

INDIA'S SECULAR DEMOCRACY AT RISK :THE CHALLENGE OF COMMUNALISM

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In view of the intrusion of religious passions and caste loyalties into politics one may ask whether india is a truly secular or a theocratic state. India is ofcourse, not the only modern state where politics is related closely to religion. Church and state are linked in Italy, and Germany; and in Britain the Anglican church is established ie it is a part of the state structure. But the issue of Secularism in india is different from the issue in Europe or the U.S.A

The question of political Secularism became important in Europe in the 17th & 18th centuries when states in their modern form where in process of development. A major issue was the nature of political power and particularly its relation to the then powerful church. In the medieval times the state looked up to the church to sanction its authority but the new states that emerged in the modern period were selfdependant .

The new political leaders wanted their authority to be self-justifying. In Britain under Henry VIII there was a political as well as religious secession from papal authority After the struggles of that period it became clear that political authority is by nature secular and “ theocratic state is a misnomer inorder to be sovereign a state must have its own springs of power otherwise it is not sovereign and hence not a state in the true sense. A state may deny its own sovereignty ,as when the constitution of Pakistan proclaimed “ SOVEREIGNTY BELONGS TO GOD ALONE ”.But verbal denials do not mean that the state would infact fail to exercise its sovereign powers.

There is an inseparable linkage between democracy and secularism in India. In this Multi-religious and multi-cultural society democracy cannot function if it propogates any one religion .The people in general will not tolerate discrimination on the part of state on

religious matter. Hence ,secularism is a compulsion for Indian Democracy. In India secularism has emerged in our struggle for freedom ,as a complimentary value of democracy and nationalism.

“ We ,the people of India ,having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic and to secure to all its citizens; Justice-social, economic and political ;Liberty of thought ,expression, belief, faith and worship ;Equality of status and of opportunity ; and to promote among them all Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation ; in our Constituent Assembly this twenty sixth day of November 1949,do hereby,adopt,enact and give to ourselves this constitution ”.Thus the state will remain secular as long as its citizens carry out their responsibility of self-government, in which they are aided because India has a political tradition that favours Secularism .However ,the issue of secularism in India today is not a simple one. The task is to uphold the self dependent political

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community or nation. Secularism expresses the continuing resolve of a people to keep the control of its affairs in its own hands. But a political community does not come into existence readymade. It develops over a period of time and often in faltering steps, during which compromises are made with religious institutions or beliefs.

Whether India is a sufficiently secular state and whether circumstances are favourable for the survival of secularism depends ultimately upon the readiness and ability of its people to maintain an autonomous political community. Critics who maintain that Indian secularism hardly exists are wrong in so far as they demand that the

state should maintain strict neutrality towards all religions or organized churches and should not try to regulate religious organizations .The emphasis on the secular states non-interference in religious matters stems from a negative definition of the nature of the state ;this is related to the emergence of Secularism in western Europe and the U.S.A . But it needs to be defined positively.

Communalism is still a powerful force in India. The challenges of casteism , communalism and religious fundamentalism involving separatism in India are the major threats to our Secular state. They weaken the working and stability of our democratic secular Federal state and militate against the basic principles governing our national life and providing means to our new identity. ‘Casteism’ and ‘ Communalism’ are tearing apart the rich and closely-knit fabric of Indian cultural pluralism. Our national movement was the biggest and the most widespread anti-imperialist movement in world history, because it was a movement of all patriotic elements drawn from the diverse regions linguistic groups , religious communities ,castes and tribes rural and urban segments Inter –communal and Inter-caste tensions and violence have been recurrent and increasing numbers of communal riots and caste carnage. They should stop if India is to emerge as a democratic and secular polity.

India is a puzzling and complex mix of tribal ,feudal and industrial stages of social evolution. This is compounded by low literacy rate , strangle-hold of religion , superstitions , ignorance and poverty. Apart from these and other not so easily identifiable causes of social tension , the democratic process itself is the most potent cause of tension. Each group , community and region is ,as it were , up in arms against the Union Government , the only viable unifying force still left in tact.

Revivalism of religious fundamentalism has pitted followers of different religions against each other . In Kashmir ,it is Islam against Hindu hegemony; in Gujarat ,it is Hindutva forces against Muslims and in Punjab it is Sikhs against Hindus .These tensions are not conflicts of divergent cultures; each one of them is potentially and actually a political movement aiming at realizing not a mere cultural or religious objective .The objective is open or camouflaged , political.

