

Theory and Practice of Secularism in India

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Abstract:

India is a land of religions, language and customs. Therefore, India is multi religious and multi culture from its known history. Perhaps no other society of the world is as multi-cultural and multi religious as Indian society secularism is an important aspect of Indian society, for which it is also well known in the world. The present paper pertains to the theoretical aspects covering the concepts, history, theory, practice, and challenges in the context of India.

Keyword: Secularism, India, religion, challenges.

Introduction: India achieved independence on 15th august, 1947, and the constitution of free India came into force on 26th January, 1950. Since then, the concept of “secularism” has assumed a special importance in the politics and the Constitutional Law of India. The aim of the constitution is to establish a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, and Democratic, Republic of India. The term secular does not appear in the original constitution of India. But now this term has been inserted in the preamble of the constitution of 42nd amendment (1976) to the constitution, therefore, the preamble of the constitution, the provision of fundamental rights and directive principle of state policy reflect the spirit of secularism. India, like many of the modern state, has accepted the theory of secular state. Under this theory, the state is neither religious, nor irreligious but is a wholly detached from religious dogmas and activities. The state is neutral in religious matters. Though, most of the states are agreed on the principle of secularism, the concept of secularism is modified according to the conditions of states. For example, in the U.S.A, the principle of separation of Church and state is recognized. In U.K religious toleration and secular outlook and attitude on the part of people and government is recognized. In France the American model is accepted. In the USSR secularism is of the Marxian tradition which is anti-religious as such. The Indian constitution differs from the Western constitution in this respect. Secularism in India cannot be said to be patterned entirely on any of the western states, because secularism in India has come into being in a different historical context. In India, there had been no religious organization like Church and Hinduism is not as organized religion as Christianity in the western state. Therefore, in India there had been no state-church controversy. But the Indian society which has long tradition of religious tolerance is divided by various religious sects, castes, languages, customs and many other things. Communalism was and even today it is one of the most dangerous issues in India. Because of all these factors, secularism in India is viewed very differently from the western concept of secularism. ‘Nehru was a leading champion of a non-communal secular state He defined the secular state is one in which the state protects all religions but does not favor one at the expense of others and does not itself adopt any religion as a state religion’.

Mahatma Gandhi also viewed the Indian politics from the non-communal-point of view. But his idea of secular state for India was different from that of Nehru. Secularism for Gandhi did not mean a religiously but the spirit of religious tolerance which he postulated on the bases of universalistic ethic of Hinduism itself. His conception of Indian polity was entirely non communal and yet non secular, in the strictly western sense of the state. Mahatma Gandhi, in his autobiography wrote “those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means”.

Common people of India also think of Indian secular state as the state which gives freedom of religion, protection to all religions, and equality before law or equal treatment to all the citizens irrespective of their religions, caste, color, creed, place of birth etc. Indian concept of secularism recognizes both, the principle of secular state and religion of the people. This idea of co-existence of “Secular State” and religion is embodied in the constitution especially in the part III and IV dealing with the fundamental rights and directive principle of states policy respectively.

Similarly since the enforcement of the constitution, on many occasion various political leaders, writers, journalists and other people have declared that, India is a secular state or India has accepted “Secularism” as its national policy.

What is Secularism

For understanding the nature of India as a secular state, let us first be clear about what secularism is and what a secular’s state is. According to the dictionary (Oxford Advanced Learner’s) the meaning of the word secular is “Worldly or material, not religious or spiritual.” According to the Encyclopedia Britannica Secular means “ having no concern with religious or spiritual matters, anything which is distinct, opposed to or not connected with religion or ecclesiastical things ,temporal as opposed to spiritual or ecclesiastical. “In this way secularism means lacking concern with religion.

Defining a secular state Donald.E. Smith writes, “The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion; deal with the individuals as a citizen irrespective of his religion, nor it does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion.”

In India no religion enjoys the status of a state religion. And all religions treated as equal. Further, all Indian citizens have a fundamental right of religious freedom, both individual and corporate. Defining the nature of India as a secular state, the Alexandrowics write, “India as a secular state guarantee, constitutionally, freedom of religion to all persons and does not assign a special position to any particular religion.”

