

Full Length Research

Anti-Secularist Critique in Context of India

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India is as secular as it is democratic. Secularism in India is considered as a foreign copied idea which has been imposed on its people since secularism is a word which has its origin in western countries and relates to the separation of the church from the state. The validity for such provision was made by an amendment in the written constitution of India. The current article is an effort to describe secularism in Indian context. The article also highlights various understandings about secularism popular in west and among left liberal thinkers. The methodology is descriptive analytical.

Keywords: Secularism, Anti-Secularist Critique, Left-Liberal view, Western Ideology, Nation State, Democratic.

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INTRODUCTION

Secularism has been one of the most debated and contested issues in independent India. There have been many formulations regarding the subject. Many theorists suggested western model of secularism that is wall of separation theses. Many argued for a kind of secularism, which is very much imbued and suited to the Indian political system. But there has been significant change in the discourse of secularism in India from 1980 onwards. This paper particularly tries to analyse the anti-secularist critiques and questions some of the fundamental foundations.

Meaning of Secularism

Secularism has essentially two broad principles. One which means separation of religion from politics and secondly acceptance of religion as purely and strictly private affairs of individuals having nothing to do with the

state.

Donald Eugene Smith (1958:147) suggested a working definition thus:

“The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion.”

Broadly speaking the critique of secularism revolves around three relations

- i. religion and the individual(freedom of religion)
- ii. The state and the individual(citizenship)
- iii. The state and the religion (separation of state and religion)

Different Categories of Anti-Secularist Critiques

Though there are many criticisms against the concept of secularism from different angles based on each other's understanding, the critiques of Secularism can broadly be categorized into three categories:

- I. In the light of recent developments, the left liberal viewpoint has become increasingly critical of State policies. The main proponents of this group are the leftist scholars and activists, human-rights groups, feminists and most of the time their criticism is also co-opted by minority groups and activists. Specifically, Marxists have become highly critical of the State, which according to them is pandering to the ruling-class wishes. However, the left so far has been unable to shed its ambivalent posture towards Common Civil Code.
- II. The academic critique of secularism that strikes at the very roots of secularism. It argues for the inner potentialities of religious faith in promoting inter-religious understanding and communal harmony. Implicit in their critique is also a negative assessment of Modern-nation State, and its ideological hegemony. However, these commentators have not offered much substantive or empirical evidence in support of their critique. It has been suggested that the "secularists" are drawn from the westernized, English speaking elite that distinguished itself from the vernacular-speaking practitioners of religion.
- III. The third category is the domain of practitioners of power, mainly political organisations with 'rightist' orientation who condemn Indian secularism as practiced is 'pseudo' and which is in the unjustifiable service of the minority religious traditions. It seeks to alter the fundamental nature of the State. At other times, it descends to pure vote bank politics that is manifest in their observations.

The impact of left Liberal Tradition

The Left liberal tradition is a continuation of Nehruvian Legacy, which is deeply suspicious of the role of religion in politics, and which, if given half-a-chance, would refuse the very legitimacy of religion in analysis and insist on economic and other interpretations of the problems concerned. However, this is not too far away from the Nehruvian position. India is supposed to be a religious country above everything else. Almost always it seemed

to stand for blind beliefs and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation and the preservation of vested interest..."

"Marxist secularists are in the most fundamental and 'ultimate' sense of the word anti-religious. They do not merely wish it to be restricted to individual private life and practices but ultimately expect and hope that religious influence will disappear from every sphere of human existence..."(Khan.R).

From this extreme position, just as Nehru had to compromise, Indian left intellectual today are willing to recognize the role of religious in life and thus their notion and critique of secularism has often come to mirror that of liberal democrats. Thus, when Marxists say that, it is not at level of faith or spiritual belief that Marxists must contest religious... to do so in deeply religious societies like India would be a recipe for disaster. It is much more at the level of economic, political and social needs that Marxism must work. It is clear that faith and spiritual beliefs implicitly stands the test of criticism and it is only that at other levels the problems need to be tackled. This is also very obvious that this is not significantly different from the liberal democratic view, which too grants religion its rightful place in the private domains.

