakthroughs, navigation, international commerce and trade, reformation. We have seen how the multiplication of faiths and creeds and the consequent religious wars and attendant bloodbath paved the way for the emergence of secular state slowly but surely. We have also seen the ups and downs of the concept of secularism and the process of secularisation, we have seen how in recent times. We have come a full circle in the form of growing deprivatization of religion; how it is playing a public role, for good for bad, and how the 'decline these' has become a contested issue.

Keywords: Western, cultural, religion and society

Introduction

We often tend to ignore, wittingly or unwittingly, these changes in the West and the context of West while discussing about secularism in India. So from a broad historical perspective the modern secular ideal and concept originated in the West and illustrated as a world view under the impetus provided by the major social changes of the modern age-Religious Reformation, Industrial Revolution and the Democratic Transition; even though certain basic ingredient of secularism can be seen in the cultural tradition of India. India's introduction to the ideal of modern secularism was because of Western impact. At the same time, the Western impact which was conducive to the implantation of the secular idea has to be distinguished from the British colonial impact, which created formidable impediments on the path of transition to secular state and society. The British rulers, despite the fact that their own society and polity was undergoing rapid secularisation, pursued a policy which was the obverse of secularism, they pursued a policy, particularly after the 1857 Sepoy mutiny, which passes for 'Divide and Rule' and consisted of exploiting one religious group against another so as to scuttle the gathering storm of freedom movement.

As historian Daniel Thornier writes, particularly after the 1857 rebellion "The British abandoned their role as social reformers". On the contrary, they allied themselves with India's backward looking classes and social strata. This, compounded by the inadequate disassociation of the masses from religious revivals in and their inadequate mobilization on a class or socio-economic basis created formidable constraints in the secularisation of Indian society and polity. Yet the Swaraj struggle, with marginal and occasional deviations was quintessentially secular in its soul, thanks to the anti-colonial nationalists, Quite a number of them derived inspiration from modern western liberal thought from renaissance full and ideas and expression thrown up by the English Industrial revolution, French revolution, the constitution of the United States and a host of other liberal thinkers. Secondly, the re-

interpretation of religious traditions of India by thinkers and religious reformers, sought to secularize the religions and engender material unity and cohesion among the people. Swami Vivekanand, Gandhiji and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad are important personalities who, while being religious, reformed their religions and gave a powerful stimulus to freedom movement.

Therefore, the idea of a secular India is a modern, and it took shape in the course of National movement. Those who were fighting for the independence and unit of India could hardly have taken a different stand, for at that time the repudiation of secularism would have meant the rejection of the very idea of India's unity. The colonial administration derived the idea of either a united or a secular India. Among the nationalists, on the other hand the attachment to secularism became not only a matter of practical politics but also one of national honor. But before coming to Gandhi and Nehru, it would be quite appropriate to have a bird's eye view on Lok Manya Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his role in the freedom struggle, for it has been often dubbed as communal. As former President Shanker Dayal Sharma writes, Tilak, aware of the reluctance of the British to interfere in the processes of religion by itself, took advantage of this to use Hindu Festivals and symbols for organizing a mass awakening against the British. But his approach was always secular and broad minded, never parochial. His defense counsel in the famous sedition trial was none other than Mohd. Ali Jinnah. Tilak's book Gita Rahasya and his Dharmachi Swarup Laxan clearly explained the secular and broad minded never parochial, idealism in the Bhagwat Gita. Moreover he was the principal architect of the rapprochement between the Indian National Congress and Muslim League at Lucknow Pact in 1916.

Mahatma Gandhi has often been referred to as the spiritual father of Indian secularism. However Prof. T. N. Madan argued that Gandhiji has even been inaccurately and unjustly called a secularist. If the essence of all varieties of secularism is the demarcation of foundation between the sacred and secular domains peruse than Gandhi would have had no use

for such an ideology. As he wrote in *Young India* on Nov. 27, 1924, for me there is politics without religion – not the religion of the superstitions and the blind religion that hates and fights, but the universal religion of toleration. Politics without morality is a thing to be avoided.”

