

**What does it mean by Secularism in multi-religious context? Bring out the religious freedom enjoyed by India Christians and its base.**

## **Introduction**

India has a long tradition of secularism. It was not only a foundation of many religions, but also of progressive thoughts, Charvakas and Lokayatas opposed religious practices. Gautama Buddha and Mahavira propagated tolerance and nonviolence and equal respect to all. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy who opposed the merciless custom of Sati, campaigned for secularization of society and positive intervention of the state with a view to curbing antisocial acts of religion. The advocacy of religious tolerance and equal respect for all religions was, in itself a progressive step till independence in India.<sup>1</sup> Religious plurality makes secularism very significant in India. The rise of Hindutva and the issue of religious conversion have intensified the debate of secularism in India. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyse the existence and the possibility of secularism in the multi-religious context and religious freedom's possibility for minority in India, particularly Christians.

### **1. Origin Secularism**

According to modern literature secularism has its derivation in western countries and it is related to the separation of the church from the state, which gives the state a position of neutrality between different religions, while at the same time, it guarantees all citizens right to adhere any religion. The word secularism was first coined by George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) in 1851. In English, the word is derived from the Latin *Saeculum* which literally means "this present age."<sup>2</sup> It is also one of the Latin words for World, and for a long time secular meant "worldly" in contrast to "religious" or "sacred". However, much before the formal coining of the term by Holyoake, the process, or rather the struggle, for secularisation had already been launched in western society.

### **2. Domains of Religion and Secularism**

The reduction of the pervasive role of religion has led many people to believe that religion and secularism are antithetical each other. Strictly speaking, this is not quite accurate. Rather than being hostile, the relationship between the two is reciprocally exclusive. The chief concerns of religion are faith in some divine being and after-life. With these, state is not worried and it would joyfully leave such matters to religion. In view of the differing domains of religion and secularism, Lauer has noted, "along with secularisation, religion may still

flourish and may continue to function as a source of justification for man's morality, giving him some transcendent meaning to his existence." Thus, it is not quite correct to see secularism and religion as an "either/or" state. This situation, however, should not make us lose picture of the fact that there is, to a degree, an integral tension between religion and secularism. Indeed, here there appears to be a common meeting point, and religion and secularism seem to be two sides of the same coin.

### **3. Nehruvian and Gandhian visions of Secularism**

The principal advocates of secular ideology in modern India were Mahatma Gandhiji and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru. Gandhiji's secularism was based on a commitment to the brotherhood of religious communities based on their respect for and pursuit of truth. Whereas, Pandit J. L. Nehru's secularism was based on a commitment to scientific humanism tinged with a progressive view of historical change. Nehruvianism visualized a secular democracy not in opposition to religion but aimed at the distancing of religion from public affairs. In fact, many commentators such as Ashis Nandy believe that religion in India cannot be cordoned off from politics because it informs all aspects of an Indian's life. Gandhi's view of secularism differed from that of Nehru in not requiring religion to be removed from the public sphere, whereas this separation was essential for Nehru. Gandhi's style of nationalism was the major nonsecular alternative to the Nehruvian secular matrix. Gandhi believed that it was only through the restoration of religion that India could truly enjoy liberation from the invaders. Gandhi's secularism, if we can call it so, was founded on a non-violent notion of tolerance. For Gandhi, tolerance was a obligation. He asks for a rethinking of tolerance in the light of his famous principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha*. British government also helped in establishing secularism in India. British government tried to establish secularism in two ways; government and missions.<sup>3</sup> Government based on non-religious principles and Christian mission based on freedom of choice to faith. Both of these played an important role in future of secularism in India.

### **4. Indian Constitution: Basis of Secularism**

The creation of India as a secular state has been accepted as one of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru greatest achievements. Moreover he was especially concerned with transforming India from a 'caste ridden society' in which communalism constitutes a major threat to all the values that he cherished to a 'national state' which comprises people of all religions and shades of belief and is fundamentally secular as a state. Having concisely measured the circumstances under

which the verdict to make India a secular state occurred, it is now time to become acquainted with the provisions of the Constitution, which're supportive of principle of secularism, and which reflect the secular base and character of the Indian state. Article 15.1 of the Constitution lays down that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion. Article 16 provides equal opportunity for all citizens in matters of employment under the State. Further, it prohibits discrimination or ineligibility on grounds of religion. Article 25 gives all persons freedom of conscience and right to profess, practice and propagate religion.<sup>4</sup> It can make laws for regulating or restricting economic, political or secular activity associated with religion. Especially, it can throw open Hindu religious institutions to all classes of Hindus. Government and aided educational institutions, cannot reject anyone admission on grounds of religion. Nor can they force anyone to take part in religious teaching or prayer. Religious minorities have a right to establish educational institutions and the State cannot discriminate against them on that ground in granting aid. State intervention is also indicated in the constitutional directive of striving to evolve a Uniform Civil Code. In matters pertaining to Hindu Society, state interference in religious matters has been justified on the ground that Hinduism lacks an ecclesiastical organisation to bring about any reforms from within. Moreover, this initiative and action was needed to evolve a Uniform Civil Code. In understanding of these provisions in India, the term secularism is deduced to imply that the state will not classify itself with any one religion, but be equally friendly towards, or equidistant from, all religions. Operating on this principle of neutrality, the Indian state is expected to prevent and contain inter-group conflict. This kind of secular policy, it is expected, would promote among all citizens a national identity that would rise above various religious identities, without, however, negating the latter.