In fact, more or less, this has been the position of the Indian State since its inception and the Constitution reflects such a position. Thus, India's social legislation of removal of untouchability, positive discrimination in jobs, marriage bills, women's quota bills, temple entry acts and other such measures have sought to tackle the problem at the economic and political levels. This also has been the umbilical cord of the secular process that underway in our society. These policies are also inherent of the problems that we are facing today. For, these measures provide a fertile ground for manipulation of the people by political parties. Though the State is debarred from the use of religion for its activities, political parties are not invited to do so, as long as they are not manifestly instigating disturbance in which case they will be prevented on grounds of Public order, morality and health.

In the well meant and richly deserved, reservation policies have provided an ideal opportunity to announce various sops to the castes for the consolidation of vote-banks thus solidifying caste-blocks and pitting them against each other in competition for benefits, greater zeal in reforming Hindu religious tradition has invited negative comments of "appeasement" of minority communities. Nobody seems to care for the valid point that Smith made, justifying greater activism as far as Hindu religious traditions are concerned. Perhaps the Indian state does not interfere in the personal laws of minorities to this reason. Muslims and Christian have a

'central church' to deal with such problems. Also the Indian constitution recognizes only religious minorities. Implicitly it means that the state guarantees certain freedoms to these minorities.

Secularism in the East and the West

Critics and opponents of secularism in India base their argument on its foreign origin thus being a western concept secularism is essentially an imposed product of the West, it is incompatible with the social and cultural conditions of South Asia. While it is true that secularism is a 'Western' ideology in the sense that it arose in the west, anti-secularists have consistently argued that Western secularism is anti-religious as it does not protect the various religious cultures within the state, and is therefore inapplicable to India. More specifically, while the religious traditions of South Asia do make a distinction between the religious and the secular, in these traditions the religious engulfs the secular, and therefore secularism as such is not inherent in these traditions. Yet while the first 'culture', so to speak, which made this dichotomy, was predominantly Christian, this doesn't logically lead to the conclusion that the ability to make this bifurcation in South Asia – though not fully manifested – at the same time it is a product of the West, and is thus irrelevant to South Asia.

The difference between secularism in the East and the West is that in the West it is related to individual freedom because it arose with the nation-state as a replacement of the feudal lords with the bourgeoisies as a power base. Whereas in the colonized world the state becomes the power base for which the masses had to work. Secularism in the post-colonial world came to mean dependency on the state rather than control over it. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, the British interfered a great deal with traditional power bases in order to secure the traditional mode of production, and did so all under the guise of promoting secularism.

Indian Constitutional Secularism

Indian constitutional secularism which is sui generis character has three distinct features: (a) the principle of giving primacy to the individual, placing him before and above religion, (b) recognizing freedom of religion and religious denomination as incidental only to his well being and to a general scheme of liberty and (c) clarity of the enunciation of the principle of tolerance. Any criticism of constitutional view of secularism needs to take into account the enormous constraints under which it is framed and practiced. Innovative strategies are required to confront unique situation and the Indian secularism has been one such attempt. So, an assessment of the

Indian view needs to be sympathetic to the historical situation as also the external pressure under which they are framed. Sure, many mistakes are made, some deliberate to serve political needs.

B.L.Fadia says "the constitution has failed secularism as in some article it couched in secular phrases but sanctioned ban on cow slaughter as it hurts Hindu religious sentiments. Despite having provision for uniform civil codes Hindus can have one legal wife whereas Muslims are allowed to keep four wives."

Problems of Secularism in India

India's experience with partition had also dented its confidence resulting in a doubly anti-negative approach as far as reforms of minority communities are concerned. All this has made common civil code a distant dream. It is also here that the left-liberal approach is ambiguous, now blowing hot and cold, unable to decide on the right course of action. It is also here that the Indian Judiciary has been of immense help to the Indian state. As Baxi writes, It has been a consistent judicial view, right up to the Shah Bano case decision, that in introducing social reform the state is entitled to proceed by stages and to consider whether a particular community governed by personal law' is ripe enough for the reform proposed. But there cannot be any doubt that it has also caused resentment in a section of the majority community, which is promptly exploited by political organization. This fact was brought into relief by the controversy generated by the Shah Bano case. Every major political organisation tried to exploit the situation to its advantages by taking position that would beat serve its political interest.

