



Evolution of Secularism in India: Ethics vs Politics Debate

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Indian secularism has to be debated within two categories the Ethics of Secularism and the Politics of Secularism. Ethical Secularism is not merely about how religious groups are treated by the state. What it meant, in essence, was how to forge positive and proactive solidarity between religious groups in their everyday social and cultural life. The incidents of communal riots, spatial segregation and ghettoization, lynching of the Muslims in the name of cow protection, states how secularism as an ethical moral philosophy for the creation of thick friendship and cross-cultural bonds has failed in India. Politics of secularism highlights the contradictions that exist within the Indian secular state. The subsequent development of Indian politics in the last seventy years has further jeopardised the idea of secularism. The Indian state has used secularism as a tool for minority appeasement “Shah Bano Case” and at other occasions it has relied on the idea of soft Hindutva opening of Babri Masjid gate to appeal the majority community. Religion has been used by the Indian state to remain in power. The paper analyses how Indian secularism has been robbed of ethics and principle of politics? The essay captures the journey of Indian secularism by focusing on secularism’s historical background; secularism vs religion debate; secularism and Indian democracy. The objective is to critically look into the accounts for the crisis of Indian secularism.

Keywords: Secularism, majoritarianism, minority rights, communalism

Introduction

The advocates of Indian secularism thought that “secular ideal” is essential for the maintenance of social and communal harmony in India. The evidence of history in the last seventy years reflect that Indian secularism has partially succeeded in meeting its objective. So now the question arises what does the future of secularism looks like in India? Indian secularism is a typical illustration of ideological ambivalence and political ambiguity. The existing debate on Indian secularism is based on two opposite arguments, the left liberal secularist who advocate separation of religion from politics and the communitarians who support the autonomy for religious communities against coercive state secularism. One sought to secularise religion and the other seeks to spiritualise politics. In India secularism as an ideology is struggling to maintain the right balance between religion and politics. The philosophy of Indian secularism has to be debated within two categories the Ethics of Secularism and the Politics of Secularism. Ethical Secularism is not merely about how religious groups are treated by the state. What it meant, in essence, was how to forge positive and proactive solidarity between religious groups in their everyday social and cultural life. The incidents of communal riots, spatial segregation and ghettoization, lynching of the Muslims in the name of cow protection, states how secularism as an ethical moral philosophy for the creation of thick friendship and cross-cultural bonds has failed in India. Politics of secularism highlights the contradictions that exist within the Indian secular state. The subsequent development of Indian politics in the last seventy years has further jeopardised the idea of secularism. The Indian state has used secularism as a tool for minority appeasement “Shah Bano Case” and at other occasions it has relied on the idea of soft Hindutva opening of Babri Masjid gate to appeal the majority community. Religion has been used by the Indian state to remain in power. The paper analyses how Indian secularism has been robbed of ethics and principle of politics? The essay captures the journey of Indian secularism by focusing on secularism’s historical background; secularism vs religion debate; secularism and communal question; Indian democracy and secular nationalism, majoritarian state and minority challenge. The objective is to critically look into the accounts for the crisis of Indian secularism.

Indian Secularism: The Critical Debates

The constitutional understanding of secularism rallied around the idea that nation is above and apart from religion; religious belief is matter of private faith and the secular spirit will bring into being the nation as a viable, homogenous and governable entity. (Needham & Rajan, 2007, p.6). It was a design to counter the evil tenets of communalism and divisive social and political forces in India. It was adopted to ensure amiable resolution of particularistic identities.

Secularism in India had multiple objectives, a mantra to unite everyone living in India irrespective of their religious identities, ensure religious and cultural freedom and provide protection and equal treatment to a sizable minority community and also to do away with the evils of caste system and ultimately set the nation on the path of modernisation and progress. (Needham and Rajan, 2007, p.20) The Constitution makers did not include the term secular in the Constitution, it was only after the 42nd Amendment in 1976, that the word secular was introduced in the Preamble. It became a central tenet when Supreme Court in the Keshavanand Bharti case 1973 declared it as part of the basic structure of the Constitution, that cannot be altered.