Communalism is perversion of religion from a moral order to an arrangement of contemporary political convenience. In our country ,eight major religious communities

co-exist ,namely the Hindus(82%), Muslims(12.12%), Christians(2.6%), Sikhs(2%), Buddhists(0.7%), Jains(0.4%),Parsis(0.3%) and Jews(0.1%).

Quite often communalism is wrongly used as a synonym for religion or simply for a sense of belonging to a community .A communalist is basically interested in using and exploiting religion and that too for political ,electoral and economic gains. Communalism is exploitation of religion, some times open and sometimes subtle¹

Historically , communalism and casteism had their inception in the Moghul and British periods. Hindu-Muslim relations under the Mughal rulers depended largely on the sovereign's will and disposition. After 1857 , the Muslims suffered a great deal at the hands of the British, for the community as a whole was not trusted .The establishment of Muslim League in 1906 was another milestone in Hindu-Muslim relations. The Muslim League and Congress organizations started drifting apart from each other. Muslim fanaticism started asserting itself against liberal and accommodative views. The British played their part deftly and saw to it that the two communities never reached a real understanding on vital issues. The establishment of Pakistan as the new home for the Muslims in 1947 should have solved the problem of relations between the communities but to the eternal regret of every body, who had firm and unshakable belief in amity and friendship between the two communities ,the problems continue to plague the life and endeavour of hundreds of millions of people on both sides of the great divide to live in peace. There have been three(declared) wars between India and Pakistan in 1947,1965 and 1971,the last resulting in the dismemberment of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh. Scores of Muslim organizations have come into existence some drawing their inspiration from across the border and others openly and brazenly directed by Pakistan .During the British period ,communalism and its major manifestation, communal riots were imputed to Two Nations theory and in the context, it was presumed that the partition would solve the problem forever .But ,in retrospect ,our comprehension of Hindu-Muslim reality seems erroneous.8000 communal riots occurred since India's Independence²

Communal conflicts not only create bitterness and a sense of insecurity but have far-reaching economic and political consequences as well. They retard economic development .Politically , they weaken the forces of democracy and damage the nation's

image outside the country. Socially, they loosen the bonds of unity among members of different communities and corrode the very basis of national solidarity. It is, therefore necessary to ponder over the question of communal riots that take place and devise measures to prevent their recurrence. Communal riots still take place on flimsy grounds. Large-scale communal riots broke out in India after the demolition of Babri Masjid by the activists Sangh Parivar in Ayodhya. Many (both Hindus and Muslims) were killed in the communal backlash that followed. The attacks on Christians in Orissa and Gujarat made headlines in electronic and print media. The grouse of the Sangh Parivar is that the Muslims had demolished their temples, humiliated Hindus during Muslim rule and partitioned India and thus justified their animosity and attacks on Muslims. The Christians are small in number compared to Muslims to pose any serious threat to the Sangh Parivar family in the elections. But the RSS is sore that the missionaries are involved in the conversion of tribals to Christianity. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad in Gujarat wants to stop the missionary activity in Dang district its campaign and thus to win back the tribal support. The BJP, backed by such campaign, could muster tribal community support in the recently held Assembly elections in Gujarat.

Kashmir Problem

Kashmir is a predominantly Muslim State situated in the backdrop of a long chain of Muslim countries of Asia. The militant outfits operating in the State draw their sustenance from rulers in Pakistan. Apart from geo-political factors, other factors too have helped in strengthening the forces of secessionism. They are absence of true democratic institutions in the State, rigged elections, Press censorship and denial of Fundamental Rights. The policy of extending subsidies has led to the developmental lag and mounting unemployment. The absence of ameliorative political reforms and unintended excesses by hard-pressed para-military forces have led to the creation of a plethora of secessionist groups. Whereas Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) wants complete independence of the state, others like Hizbul Mujahideen and Jamait-Islami stand for Kashmir's merger with Pakistan. The politics of expediency and policy of subsidies have created alienation and embitterment in Kashmir. Out of 12,400 civilians killed by militants in the past 12 years, 11,000 were Muslims. The Government of Mufti

Mohammed Sayeed in Kashmir is still settling down trying to come to grips with the ground situation, but there are positive signs-noticeable decline in militancy, State aid for victims of terrorism and para-military excesses – that signal the Government's direction..