All this has given the state far less room to assert itself through its constitutional means. Every system of administration has only been as good as the people who run it. Even then, Indian judiciary, which has been entrusted with the duty of safeguarding constitutional interests, barring a few observations, has been able to do it with a large measure of impartiality and success. A criticism of state view of secularism can only be a criticism of the people who run it, as none of the critique has so far been able to provide a viable alternative.

We find that in much criticism, such sympathy is consciously absent. If the left-liberal critique has targeted the vacillation of the state, the criticism of Madan and Nandy category strikes at the very roots of secularism. Therefore, for Madan, secularism is an empty notion, not only because it is the will of only a handful, but also because society is religious or communal, which the state will reflect. Nor, according to him, religion in South Asia can be separated from politics, as religion is constitutive of society here. Both politics and economics are simply encompassed by religion.

Such an understanding of South Asian religion is all

pervasive and true; it may need to change that has to be corrected under the new circumstances. Nor, such an understanding should make secularism undesirable. Especially the Indian variety of secularism is very much responsible for the survival of the concept of nation-state. It may be argued that the concept of nation-state is as oppress as religion deemed to be, but that is another story. Speaking within the domain of this concept, secularism sees inevitable.

Religion has not only been a faith, but it has also been an ideology. Precisely, this religion as an ideology uses religion as faith (perhaps the latter is an unwitting victim) to achieve its political ends. This is where the concept of secularism has been of help to modern nation-state. It is only when the state fails to perform its duty of protecting religion as faith, secularism comes to grief.

And, precisely this has happened to the Muslim women (Protection of Rights and Divorce Act of 1986) (Shah Bano Case) and in the Rama Janam Bhoomi affair and in a few other cases. Rather than delegitimizing the concept, these incidents have come to reflect the nature of sensitive balance that is sought to be balanced by secularism. This is where the room for rightist critiques to appropriate is produced. When anti-secularist speaks about the oppressive and hegemonic nature of the secular ideology.

Similarly, Larson argues that the progression of India as a modern nation-state cannot be achieved "a) without a rigorous critique of the discourse of modernity in India, b) without a fundamental settling of accounts with the indigenous intellectual settling of accounts with the indigenous intellectual and spiritual traditions of India that allows those traditions a meaningful place in independent India, and c) without some fundamental shift in the policies and priorities of India as a modern nation-state growing out of the critique of modernity and a more substantive appropriation of the nation's indigenous intellectual and spiritual traditions.

Secularism is not the culprit rather it is the state and various community leaders in defining the only way culture can find public expression; through state politics and policy. Leaders like Jinnah and Indira Gandhi were criticized for their political use of religion rather than their religious use of politics, as their demonology was the result of the secularization of politics through a non-secular means.

More specifically, Jinnah sought to secure a political base by instilling the fear of discrimination against Muslims. Yet politically uniting the community meant exploiting religions symbolism. And through this process the state has become intolerant of faith. In promoting secularism, the state had become just as pervading, if not more so, as religious ideological powers. It is because of this that critics consider secularism to be ethno phobic because it forces one to comply with the modern state at the cost of one's culture. Though Nehru was considered

a rationalist – and Nehru himself would most likely have agreed with, during the debates over the Hindu Code Bill, Nehru bolstered his agreements for reforms not with pleas for a secular state culture, but with the assertion of the dynamism and flexibility of Hinduism.

Gandhi, though not a statesman, felt that religion and the state should remain separate. Similarly, Akbar found the source of his tolerance to what he himself defined as the true message of Islam. However, the majority of the Islamic clergy at the time did not feel that Akbar's tolerance, per se, was the "true message", and subjected him to much diatribe for his Islamic ways. Hence, religion may be a source of tolerance, but as an institution it can also be a great source of intolerance and should therefore not be intertwined with the state.

The concept of the separation of the state and religion was a British import. Prior to that, rulers both Hindu and Muslim were partial to institutions of their own faith. It was further assumed by these leaders and those they led that they were to be the protect of these institutions and while Islamic political theory does recognize the state and the sovereign, Mughal emperors did not adhere to the modern concept of state neutrality towards religious institutions. So clearly the neither secularism nor the state are culprits of intolerance, but those claiming to propagate them.

In Ashish Nandy's words, We live in an India where more than 80% of the communal clashes and riots still take place among the less than 20 % of the Indians who stay in the cities and are increasingly disconnected from their traditional community lies and consciousness. He further points out that "...today we have roughly one and a half riot a day in India".