Secularism in the History of India

Secular traditions are deep rooted in the history of India. Indian culture is a composite one which is based on the blending of various spiritual traditions and social movements. In ancient India, the Santam Dharma (Hinduism) was basically allowed to develop as a holistic religion by welcoming different spiritual traditions and trying to integrate them into a common mainstream. The development of different spiritual traditions and to trying to integrate them into a common mainstream. The development of religious plurality of Hinduism.

Emperor Ashoka was the first great emperor to announce, as early as third century B.C. that, the state would not prosecute any religious sect. In his 12th Rock Edit, Ashoka made an appeal not only for the toleration of all religion sects but also to develop a spirit of great respect toward them. Ashoka's secular outlook is one of the landmarks not only of in Indian civilization but also of the human civilization itself (Yarankar, 2006).

In medieval India the Sufi and Bhakti movements bond the people of various communities together with love and peace. The leading lights of these movements were Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, Baba Farid, Sanit Kabir Das, Guru Nanak Dev, Saint Tukaram and Mira Bai. They contributed to the development for a composite culture in such a manner that nobody dares to challenge them. The remarks of guru Nanak, when he says that "There is no Hindu and no Muslim, as there is no distinction between man and man"

The Mughal emperor the great Akbar also to a great extent promoted the policy of toleration of different religions. His propagation of Din-e-Illahi (Divine faith) and Sulh-e-kul Peace with all) were highly inspired by the spirit of secularism. Most of the Mughal kings were tolerant and liberal in their approach. The Muslim rulers were not as anti-Hindu as pictured by some chauvinist Hindu leaders (Yerankar, 2006).

According to modern literature secularism has its origin 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 principal advocates of secular ideology in modern India were Mahatma Gandhi and Pundit Jawahar Lal Nehru. Gandhi's secularism was based on a commitment to the brotherhood of religious communities based on their respect for and pursuit of truth. At present scenario, in the context of India, the separation of religion from the state constitutes the core of the philosophy of secularism. The expression secular has also a special; significances in the context of the historical development of Indian polity. In India, the word secular is identified with tolerance among the different religions. In secular state, no one enjoys any special privilege in national life or in any type of conduct for international relations. In a secular state, the relationship between religion and individual is an independent variable in the sense that each and every citizen is free to choose his or her own religion or even refuse to adhere any one of them.

Secularism in the Constitution of India

The spirit of Indian Constitution is based on secularism. Originally the word Secular did not occur in the constitution. The constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976, added the term secular to the Preamble. Accordingly now India is a "sovereign, Socialist, Secular, and democratic Republic." The Indian State does not recognize or endow any religion. Article 15(1) and 15(2) prohibit discrimination on grounds of religion. Article 25(1) guarantees freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice and propagate religion. Article 27 bars compelling anybody to pay taxes, the proceeds of which are specifically appropriated in payment of expense for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious denomination.

Thus the spirit of Indian constitution is the absolute separation of religion from political and administrative affairs, non-interference of religion in political affairs and of administration in religion

However, it may noted that the constitution gives special privileges to religious minorities. Article 30(1) lays down that all minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institution of their choice. Thus the spirit of Indian constitution is secular. But in practice, it has been distorted. Indian political leaders have given totally different meaning of secularism.

Theory and Practice of Secularism in India

After a long struggle against Britain's colonial rule, when the Indian subcontinent gets a status of independent country, then it becomes a pluralistic nation and welcomed religious and cultural diversity. According to Rambabu (2006) at that time of the partition it was estimated that there was 361 million people living within Indian's borders; of these people 315 million are Hindus, 32 million Muslims, 7 million Christians, 6 million Sikhs, one million Buddhists, and a small minority of Jews. Therefore it was the need of the hour to save this multi-ethnicity of India, for which later on our constitution have opted the way of secularism.

When Jawaharlal Nehru framed the objective resolution of the constitutor secularism. He felt that religious tolerance, an essential aspect of secularism was characteristics of Indian culture. But this was not all. According to Nehru, narrow religious grouping, binding or loyalties must exclude many section of the population and only create Hindu nationalism, Muslim nationalism and Christian nationalism and not Indian nationalism. In a country with different religious group, it is important to build real nationalism on the basis of the secularity. Secularism is essential for the survival of multinational state. A secular state therefore is not anti-religious state but a state without religion it involves the concept of religious freedom for all faiths living within the state.