### **5. Secularism in Multi-religious Context**

The Indian model of secularism represents a distinctive example altogether. Though in the current political discourse, it is one of the most provoking, baffling and intriguing phrase, it has occupied the central stage in intellectual debates. In the context of multi-religious Indian society, the secularism is to be understood at the level of individuals, society and the State, which are corresponding to each other. Here, the individuals cling to their professed faith or religion; society is multi-religious society based on mutual respect; and the State observes equal respect for all religions. This mutual respect reflects a 'humanistic critique' of religion, so long as it remains within the confines of 'public order, morality and health' and continues to provide for 'social welfare and reforms'. Furthermore, this feeling of mutual respect

among the communities, minorities in particular, not only strengthen the Constitutional safeguards, but also ensures a sense of security and belongingness, which no Constitution can substitute. "The secularism, thus, means not only a bundle of guarantees in respect of the freedom of religion and conscience and in respect of cultural and educational rights, but a sense of basic fraternity, fellowship and unity among the citizens.<sup>5</sup> Secularism in India, thus, does not mean departure of religion from state. Instead, secularism in India means a state that is impartial to all religious sects. Religious laws in personal domain, particularly for Muslim Indians, supersede parliamentary laws in India; and currently, in some situations such as religious brainwashing schools the state partially finances certain religious schools. These dissimilarities have led a number of scholars to declare that India is not a secular state. Beside this the persecution of minority, like Christianity, by Sanghis has also cause many to question whether India is really secular in its practice.

## **6. Challenge to Secularism**

Almost all of the secular leaders and advocate interviewed by the researcher admitted that secularism was being tarnished in practice. Incidentally even R.N Shing High Court, Advocate admitted that the challenges to secularism arise from the way it is being practiced.<sup>6</sup> The Hindu fundamentalists further want that the Constitution, which they allege is anti-Hindu, should be redrafted.<sup>27</sup> The 'Sant Samiti' in its October 1, 1992 meeting set up a committee to redraft the Constitution. Their critique of the Constitution was published in a 63 page booklet, which argues that the present Constitution is based on British laws and is unrepresentative of the Indian ethos.<sup>7</sup>

### **6.1 Problem of Uniform Civil Code**

The best point to begin is with the vexed issue of the uniform civil code, which the founding fathers of our constitution wanted to eventually apply to all citizens. But in the last forty years, no progress has been made in the evolution of a uniform civil code. Today, its adoption appears to be more problematic than it was at the time when the constitution was framed. This constraint is particularly great in sensitive legislation like religious laws. Such limitations indicate that the path leading to a truly secular society in India is strewn with numerous hurdles. Only the Hindu Nationalists have been pleading for a uniform civil law.<sup>8</sup>

## **6.2 Politics on Religion and Communalism**

Secularism is challenged by the ascendance of the forces of communalism, fundamentalism and religious revivalism, accompanied by violence.<sup>9</sup> This expectation has been belied in as much as all our political activities are heavily laden with communal, caste or other parochial considerations. To worsen matters, religious or caste divisiveness is exploited for political gains. There is evidence to show that even communal riots are engineered with political objectives in view. The responsibility of undermining India's limited secularism falls upon the shoulders of the leaders of the post-Nehru era, many of whom are not intellectually liberated. This failure of the leadership has thwarted the progressive separation of religion and politics in India. For to Mahashabha ideology Conversion from Hinduism to other religions must be stopped, since the change of religion is equivalent to a change in nationality.<sup>10</sup> In reality it's a matter of personal opinion.

## **6.3 Cultural Symbols and Secularism**

Hinduism, the religion of the vast majority, is also a sort of a "national" religion in the sense that it is confined to the boundaries of this country (with Nepal, of course, being an exception). Consequently, for most, if not all Hindus, Hinduism gets identified with nationalism and national culture. Several majority-minority misunderstandings originate from such perspectives. Thus, many public rituals and ceremonials, like *bhoomi pujan*, breaking of coconuts on inaugural or auspicious occasions, performing of *aarti* and applying of *tilak* to distinguished guests are perceived by Hindus as cultural or nationalistic expressions, but to non-Hindus these are manifestations of Hindu culture. The confusion between "Hindu" and "Indian" has largely arisen because in the last forty years, the cultural proportions of secularism have been totally abandoned.