Punjab Problem

Roots of secessionism and communalism in Punjab go back to the year 1931. In the First Round Table Conference, the Akali delegates proposed the formation of an independent state to be named Azad Punjab or Khalistan. The Batala resolution of 1968 for the first time pressed the Sikh case for being considered a sovereign community that was further reiterated by Anandpur Sahib resolution. In 1974, Jagjit Singh Chauhan declared Government in exile and the entry of firebrand religious bigot Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale meant the formation of a parallel government in parts of Punjab on communal lines. The Operation Blue Star hurt the Sikh psyche immeasurably and the subsequent riots against Sikhs following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in November, 1984, further exacerbated the ulcer of Sikh alienation. The Sikh militancy and terrorist activities in Punjab were put an end to under K.P.S. Gill's leadership.

Gujarat Carnage

In the multi-religious pluralistic society there can be no peace in the country without peace among different religious communities in India. The communal riots that occur so often in the country bear testimony to the lack of peace among different religious communities living in India.

The Gujarat carnage is the beginning of a new chapter for the Bharatiya Janata Party in India. The Godhra and Post-Godhra incidents pointed to the absence of political sanity in Gujarat. But, fortunately, the Akshardham attack saw no devastating aftermath directed against Muslims. The common people have followed the path shown by political leaders. Although inter-communal clashes have been distressingly frequent in the half-century and more of partition and Indian independence, the scale and manner of the killings under the Bharatiya Janata Party's watch in Gujarat are in many ways unique. The post-Godhra and Ahmedabad riots between Hindus and Muslims helped B.J.P to retain

power in Gujarat. Nothing could represent a more provocative insult to the national commitment to communal harmony and pluralist co-existence than Narendra Modi's repeated taunts of the Muslim minority people of his own state his insinuations that they are susceptible to the supposedly adventurous designs of Pakistan and his final desperate suggestion that if the opposition Congress wins the election, it would represent a victory for Pakistan. Most mocking and challenging of the authority of the Indian Constitution has been the campaign of the BJP leadership buttressed as it was by the incendiary propaganda of the Vishva Hindu Parishad which openly called upon Hindus to "protect their interests."

Gujarat's election puts to test the faith of millions of citizens in this country's ability to rise above such sectarian and narrow-minded bigotry³. The people of Gujarat must reject the poison of bigotry and chauvinism that is being spread out by the peddlers of Hindu chauvinism. It is important that secular and pluralist values triumph in Gujarat in the near future.

After the attack on Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, by some Pakistan-Kashmir terrorists, India began laying anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines along its 1800 miles border with Pakistan. This proxy war between India and Pakistan went on for a few months. Now that peace prevails again on the borders, attention has to be concentrated on how to defuse the communal situation.

The terrorist attack on Indian Parliament was unprecedented not only in the history of India but also in the annals of democracy in the world. It also manifests utter disregard and contempt for parliamentary democracy by Pakistan which only can boast of a military-propped democracy.

Communalism gave rise to a culture and climate of anti-minoritism resulting in increasing intolerance. Communalism, regionalism, linguistic fanaticism and casteism have become closely linked with our country's socio-political evolution.

Causes for the Communal Conflict

- 1) A struggle for property has led occasionally to widespread religious conflicts.
- 2) Sexual offences have been a major cause for communal conflict.

- 3) The urge for economic domination has driven the communal elite of Hindus and Muslims to cross swords and involved innocent masses in communal disturbances.
- 4) Political interests and communal behaviour to capture political power is the root-cause for communal riots in India.
- 5) Scramble for jobs ,clashes of economic interests and personal animosities play an important part in communal riots.
- 6) Cow-slaughter and religious processions of one community passing places of worship of the other often incite riots.

Indian Muslims are generally described as educationally backward, economically poor and politically less conscious .Although the Muslim community forms 12.2% of the country's population ,its children account for only 4% of those doing Matriculation and above. However ,in the recent times , Muslims are encouraging education among their children and attempting to better their community interests. Muslims are fast changing in attitudes ,self-reliance and reforms. These are the new buzzwords among India's largest minority community as it leaps out of its shell of isolation into brave but uncertain New World challenging dogma and habit⁴.

Communal clashes have a crippling effect on the Indian society .The minorities are the worst sufferers of communal conflagrations.The Sangh Parivar with its hidden agenda of saffron hegemony and the tendency to link the neighbourhood Muslims with Pakistan and with Osama bin Laden needs to be curbed. Its is true that the Congress tried to appease communal elements at various stages. But the BJP was responsible for the rampant spread of bigotry and polarization of society on communal lines. The hidden agenda of Sangh Parivar was not only detrimental to the religious minorities ,but also to the majority community as well⁵ .The communal experiment conducted in Gujarat by the BJP cannot be repeated in other parts of India as people have closely watched the developments in Gujarat.