K.N. Panikkar argues that there are three characteristics of the kind of secular state that India claim to be:

Firstly, the secular state postulates that political institution must be based on the economic and social interest of the entire community, without reference religion, that all must enjoy equal rights.

Secondly it eliminates from the body politic ideas of division between individual and groups on the basis of their faith and racial origin. The third place It is obvious that a composite secular state must accept as the basis of its.

Secularism is essential for democracy, even though in its ideal form it may not exist anywhere in the world India ran into difficulties soon after independence on the question of a common civil code (ccc) which was meant to bring about gender justice and equality uniformly amongst three different religious communities. The issue of ccc has since been beset with acrimonious debate, convicting

a question of gender justice and equality into a communal one. Many other such question acquired a religious connotation and therefore problematic for state policy.

In real practice too, the governments in India always tries to follow a secular path, although it had some setbacks from time to time. In our country, we had as many as four non Hindu Presidents, three Muslims namely, Dr. Zakir Husain, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Dr. A.P.J. Kalam and a Sikh, Gyani Zail Singh. Supreme Court of India has had Muslims as chief justices one of them M. Hidayatullah, was also Vice-President for a term. Dr. Hamid Ansari, a Muslim is at the position of Vice President of India. Air Chief Marshal I.H. Lateef was a Muslim. Several others have reached very high positions. There have been invariably more than one Muslim minister at the center and in most of the states. Similarly governors, vice-chancellors, leaders in the field of science and technology, and a number of ambassadors are from different religious communities. Therefore, in general the Indian governments has not been indifferent to religion but has attempt to treat and foster each religion in the country equally.

The minority communities in India are well represented in the top cadres of the armed forces. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and the other minorities have given the country some outstanding civil servants, artists and sports persons in seventy years since independence. The general nondiscriminatory climate in the country ensures that ability and performance should be given due weightage and nobody should be held back because of his/her religion.

Challenges of Secularism in India

Indian is known for its cultural heterogeneity with respect to language and religion. Hindus constitute the majority, while the Muslims constitute the largest minority. The challenges of castism, communalism and religious fundamentalism, involving separatism and violence in India, are the major threats to our secular polity. They weaken the working and stability of our secular federal system and militate against the basic principles governing our national life and providing meaning to our new identity.

In recent years there have been recurrent and increasing numbers of communal riots, caste, linguistic animosities. This disruptive element should be suppressed with firm step if India is to emerge as a democratic secular polity.

On the other hand, very often the political parties, including the national parties, too sometimes, do not allow secularism to take precedence over their political interests. The electorate in India, guided by traditions, tends to be responsive to appeals based on caste, religion, region .language. By announcing various schemes to a particular community, political parties, openly violate the idea of secularism they claim to stand for. While distributing tickets during elections, nearly all political parties take religion of a candidate into consideration. Such a practice in India poses the greatest threat to secularism.

Indian political leaders and political parties, national or regional have given totally different meaning to secularism. Politics is based on religious propaganda and divided the people on the base of religion and caste is great threat to democracy and a big obstacle in the way of development and progress of the country.

Conclusion:

After a long history of communal incident in India, still now secularism is seen as the only possible option that would be able to provide harmonious and peaceful survival for the different religions and castes of Indian society.

It is note that we need proper educational plan too, to slightly redesign our existing curriculum in the schools and colleges. The texts books presenting distorted historical facts have to be changed and secular ideas will have to be inculcated in the innocent minds of our young generation. all religions should get their weightage in the textbooks of history. The culture traditions and festivals of any particular religion should not be over-projected. the scarifies and hardships of all religious communities and their contribution towards freedom and development of the country need to be focused in the books of history at school and colleges level. The importance of various culture and traditions of different religions in the peculiarity of the country should have to be discussed proper. At last since, India has been declared a secular state by its written constitution, therefore it is responsibility of every Indians to stand by and believe in this declaration. In this huge diversity, secularism is the only tool with leads to the development and progress of the country. Secularism is one of the major instruments for building a modern polity.

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