Taking an optimistic position towards secularism in India, D E Smith says that India intends to be a secular state. "The ideal is clearly embodied in the constitution, and it is being implemented in substantial measure." While reminding us that a "completely secular does not exist," Smith says, "India is as secular as it is democratic". And despite the apparent threat of communalism, Smith's vehement argument is that "The secular state has far more than an even chance of survival in India". This assessment is based on the definition that "the secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as or citizen irrespective of his religion, nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion". All the characteristics of D E Smith's secular state are important in the Constitution of India. But V P Luthara, stressing on one aspect of Smith's definition, that is, separation of religion and state, hold that a secular state is "one which is separated from, unconnected with and not devoted to religion, or to use a terminology which is generally employed to indicate such a relationship between the state and the Church." On the basis of this definition and historical data available to him,

Luthara remarks that India “is not and can not be secular state”.

While characterizing Indian secularism, T N Madan skeptically writes: At best Indian secularism has been an inadequate by defined “attitude” (it can not be called a philosophy of life except when one is dismissing the thought of someone like Mahatma Gandhi or Maulana Azad) of goodwill towards all religions, Sarva Dharma Sambhava; in a narrower formulation it has been a negative or defensive policy of religious neutrality (Dharma Nirpekshita) or the part of the state, in either formulation, Indian secularism achieves the opposite of its stated intentions; it trivializes religious difference as well as the notion of the unity of religions. And really fails to provide guidance for viable political action, for it is not a noted, full-blooded, and well thought art , it is only a strategy.

Although, there is some element of truth in what Madan argue, however, in the Indian context, the idea of a secular state partly draws its significance from the fact that historically Indian society has been a multi-religious society. It must be remembered that this character anecdotes the advance of Muslims and Christians Communities in this country. One may remark in passing that it is the primary responsibility of the majority community to safeguard the secular character of Indian state. Unless the member of majority community experience, in their day to day living, that they are at par with members of majority community in all situations which fall within the jurisdiction of the state, the idea of a secular state embracing all Indians will lack all substances and reality. And it is the responsibility of all religious community to reformulate their traditional values and norms and reform their traditional practices so as to bring them in harmony with the value and principles which govern the secular jurisdictions of the state. The peculiar Indian element in the concept of secularism is the value of Sarva Dharma Sambhava that is, the attitude of equal respect for all religions.

For Rajni Kothari, democracy becomes majoritarianism and with or growing polarizations of society such majoritarianism gets embroiled in the clashes between majority and minority at the community level. The result is communal politics. For a solution he suggests, “It is only by rejuvenating citizens’ initiatives and forcing the state to concede to the just demand of the minorities that long term strategy of combating communalism can evolve.”

In the wake of growing communalism, it is often alleged that secularism in India failed to serve its purpose. The decade of 1980s has witnessed an escalation of communalism and a consolidation of sentiments around symbol of religious identity and perception of threat to these identities. Communal ideology has gained much wider social acceptance forcing a retreat from even the “liberal rhetoric” of secularism.

Claims of religious tolerance based on consuming

ideologies of religious faith also have to be questioned as they can and often do result in hierarchy and chauvinism. For instance, while M.N. Srinivas maintains that Hinduism can allow for more secularization and pluralism than other faiths, Hinduism never existed as one single institution with one common referent. Furthermore, the debates over laws governing conversion, as well as the debates concerning the Hindu Code Bill reflect the opposite – Hindu chauvinism and resistance to secularism cannot meet the political challenges of South Asia because the majority and minority differ in this perception of how a secular state should act.

Critics of the growing momentum of the Hindu right acknowledge its apparent ease with functioning in the modern state, and the fact that as of yet it had not attacked the term ‘secularism’ itself. Yet, concluding that it is the modern state and secularism, which has bolstered the development of the Hindu right, would be denying its possibly pre-modern origins.

Chattejee questions the relevance of comparing secularism in India with that of Europe or the West because despite difference in operationalization, all three versions have the same referents. However, it is exactly these referents that set the mode for its operationalization. And it is this lack of comparison, which has led to the state’s contradictory behaviour, as well as the lack of understanding regarding secularism.