Indian secularism unlike the western model did not adopt the strict wall of separation between religion and state. It refers to separation of religion and state; freedom of religion and conscience; and equal treatment of all religion. The makers of modern India adopted secularism as political and a social philosophy. Political philosophy where the state will maintain principled distance and would treat all religious groups equally. Social or ethical philosophy of secularism meant that there should be social cohesion and solidarity among religious groups. Communal consciousness should be replaced with mutual understanding and respect. The principles central to the ideology of secularism were pluralism, tolerance, harmonious coexistence of different religious groups in the Indian polity.

Early 1980s a debate in the academia opened regarding secularism in India. The debate revolved around three questions: i) What is the nature of Indian secularism? ii) What is the relation between state and religion? iii) Is there a crisis of secularism in India? According to Nandy, this modern Western rational-scientific secularism, which Nehru sought to impose on the Indian society, has failed either to eliminate religion from politics or promote greater religious tolerance. Hence, it can "no longer pretend to guide moral or political action." Ashis Nandy while rejecting the idea of secularism says that religion is not merely a matter of private preference when it can be used to cement notion of toleration by applying theology of various religions.

Like Nandy, T. N. Madan maintains that religious zealots, who contribute to fundamentalism or fanaticism by reducing religion to mere political bickering, are provoked to do so by secularists who deny the very legitimacy of religion in life. According to him, because it denies the immense importance of religion in the lives of the peoples of South Asia, secularism in this region an impossible credo, an impracticable basis of state action and an impotent remedy against fundamentalism fanaticism. (Pantham, 1999, p.520)

While Nandy and Madan, maintain that given the pervasive role of religion in the lives of the Indian people, secularism, defined as the separation of the state from religion, is an intolerable imposition, by the modernist elite, of an alien ideology on the Indian society. While deciphering the nature of Indian secularism the makers were bound to engage with religion as a subject. Certain aspects of religiosity were debated at length in the Constituent Assembly from the abolition of untouchability, protection of cow, propagation of religion, non-inclusion of uniform civil code in the fundamental right principle. (Mukherjee, 2007, p.59) Nehru in 1961, said It is perhaps not easy even to find a good word in Hindi for "secular." Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct.... It is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities. It is a model that is clearly different from both the theocratic or fundamentalist models of the state and the principle of a "wall of separation" between the state and religion, which is followed in some Western countries. Enjoined by the constitution to be equally tolerant of all religions, the Indian state is required to steer clear of anti-religiosity and communalism. (Pantham, 1997, p. 530)

According to Rajeev Bhargava secularism embodied in the Constitution is not as ambiguous or contradictory as made by its critics. It is complex and a multi value doctrine based on the core principles of secularism. (Bhargava, 2010, p. 30) First, secularism values equal citizenship, that challenge hierarchical religions which are particularly insensitive to the vital interest of its members-those at the bottom of sanctioned hierarchy. State must interfere in hierarchically organised religions. ((Bhargava, 2010, p. 31). Second, religious liberty free to practice but also criticise religion to which they belong, to reject it and adopt another religion or remain without one. (Bhargava, 2010, p. 21-22) Third, value is equality of free citizenship. The value of equal citizenship has two dimensions that require elaboration. One active another passive. To be a passive citizen is to be entitled to physical security, a minimum of material wellbeing and a sphere of one's own in which others ought not to interfere. The benefits of citizenship must be available to everyone and there is no room for discrimination on grounds of religion. If the state works to protect the security and well-being of some individuals or groups but fails to secure these meagre but important benefits to others. Then the principle of equal passive citizenship is violated. The active dimension of citizenship involves the recognition of citizens as equal participants in the public domain. The core idea of secularism then is this: separation of religion and state for the sake of religious liberty and equality of free citizenship (Bhargava, 2010, p. 23-25)

Rajeev Bhargava further states that mere separation of religion and politics does not create a secular state. secularism is no single value doctrine. A state that permits religious liberty but violates the principle of equal citizenship, either in its passive or its active dimension, not secular. (Bhargava, 2010, p.23-25) Thus, in essence

secularism is a moral disposition where the state does not discriminate on the basis of religion, caste, gender, language or ethnicity. It also forges close knit ties between different groups. Unfortunately, the question of ethics has been left by the liberal secular states to religion, schools and family which became foundation for right wing mobilisation. Today we need to debate if state too can provide secular ethics without leaving them to private institutions. (Gudavarthy, 2014, p.187-188)