Earlier in the same year on April 3, 1924 he had said “politics benefits of religion are a death trap because they kill the soul.” His vision was holistic, with religion as its constitutive principle– as the source of value for judging the work of all worldly goals and actions. Religion here means, above all, altruism (*Sewa-dharma*), self-assurance arising from in his conviction (*atmsantushti*), and the putting of one’s faith in the saving grace of God (*Ram-Nama*). ‘For I’, Gandhi observed, ‘Very, the tiniest activity is governed by what I consider my religion. This for him was a timeless principle and yet he was very sensitive to the conditions and demand of particular times and places in conformity with *Kala-desh* (*timi-place*) sensitivity of Indian classical tradition. He said that in this age, only political *Sanyas* can fulfill and adorn the ideal of *Sannyasa*. Consequently ‘No Indian, who aspires to follow the way of true religion, can afford to remain a loop from politics’. He wrote in 1940- I cannot conceive politics as divorced from religion. The religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the Universe. It is not less, because it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality.”

Bhiku Parekh observes that, “There was hardly a Hindu religious category and practice to which (Gandhi) did not give a worldly or secular content.” In other words “Gandhi secularized Hinduism as much as it was possible to do within a ‘spiritual framework.” Margaret Chatterjee holds that Gandhi seems almost a secularist, but judged by his handling of concrete issues, notably the communal (*Hindu-Muslim*) problem; he was not secularist if by this we mean an attempt to prune away all religious consideration from political matters. However, if we examine his later statements, his secularism was unimpeachable. To begin with, Mahatma Gandhi’s leadership and his philosophical convictions were outstandingly powerful element in promoting secular outlook in India. That Gandhi was totally opposed to communalism is well known as is his belief that a person should have a right to pursue his or her religion and not face any discrimination on the ground of religion. It is also well known that individual and the Congress should show equal respect for all religions. That no other basis, other than secular would have found favor, with Gandhi is clear from his statement. *Hindustan* belongs to all those who are born and bred here and those who have no country to look to. Therefore, it belongs to Parsi, Israelis to Indian Christians, Muslims and other non-Hindus as much as to Hindus. Free India will be no *Hindu Raj*, it will be *Indian Raj* based not on the majority of any religious sect or community but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion. I can conceive of a mixed majority putting the Hindus in a minority. They would be elected for their record of service and merits. Religion is a personal matter, which should have no place in politics. Expressing his unwavering commitment to secularism, Gandhi further said that he wanted his India of his dream not to develop one religion but “To be wholly a tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another.”

It is true that Gandhi wanted that the individual and the

Congress should show equal respect for all religions. The above statement of Gandhi would go to prove that there was no contradiction between his credo of *Sarva-Dharma Sambhav* (equal respect for all religions) and neutrality of the state towards all faiths. This is, according to Bipin Chandra, attested by the fact that the famous 1931 Karachi resolution on fundamental rights declaring that “The state shall observe neutrality in regard to all religions was moved at the Congress session by Gandhi. However, T. N. Madan says that a Gandhian would have to say that secularism has run into difficulties in India because the modern state is too much with us, and intrudes into areas of life where it has no business even to peep. That state is best which governs the least. The ideal to strive for is that or morally sensitive individuals actively promoting civil society. Again, he says that, to the extent to which Indian secularism, even though it stand for equal respect for all religious faith (*Sarva Dharma Samabhava*), is a state ideology, enshrined in the constitution in which it is linked to the materialist ideology of socialism, and to the extent to which it has nothing to say about the individual except in terms of his or her rights, it is from the Gandhian perspective a hedonistic ideology and bound to fail. Gandhi most then used the term in two different senses: one in its denominational sense, that is, in term of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. and the other in the traditional sense of *dharma*- the moral code which guided a person life. In asserting that, politics should be based on religion, he meant that they should have a moral foundation. Gandhi has also high regard for atheists in his *Sarwa Dharm Sambhav* thesis. K. G. Mishruwala pointed out in 1950s, Gandhi’s change of proposition from ‘God is truth to Truth is God’ enabled him to give an equal place to them (Atheists) in the Congress of all Religions. Atheists, provided they accepted Truth as the Supreme end had an equal place in his *Sarva-Dharma-Sambhav* with theists.”