Vagaries among Secularists:

Yet some proponents of secularism are also not too clear on its boundaries. Although D.E. Smith attributes India’s success in achieving secularism to the lack of hierarchy in Hinduism and its inherent doctrinal tolerance (Bhargava, pg 1784), on the contrary, though not as strictly institutionalized as Christianity or Islam, Hindu traditions have been always been based on local hierarchies. And its texts and ideological manifestations are anything but egalitarian or tolerant.

Similarly, A.B. Shah defined secularist as the governance of the relationship between individuals and religion. He goes on to say that our secular lives are in three levels : (1) personal, interpersonal, and institutional, and that how we deal with these levels does not rely on our religious conviction or background (Shah, pg79, 1975). On the contrary, how we decide politically is based on our moral conviction, some or all of which may have its origins in our religious upbringing. Rather, secularism governs the relationship between the state and religion as an institution because it is at the state level that the imposition of one’s religious convictions over another’s in the discourse on individual rights granted by the state that the secularism in brought into the fray to justify the state’s separation from religious institutions in order to keep true to its commitment to the security of individual

rights. So while Akeel Bilgrami would argue that secularism in India never had the opportunity to emerge out of an inter-community dialogue. One wonders whether it would have anyway, as doing so would make it subject to communitarian interests rather than ultimate goals of the ideology, itself. Specifically, A.B.Shah maintains that its Indian variant stagnated precisely because it sought to maintain the status of religious communities (Bilgrami, 1994: 1754).

Bilgrami however cites other flaws in Nehru's secularism, which was flawed because it was specially Nehru secularism. He argues that it was an imposition in that Nehru assumed that secularism is placed outside the political arena in which other ideologies co exists. And although modern states are not the first and only entities which impose a way of life, Nehru's secularism sought to do just that in that it was used as a guise to purport that the Congress party represented all of India, rather than allowing or communal representation. So, issues of secularism versus communalism were evaded because Nehru believed that by emphasizing economic and political reform through a leftist agenda, the acknowledgement and therefore the existence of communal and religious differences and hostilities would be avoided. Subsequently, it is the Congress party, which is guilty for making Nehruvian secularism obsolete in the eyes of the public because of its chauvinism and alienation of minority communities.

With regards to religious tolerance, Beteille would argue that if various religious communities have lived amicably in a pluralistic society, it is not because of any one the heir all-encompassing ideologies, but rather the opposite. They've never sustained their pristine nature in a plural society. Bilgrami also asserts that contrary to Nandy's view that the Hindutva Brigade is "an innocent protest against the tyrannies of Nehru's secularism," such a movement was foreseen by Nehru if religion and politics are combined.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, the critique of modern nation-states are also aware of historical realities with its own contradictions and strengths, it should also be recognized that post-modern critique have so far failed to produce a coherent and viable alternative and Nandy's prescription of going back to pre-modern theology of popular faith concerning tolerance (Nandy, 1988) characterized by singular lack of fit with the existing circumstances. Madan however, concedes that the only way for secularism in South Asia to succeed would be for religion and secularism to be taken equally seriously.

Secularism is everything which religion is not, its process of emergence, its moral framework, and its relationship between the state and the individual and

between individuals. What also needs mentioning is that many anti-secularist intellectuals are equally "non-believers" in their personal lives, and also equally "anti-fundamentalist". And yet their criticism of secularism is in itself grounded in the secular.

The reality is that the society in India is non secular and there is growing fundamentalism. The political parties and their vested interests have hardly contributed in strengthening the secular fabric of the state but actually tarnishing it to set their scores. Communalism has continued to grow even after independence. Communalism has been exploited by all political parties and politicians in the pursuit of power. Above all there can never be a secular state without a secular society.

To conclude, the secularism in India is being diluted by various overt and covert ways. The secular social fabric of Indian society is currently under immense danger. In an effort of self defence survival mechanisms minorities are moving towards greater fundamentalism. One can summarise that secularism hasn't failed. Rather, what has failed is its culturally specific interpretation. What then needs to be questioned is this interpretation. Though most non-modern Indians would prefer this pluralist meaning as they are innocent victims of the political legacy of colonialism, the fact that these non-moderns were easily led and manipulated financially by upper-class political leaders to commit the actual violence in the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi only proves that they aren't as naïve and innocent and they opt for this pluralist meaning with a clear politically intolerant agenda behind it.

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