No matter how eloquently the prime minister A.B. Vajpayee tries to protect a humane, tolerant and a sane image of Hindutva, it is the rhetoric of the sanghpariver leaders like Ashok singhal, Giriraj Kishore and especially D.R Praven Togadia that sets the pace of political debate in the country. Following the B.J.P's stunning victory in the Gujarat elections , D.R Praven Togadia in a speech in pune on Dec 29,2002 referred to 3 types of Ghaznis who had done immense damage to the country. The first is the Jihad Ghazni,meaning, presumably, Pakistan and Islamic fundamentalist terrorists it sends to carry out murderous activities in India, as well as Indian muslims who sympathize with both of them The 2nd is the secularist Ghazni who protect Jihadis of all hues and the 3rd is the political Ghazni who wants to bring MS Sonia Gandhi to the seat of power the vishwa hindu Parishad's message to Hindus is clear. India's bitterest enemy Pakistan is the epicenter of Islamic terrorism ,it holds Indian muslims in thrall; their avowed ambition is to disturb Hindu India; there fore any one who speaks up for the minorities,is in fact in cahoots wits Islamic fundamentalists,terrorists and Pakistan ; any one who opposes the V.H.P brand of cultural Nationalism is a traitor who deserves to be forced in to submission⁶

Such charges and counter charges make it difficult to focus attention on issues,which should be a source of concern. The encouragement given to Jihadis by Pakistan to create mayhem in India is just one of them .Others include proliferation of mosques and madarasas along Indias borders with Nepal and Bangladesh, the influence of migrants from Nepal and Bangladesh and the highly questionable deeds of certain christian missionary out lets .Given the attempts of the strident elements of the Sangh Parivar to create a climate of hate against the secularists and the minorities ,the legitimate efforts of the Government to deal with the issue head on acquire a communal tinge.

To the law abiding citizens,the state is a protector, which enables them to lead their lives with out fear .To day this fear is writ large on the face of the members of the minority community of Gujarat, for they are suddenly faced with the partisanship of the state ,with out any other source to look for support. This helplessness is the result of the state and its institutions turning communal in the wake of the B.J.P coming back to power once again in Gujarat recently under Narendra Modis leader ship⁷

The government at times failed to act effectively to counter societal attacks against religious minorities and attempts by state and local government's to limit religious freedom. This failure resulted in part from the legal constraints inherent in the country's federal structure and in part from the law enforcement and justice systems ,which at times are not effective. In Gujarat and Tamil-nadu anti conversion laws were passed.The ineffective investigation and prosecution of attacks on religious minorities may be seen by some extremists as a signal that such violence may be committed with impunity. So far no convictions had been obtained in connection with the 2002 attacks in Gujarat, in which as many as 2000 muslims were killed. Victims of the Gujarat riots blamed Hindus Nationalists for sabotaging efforts to prosecute Hindus involved in the riots.

The Indian state should not be allowed to identify with any religion, of the majority or the minority and also while guaranteeing the freedom of religion for all, it should not legislate on the bases of any religion as it did in the ShahBano during RajivGandhi's Prime ministership thus making serious compromise with the secular principles of the state. The state should not allow its secularism to be tampered with what ever the pressure from this or that religious community. It would other wise be the beginning of the end of secularism, which is so essential for modern statecraft in a multi religious society like India.

Secularism gives equal to all religious groups and federalism seeks to do political justice to the identities of India's various linguistic and cultural groups. The Indian constitution obviously visualizes this as a formula for national unity. Majority communalism was sought to be aroused in the recently held elections to the Gujarat assembly and a Unitarian dispensation attempted to be imposed .In the face of these dangers, it becomes necessary to reassert the basic principles upon which the Indian state has been founded. Policy making must continuously strive to strengthen the two pillars of Indian unity- secularism and federal democracy. The Ram-Rahim approach encapsulated in Gandhi's favorite hymn.

Ishwar allahteryra naam

(Ishwar and allah are but the two names of the same god)

Is the need of the hour to curb growing communalism in India.