Earlier in 1925, Gandhi had evolved the Congress pledge in which blessing of God were invoked. But when this was objected to, he readily admitted: “So far as the conscientious objection is concerned, the mention if God may be removed if required from the Congress ledge of which i am proud to think to think I was the author. Had such an objection been raised at that time, I would have yielded at once.” The criticism of secularism or rather the Nehruvian brand of it is based on the premise of Gandhi often repeated formulation that politics could not be divorced from religion. However, we have seen earlier the connotation of religion in the Gandhian thought. Moreover, during the 1940s, Gandhiji began to reformulate his views regarding the relationship between religion and politics. When he saw the communalists were using religion in its organized, denomination or doctrinal form, or as what Mashruwala called “labelled” religion, to divide the Indian people politically, to promote communal strife and to demand religion bases states, he now began to assert, as we have seen earlier, that religion and politics should be kept separate and that religion should be treated as a private matter of the individual. Among the modern Indian leaders Gandhi alone refuted the dichotomy between the enlightened elite and the backward masses. “He alone understood the meaning of religiosity of the masses as an attachment to the order, to moral economy, moral society and moral polity. The anti-colonial mobilization under his leadership assumed the form of confronts between the forces of *Dharma* and *Adharma* – for

the affirmation of Ramrajya. This message in a religious garb, an old religious symbolism harnessed to a new secular purpose, had an electrifying effect in releasing mass energy and in removing fear and generating fearlessness (Abhaya).

This approach did have the risk of inviting criticisms. For instance, he was accused of communal politics and of unnecessary injecting obscurantist issue in secular affairs. And in Mopalla revolts in Kerala, he was accused of pro-Hindu bias against his endeavor to establish a basic equality and abolish un-touchability came a cropper in the face of vehement criticism. Nevertheless, Gandhian secularism of Sarva-Dharma-Sambhav, equality to all religions and the essential tolerance and openness it implies is much closer to the reality of the deep and multifaceted religiosity of our people. It is also more in tune with our constitutional protection to the rights of religious minorities which has been reaffirmed in 83 judgments interpreting and applying legal principles to concrete issues. That partition of the sub-continent took place in spite of Gandhi's Ram-Rahim approach and his dogged opposition to it was a testimony to the failure of the so called secular elite who were bent upon communalizing the ambience for realizing their ambition of power. And the earlier critiques of Gandhi as a fundamentalist Hindu who opened up a Pandora's Box by religious use of politics or by introducing religious categories and a religion idiom are no longer accepted; Because the earlier interpretations time of secularism as the retreat of religion, the identification of secularism with rationalism and progress and of religion with unreason, social conservatism and political reaction is now undergoing a major revision and reformulation.

Most of these who think that secularism in India today is in crisis put the blame at Jawahar Lal Nehru's door step and his branded of secularism which often passes for "Dharmarirpeksha" in Hindi. The fact that Jawahar Lal Nehru was a prominent member of the constituent Assembly and the Prime Minister of the country for about seventeen years; his views, policies and practices cannot escape critical scrutiny if secularism in India is to be studied in any meaningful way. Prof. T. N. Madan says that by intellectual preference Nehru's concept of secularism was akin to western type which arose in, the context of enlightenment. At least in the period of twenties and thirties of this century, he was clear in his mind that secularism meant secularism of the western variety where variety, where religions was to be totally separated from politics and was certainly not to be confused equal respect for all religions. He was against institutional religion, ritual and mysticism and did not consider himself to be a religious person, though he admitted its humanistic and cultural values. Any impressions of his boyhood experiences of Brahmanical beliefs and ritual were erased by the powerful impact of his father's personality and, later by his reading of the words of Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell and other similar thinkers. Nehru's study of world history and his encounters with the Indian masses made him feel negative about the role of religion in human affairs. He was an agnostic who subscribed to a rationalist and even a historicist world view. He looked at religion with dismissive disdain and was puzzled and annoyed at Gandhiji's attempt to link it up with politics. He observed: India is supposed to be a religious country above everything else... (And yet) I have frequently condemned religion and wished to make a clean sweep of it almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry,