## **6.4 Minority group Perceptions**

There may be no discrimination in law or even by state functionaries. But the psychological insecurity of minorities is such that they perceive themselves to be the targets of discrimination. Sociologically, perception of discrimination is as detrimental as actual discrimination for members of minority groups and affects their motivation, aspirations and achievements. Apart from education and jobs, bigotry and discrimination are perceived as functional in the matter of intergroup violence and conflict. And such feeling of dread is candid because there is now ample evidence to show that at times the administrative

machinery of the state does not operate impartially at the time of communal riots; those responsible for ensuring law and order act in non-secular way, and tends to victimize members of minority groups.

## **7. Christians and Religious Freedom in India**

Although some Indian State governments did enact legislations entitled 'Freedom of Religion Bill', these were full of ambiguities which were exploited by the state mechanism to perform discrimination against religious minorities. This also amounts to abuse of the constitutional privileges. Despite the six decades of our independence the Dalit Christians continue to be the victims of all kinds of ill-treatment. The history of independent India is both pitiful and shameful on the management meted out to Dalits.

The Christians take the Indian Constitution for granted to provide, protect and safeguard the fundamental rights of every citizen and every minority, including the Christians. However, the relevance and efficiency of the safety measure are eroding very fast, due to large scale saffronisation of the education system, the accomplishment of the Sangh Parivar, to impose its political ideology. These changes are audacious enough to dream of saffronisation of all minority communities as well. Some organisations of the Sangh Parivar are so eager to threaten the very existence of the minority communities that they are moving in an enormously disruptive direction. These moves, sooner or later, will endanger the fundamental rights of the minority groups. The political rational of the communal powers is moving towards the establishment of a theocratic state, in which the aim and religion of the *Sangh Parivar* becomes the ultimate power. This is creating a situation wherein the minority communities, especially the poor and downtrodden Dalit Christians, are feeling helpless. The indifference of the administration, the abuse of minorities' rights, the Presidential Order of 1950 and the Mandal Commission report have all cumulatively led to the advancement of an awfully helpless and frustrating condition for the minority community of Christians. Christians living in urban area may, sometimes, enjoy the freedom of worship but Christians at large are suffering under communal goons in India. We have Christian media working 24/7, they have enough news to sadden one's heart by the level threat and persecution thrown at them by religious extremists. The Christians just want a just structure to meet their fundamental requirements and an equal opportunity to worship their God.

## **Conclusion**

India has always been the home of a wide variety of religious faiths. Perhaps, there is no other society that is as multi-religious as Indian society. The co-existence of a vast variety of faiths, some of which have been quite different from one another, has been a shining example of religious pluralism, and tolerance, a characteristic for which this country has been justly famous. This is not to say that Indian society has been completely free from religious tensions and friction. India is a country where religion is very central to the life of people. But today the secularity of India is greatly endangered by religious fanatics. India's age-old philosophy as expounded in Hindu scriptures called Upanishad is *sarva dharma samabhava*, which means equal respect for all religions. We need a unaffectedly secular space in which cognizant dialogues can take place on complex issues of identity and allegiance; a space in which an individual has the right to exit his or her religious community if they wish to and is assured the defence of the state; a space in which we are not required to exercise a false choice between self and community, or between religious conviction and personal freedom. The reason behind this approach is the fact that India has never been a mono-religious country. Liberty is not a license to hurt others sentiments. Thus, live and let live.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> (n.a.), "Secularism And The Law" *National Foundation for Communal Harmony* New Delhi August 2010 Pub National Foundation for Communal Harmony 9 Khan Market, New Delhi
- <sup>2</sup> Phil Zuckerman, John R. Shook (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Domenic Marbaniang, *Secularism in India: A Historical Analysis* (web publish by author), 44.
- <sup>4</sup> M. P. Raju, *Minority Rights: Myth Or Reality : a Critical Look at the 11-judge Verdict* (Delhi: Media House, 2002), 152.
- <sup>5</sup> Aparajita Baruah, *Preamble of the Constitution of India: An Insight and Comparison with Others* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publication, 2007), 48.
- <sup>6</sup> Satyajit Bhatkal, "Redefining Secularism", *The Lawyers Collective*, Vol. 6, No.5, May 1991, 6.
- <sup>7</sup> Balraj Madhok, "Secularism: Genesis and Development", in M.M. Sankhdher (ed.), *Robert Clive to Jawaharlal Nehru: India: New Historical Interpretations* (New Delhi: Deep Publication, 2012), 122.
- <sup>8</sup> Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (eds.), *The Crisis of Secularism in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 109.
- <sup>9</sup> Manvinder Kaur, *Challenges to Secularism in India: The Constitutional Ideal and Political* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publication, 1999), 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1963), 462.

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