India should continue to be a pluralistic society and its governance recognizes plurality of religions within the Hindu system and outside of it. The identity of minorities and other ethnic groups should be preserved. We are now in the clutches of theocratic forces like B.J.P, V.H.P, and Bajrang Dal and Shivsena. These forces entered the power structure. Successive governments headed by P.V Narasimha Rao, Deve Gowda, I.K Gujral and Vajpayee perpetuated the anarchy in governance and parliamentary politics in the post Rajiv Gandhi era. After the political burlesque of Deve Gowda and I.K Gujral, secularism as a political value was devalued and the ground was cleared for the theocratic forces led by B.J.P to become a major player. It was during this period that secularism became a major issue before the supreme court. In S.R Bommai case, two issues central to democratic governance came up for adjudication; the extent of permissible judicial review of the satisfaction of the president in matters of dismissal of state government and the imposition of president's rule and, on the other, was the scope and ambition of secularism and its role in governance. The court pointed out that despite the absence of the expressions 'socialist' and 'secular' in the preamble of the Indian constitution was secular and that what was implicit was made explicit. Thus no ruling party can bring about a theocratic state into existence directly or indirectly⁸. The judges pointed out "the founding fathers could not have countenanced the idea of treating minorities as second-class citizens. On the contrary, the dominating thinking appears to be that the majority community, Hindus, must be secular and thereby, help the minorities to become secular. For it is the majority community alone that then can provide the sense of security for others". The purpose of law in plural societies, the court went on to say "is not the progressive assimilation of minorities in the majoritarian milieu. This would not solve the problem but would vainly seek to dissolve it"⁹. Secularism is, therefore, part of the fundamental law and the basic structure of the India political system.

Pseudo-secularists may be scoffed at but not the law laid down by the supreme court. It will also be useful to remember that this ruling was rendered in the backdrop of Ayodhya rathayatra, Babri Masjid and the riots that followed in Mumbai and other places. The court referred to section 123, Sub-sections 3 and 3A of the Representation of the People's Act, 1951, and pointed out that election law also barred religion as the basis of electoral politics. It is in this context of law as expounded by the supreme court in S.R

Bommai's case that the legitimacy B.J.P and its outfits and of ShivSena to participate in the country's politics with the agenda that they profess needs questioning. Does professing theocratic principles or propounding Hindu religion as the ruling religion of the state entitles them to continue in power? In the light of such an exposition of secularism will it be possible for the B.J.P to continue in power?

In fact, the anti-secular power-wielders and their hatchet men should read what the court said "it(secularism) enables people to see the imperative requirements for human progress in all aspects and social advancement, and indeed for human survival itself.It not only improves the material conditions of human life.but also liberates the human spirit from bondage of ignorance, suppression, irrationality, injustice, fraudulent hypocrisy and oppressive exploitation".Not so vacuous after all¹⁰.

Conclusion

The Indian state and the ruling elite committed to the capitalist modernization have failed in propagating the ideology of secularism and in shaking off the shackles of religion,caste and community loyalties which are binding on all classes in India.The modern India state has to grapple with the challenges posed by communal forces.Therefore,we must oppose communalism not only in minority but also in the majority if we do not want to weaken the growth of real democratic and secular spirit. The real challenge to modern India state is from organized religious groups¹¹.The internal weakness of the Indian state is and will be exploited by the imperialists who have important stakes in our country which is following the path of capitalist modernization and globalization.This is a real threat to the National Integration of India

To sumup the political scene in India is intricate and the equation between secularism and communal politics covers only a small part of the picture.Any state is inherently a secular power although it may not always be secular minded.The definition of secularism as the divorce of the state from religion or from the churches is derived from the history of emergence of the modern European states in struggles against church dominance.A more general definition of secularism is the determination of a people to uphold a self governing political community. This involves the acceptance of self

responsibility by the citizens. The prevalence of tolerant policies and attitudes is the need of the hour.

During the last 56 years of India's independence, India has witnessed both successes and failures in running the secular democratic processes. It has evolved a lasting secular constitution, a viable political system and a functional federal secular polity and with strong democratic traditions. Diverse races and ethno-lingual groups have been unified without destroying their identities. Above all, a vast multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural India has been kept united.

These achievements, however, are facing serious challenges from the negative trends that have crept in over the years. Communal, caste and linguistic tensions are growing in such proportion that the unity of India appears to be threatened. Use of violence in communal and caste politics has given legitimacy to communal violence and crime in politics. The former election commissioner G.V.G Krishna Murthy, has gone on record to say that the situation in India is threatening to degenerate into a “government of the criminals, for the criminals and by the criminals”. Such a sorry state of affairs can't be allowed to continue for long period. The doctrines of liberty, equality, Fraternity, social justice, secularism, fair play and rule of law enshrined in the Indian constitution have to percolate into our daily lives. The government, the political parties, and Indian citizens all must play their effective role in the fight against these challenges particularly the challenge of communalism. There is no doubt that with the efforts of younger generation India can look forward to emerging as a great secular Nation.

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