Indian Secularism and the Communal Question

Imtiaz Ahmad says that in India, the State has remained committed to secularism but in society the widely diffused communalism and the highly-strung atmosphere of the country has made it impossible for the secular values and ideals to be realised. (Ahmad,2017) He said that the constitutional idea of secularism will not succeed if the communal orientation of the people is fundamentally altered. (Ahmad, 2017)

While discussing communalism some scholars argue that communal conflict in contemporary India has its own dynamics, rooted in the ongoing quest for political power, the changing nature of the relationship between the central and the provincial governments and response of the traditional elites to their ongoing decline as a consequence of structural changes etc. However, it would be a mistake to ignore the role of social memory for deployment in the present. The attempt to construct and codify the periodization of Indian history as Hindu, Muslim and British; the institutionalisation of the memory of the horrors of the bloodshed that ensued partition; the largely successful erasure from social memory that the partition was not by any means a generalised Muslim demand but the demand of a specific political party; have all contributed to the consolidation of imagined Hindu and Muslim communities as irreconcilable inextricably connected elements of the "self" and the "other." (Baber, 2006, p.56)

The British Empire introduced modern education in India which they misused as a tool to spread communal consciousness. They gave a communal interpretation of history, thus making ancient era the golden period for Hindus and Medieval era the golden period for Muslims. With each community being proud of their own glorious past, to the exclusion of the others, they justified the belief of the British that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and others constituted different and separate people. Gandhi had ruefully remarked later that as long as such an interpretation of history was being taught, unity was a distant dream. (Chaturvedi, 2001, p.61)

Hindu communalism imagined the medieval centuries as long period of alien Muslim dominance over the Hindus, repeated attempts by the Muslim rulers to convert the Hindus to Islam or else to eliminate them and the heroic stubbornness of the Hindus in defence of their religion and country's honour. (Mandav, 2000, p.16)

In the projection both Ayodhya and Somnath represented 'Hindu hurt' and the yatra linking these holy places represented Hindu assertion. (Yagnik & Sheth, 2005, p.258-259) These stories of plunder and betrayal by the ruler of one community against the other settle down in the collective consciousness of the people in the society. The wounded history might help in keeping the society divided on the wrongs committed in the past.

Another major factor that forms the memory of people is the partition of the country that established the fact that Hindus and Muslims belong to two distinct groups and they cannot stay together. This idea is harmful especially for the Muslims who decided to stay back in the India. During each incident of communal riot, the patriotism and nationalism of the Indian Muslims has been put under scanner by certain groups. Before we go into further details let's first see how partition has played a major role in creating territorial as well as psychological boundaries. The killings of lakhs of Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan and Muslims in India led to a painful partition of the country. The Hindus and Muslims, who were together fighting the British forces during the Revolt of 1857, were divided with the Independence of the country. The non-redressal of the Partition wrongs has resulted in the delaying of memory.

The Constituent Assembly, Muslim League and Congress stalwarts considered Partition to be a long-term solution to Hindu Muslim problem. Instead the incident escalated in the worst manner. Nation was divided; people felt cheated, sense of remorse and revenge floated at the same time. Partition continues to remain an open wound; even a slight disruption can cause immense pain. (Hasan, 1993, p.42)

Partition could be analysed as the cause and effect of communalism which till today seems to be the biggest obstruction to the ethos of democracy and secularism. Both sides appear convinced that the 'other' is manipulative, arrogant and expansionist, and the language used for such representations is often filled with terms that verify and dehumanise the enemy; transforming individuals into something less than human. The images of the 'other' do not remain confined to political elite, they are transmitted to the masses through education and media. (Pandey, 2012, p.125)

Another important factor that is result of the communal discourse is the community stereotyping; where we create us/them like categories. (Chakrabarty, 2003, p.1) What communalism does it creates prejudice; the Muslims are seemed to symbolize the foreign and demonic in the unconscious part of the Hindu minds and vice versa. The typecasting of one community as good and other as evil not just effects the psychology of the different communities but it is more evident in the form of spatial segregation and social alienation. The communities stop sharing space and feel unsafe in the company of the so called other

There is need to forge a combined and constant struggle against communalism by breaking stereotypes and eroding fear from the minds of the people. Secularism as a moral philosophy could be ensured only when the society based on mutual admiration and open mindedness as adopted. The political parties, civil society groups and political leadership should work in this direction. In the next section we will look at the journey of secular India.