superstition and exploitation and the preservation of vested interests. And yet I knew well that there was something else in it, something which supplied a deeper inner craving of human beings. He further elaborates and says, "But the usual religious outlook does not concern itself with this world. It seems to me to be the enemy of clear thought, for it is based not only on the acceptance without demur of certain fixed and unalterable theories and dogmas, but also on sentiment and emotion and passion. It is far removed from what I call spirituality and things of the spirit, and it deliberately or unconsciously shuts its eyes to reality lest reality may not fit with pre-conceived notions."

He was definitely against organized religion because it "invariably becomes a vested interest and thus inevitable a reactionary force opposing change and progress." Indian religiosity was more a nuisance than a real problem to Nehru. In 1928 he had declared: If religion or what is called religion, in India continues to interfere with everything, then it will not be a mere question of divorcing it from politics, but of divorcing it from life itself." Nehru was more in tune with the ethical aspect of social life as a Chinese. He says "the traditional Chinese outlook, fundamentally ethical and yet irreligious or tinged with religious skepticism has an appeal for me, though in its application to life I may not agree". He felt that the "real thing" is the economic. If we lay stress on this and divert public attention to it we shall find automatically that religious differences recede into the background and common bond unites different groups. The economic bond is stronger than even national one. These concluding words underlined Nehru's radical secular position and his socialist conviction. No wonder, he looked upon communalism as "side issues" and in 1928 said, "It (communalism) may be a giant today, but it has a feed of clay.... It is really the creation of our educated classes in search of office and employment."

He again said that "Religion, though it has undoubtedly brought comfort to innumerable human beings and stabilized society by its values, has checked the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society." Nehru approvingly quotes a modern definition of religion according to which religion is "Whatever introduces genus perspective into piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence or against any activity pursued on behalf of an ideal and against obstacles, and in spite of threats of personal loss, because of a conviction of its general and enduring value. Nehru is prepared to be a humble camp follower of this kind of religion." The upshot of above discussion is that Nehru's view on religion was "highly elitist" which may not be neither popular neither in his time nor today. "To that extent there was a sort of dichotomy in his views and the actual ground situation". It was an enlightenment view of religion, which was against revelation and dogmatism rather than religion as such he nevertheless recognized that religion stood for higher thing in life and was a moral force which supplied a "deeper inner cravings of human beings" and "which has brought peace and comfort to innumerable tortured souls."

Incidentally, Nehru formatted his views on secularism during the twenties and thirties as reflected in the Karachi resolution of the Congress party on fundamental rights (1931) wherein he had insisted upon the inclusion of 'Freedom of conscience and of the profession and practice of any religion. Further, all citizens of free India would be equal before the law, irrespective of religious (and other similar) differences and the

state would have neutrality with, regard to all religions. (Dharma -nirpekshta). This, Nehru's biographer S. Gopal tell us, was the first breakdown in concrete terms of the concept of secularism in the Indian context and formed the basis of the (relevant) articles in the constitution many years later. It is true that keeping in mind the existence of multiplicity of religions and sects in India and the overriding influence of religion. Nehru later on started laying stress on religious pluralism. For instance, after the partition of the country he posed the question. Do we believe in a national state which includes people of all religions and shades of opinion and is essentially a secular state, or do we believe in the religious theoretic conception of the state.... His answer was unequivocal: 'We shall proceed on secular and national lines.'