Indian Democracy and Secular Nationalism

Secularism in theory was adopted as a moral ethical tenet by the makers of Indian constitution. Secularism in practice has failed to either abide by the value/ethics of secularism or to adopt secularism as principle of statecraft. (Menon, 120-121) According to Manoranjan Mohanty in practice what we see is hegemonic secularism in India. The so-called secular parties have mostly used secularism as a political tool. They have manipulated religious groups for political gains. The hegemonic secularism is against the ethos of democratic secularism, that is continuous struggle against class, caste and religious domination to create a more just society. Nehru thought that economic development and modernisation alone would weaken communalism and form secular consciousness. He failed to create any organisation to spread the ethos of secularism amongst the people. Though Nehru himself indulged in extensive tours, gave speeches to educate masses and create popular support for his policies. Over the years Congress as an organisation weakened and failed to play a role in democratic transformation. (Mukherjee, 1999, p.233) Regular incidents of communal riots in India has widened the gap between the Hindus and the Muslims. The incidents of communal riots have pushed the Muslim community into ghettos thus creating spatial divide between the communities. Thereby leaving no space for inter communal interaction or peaceful co-existence. Most of these riots have occurred under Congress regime. Further VN Rai in his study in 2008 points out police administration and the ruling dispensation partisan conduct against the minorities in the communal violence of Bhiwandi 1970, Aligarh 1978 Jamshedpur 1979 Moradabad 1980, Meerut 1982, Delhi 1984 and Mumbai 1992. (Gudavarthy, 2020, p.19) The Muslims were seen as homogenous group and the Congress party ensured that their religious rights remain secure thus making no intervention in their Sharia laws when the Hindu code bill was being adopted to ensure rights of Hindu women. There was politicisation of religion where religious symbols and communal speeches were made to woo the voters. The JP movement of early 70s discredited the Congress and created cracks in the Congress hegemony. Jan Sangh was formed and the right-wing forces formally joined the electoral politics of India. With the decline of Congress as one umbrella party identity politics took centre stage giving birth to regional parties based on caste, linguistic and religious identities. Even Congress was playing the communal card and was critiqued for using soft Hindutva policies. Rajeev Gandhi's role in the Shah Bano discredited the neutral image of the Congress in the public memory. It is still referred by the BJP as worst form of appeasement politics. In order to correct his faults, the Rajeev Gandhi government allowed the opening of the Babri Masjid for worship in Ayodhya temple, thus leading to the alienation of the minorities. The anti-Sikh riot and the demolition of Babri Masjid further weakened image of the secular Congress party. Today the Congress party has lost its secular face and is fronting the worst crisis in electoral politics. Rajeev Bhargava strongly criticises the role of the political parties in their handling of secularism. He calls their secularism party political secularism. It is inherently unethical, immoral and highly opportunistic, it forms relation with regressive element of religion, the sole intention is to stay in power. Bhargava, R. (2019). Thus, the politics of hegemonic secularism has already failed in India. It has caused increasing alienation among identity groups and the oppressed. It has given rise to authoritarianism in various forms. Democratic secularism may reassure the identity groups in the process of the struggle for democratic transformation in India. (Mohanty, 1989, p.1219).

Conclusion

The seventy years of Indian secularism has remained one of the most difficult journeys for this new born state. The uniqueness of this country is its diversity and unity in diversity. The secular model might have weakened, political leaders have betrayed the masses. The decline of welfare state and adoption of neo liberal model, has further weakened the idea of secularism. The capitalist model does not endorse the idea of equality; therefore, it relies on the such forces to take on the economic agenda that is inherently unequal. With Indian economy facing major crisis the religious agenda are used to deviate the attention of the masses from the question of right and socio-economic justice. In the absence of a robust welfare state secularism as an ideology has further weakened. There is no political intent to bridge the gap between communities, for secularism to survive. In the current atmosphere where there is a fear of the uncertain and unknown, for the common people the Constitution has become their holy book. The common people have to become the new guardians of the Indian constitution. In 1951, Justice Vivian Bose, a judge of the Supreme Court of India, rightly said that the Constitution was "not just dull, lifeless words ... but living flames intended to give life to a great nation ... tongues of dynamic fire, potent to mould the future." We are witnessing now a rediscovery of the republic — and of our Constitution as its blazing torch. De, R. & Ranganathan, S. (2019). There is need to uphold the idea of positive secularism that is justice for all and discrimination for none.

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