A critic alleges that "Given Nehru's lifelong aversion to religion as practiced by common peoples the so called popular religion; he could not have suddenly begun to see virtues in it." Therefore, Nehru's definition of the secular state in terms to religious pluralism was an arrangement and interim, a compromise, a strategy rather than surrender, a strategy to deal with an awkward problem, namely the all passive influence of religion in society that would not go away. The objective resolution moved by Nehru in the constituent Assembly, which is the cornerstone of secularism in constitutional-legal sense, was by and large incorporated in the constitution. Another critic says that while political institution may be legally constituted it required appropriate social conditions to service. It is here that Indian secularism has learned too heavily on a Nehruvian rationalism and remained an imposition from outside even though it claimed constitutional legitimating for itself. It was not based on a consensus that 'emerged out of a creative dialogue between different communities, it was sui-generis. This Archimedean existence gave secularism procedural priority but in doing so it gave it to abiding substantive authority." A dichotomy between the "Secular minded elite and the religiously oriented masses cannot found a project for absorption such secularism would be alien and oppressive. The rationalist secularism can be criticized on this ground as also by the adherents of so-called "positive secularists" who charge it of pseudo secularism. As one critic says, "The dharma-nirpekshta or indifference to religion, which is how secularism is generally translated though rarely used in everyday discourse, is completely at odds with the most accepted Indian response to the term." Certainly Nehru did not share the ideological commitment to religion like Mahatma Gandhi or Sarvepalli Radha krishnan for that matter. As Radha krishnan said, "It may appear somewhat strange that our government should be a secular one while our culture is rooted in spiritual values. Secularism here does not mean irreligion or atheism or even stress on material comforts. It proclaims that it lays stress on the universality of spiritual values which may be attained in a variety of ways. This is similar, in constitutional terms, to the expression of 'non-preferentialism' (often used in American legal discourse) between different religion rather than 'neutrality between spirituality and materialism or religion and aganosticism.

Prof. Madan further says that the paradox of Indian secularism leis not only in that religious pluralism is meaningless in the absence of a positive attitude to religion, but equally significant in the idea of its articulation is trapped in a double bind. Ideas like socialism and secularism should be communicated to people in the language of the mind and the

heart of the people. And then he pin-pointed specifically the reason why secularism in India is liable to run into difficulties. Our constitution lays down that we are a secular state, but it must be admitted that this is not wholly reflected in our mass living and thinking. In a country like England, the state is allied to one particular religion..... Nevertheless, the state and the people there function in a largely secular way. Society, therefore, in England is more advanced in this respect than in India, even though our constitution may be in this matter more advanced." It is obvious that for Gandhi or for that matter even Radha krishnan, religion pluralism entailed inter religious understanding and mutual respect: it was the strength of Indian society while communal politics tried to statism could be its bane. For Nehru, however, religiosity and the attendant conflicts was his badge of social backwardness. Secularism in the sense of neutrality as state policy was a strategy to cope with a difficult situation. Nehru thought secularization presumes a general education, a liberal outlook and inculcation of scientific temper and a sense of history for the cultivation of spirit of nationalism. And the colossal neglect of investment in education with emphasis on distributive justice in the growth of the economy may have begun the crisis in secularism from 1960s onwards.

Other critics say that Nehru had erroneously presumed that a synthesis between the Hindus and Muslims in India would have taken place neither had the British nor disrupted it. Girilal Jain, says: He (Nehru) for instance does not tell us why the Christian Muslim encounter did not lead to a synthesis despite the common Semitic origins of the two faiths. Further, being educated in western style and unfamiliar with Sanskrit, the source of Indian culture he could not grasp the essence of Indian culture. Yet another critic (A Bodullah 1993-94) has said that Nehru's reading of history was tainted by a soft Hindutva ideology. However T. N. Madan says that this is absurd, for Ashoka and Akbar receive the highest honor from him, and neither was a Hindu.

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