

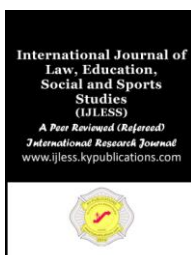
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CHALLENGES OF SECULARISM IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Nearly after sixty years of Independence, India has still been struggling to achieve the notional state prescribed in its preamble. We, the Indians have been in constant pursuit to uphold our Constitutional commitment to Secularism in its true sense. In the span of over six decades, the country witnessed repeated attacks from its neighbours from the west and the north. However, its unflinching zeal to uphold the idea of a united India could not be shaken. The country's journey from a completely dependent nation on foreign powers for energy, food and finance, to a full fledged nation which is self reliant speaks volumes about its commitment to its ethos and dream of one nation despite its diversities. However, in the recent past some political parties with the sole aim of capturing power are playing religious and caste politics thereby spoiling the secular fabric of our country. The practice of secularism in India is increasingly under attack. It is high time that we stand against these vested entities and save our nation from falling into an irretrievable trap.

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An historical Overview

India is a country where religion is very central to the life of the people. India's age old philosophy as expounded in its scriptures called Upanishad is "**Sarva Dharma Sambhava**" which means equal treatment of all the religions. India has never been a homo religious country. Even before the advent of Aryans, there existed numerous tribal cults from North West frontiers to Kanyakumari, most of whom happened to be Dravidians. However, with the invasion of Aryans people of Dravidian origin were driven down south and today we find all Dravidian people in four southern states of India. With Aryans came the Brahminical cult. Over a period of time, a section of these Brahmins migrated to south downwards and evolved new cults marrying vedic cults with the Dravidian ones. Thus it is said that Hindu Indians worship more than 33 hundred thousand Gods and Goddesses. Thus, even before the advent of Christianity and Islam, India was multi-religious in nature. Christianity and Islam added more religious traditions to the existing Indian traditions. However, despite its diverse culture there was religious tolerance due to the policies of great rulers from Ashoka to Akbar. At times inter-religious controversies did arise, but there never took place bloodshed in the name of religion. One of the reasons for the same could be attributed to the feudal system, as authority resided in the sword and not religion. Minor inter religious skirmishes gave rise to Sufi and Bhakti cult in Islam and Hinduism respectively. These cults acted as a buffer between the state and the masses, providing a safety valve to the growing fundamentalism in the country. Most of the conversions to Islam and Christianity took place through Sufis and missionaries with a spirit of devotion.

Historically, the successful continuation of Secularism in India can be attributed to the fact the there did not exist a centralized authority ruling the Indian Sub-Continent from the Hindu kush to the Bay of Bengal. Though some dynasties were successful in ruling a large area of land, they did not impose their religious practices on the entire land mass. The authority was generally restricted to timely collection of taxes and at times loyalty of the contemporaries in the times of crisis. This fragmented rule paved the way for growth of

different religious practices freely. However, with the advent of British rule, things changed drastically. For the first time the Indian Sub-Continent was brought under a common rule – The British Empire. With this came the idea of competitive politics. Differences between Hindu and Muslim elite took the centre stage for various reasons – socio-cultural, economic and political. The British rulers mercilessly adopted the policy of divide and rule thereby distorting the long established ancient & medieval history of harmony and peaceful co-existence between the Muslims and the Hindus.

The Hindus were quick to adapt to new realities and took to modern education of commerce and industries. On the other side, the Muslim elite resisted modern education and commerce and industries and took the path of religious fundamentalism thereby bringing a huge gap in the capabilities of Hindus and Muslims of the times. The British again took advantage of this gap, and used it as a tool to incite Muslims for their backwardness and intelligently passed the blame on the Hindus. This act of the British finally culminated in the form of coming of a new state PAKISTAN formed purely on religious grounds. It was for the first time in the history of the Indian Subcontinent that a state was formed purely on religious grounds.

Secularism and the Constitution of India

The Constitution of India-the charter of India's freedom-is a product not of political revolution, but of the research and deliberations of eminent men after intensive labour hijacking almost all the known constitutions of the world. The document was so sacred that it mirrored the hopes and aspirations of a new born nation that was so diverse in its religious thought and practice. The Constitution so drafted proved to be the one document that can be credited to India's unwavering democratic stand despite severe socio-economic-cultural and political turmoils in the past. The Preamble proclaims India as a secular country. Here it is to be kept in mind that the word 'secular' was added to the Preamble through an amendment during the period of emergency in 1976. The debate over the meaning of the term secular in the Indian constitution has been a heated one. As **Bipan Chandra** argues, in West, the outcome of the struggle between the Church and the State was the separation of the two; the Church was allowed to decide on religious rituals, the state was to regulate secular affairs. In India, the concept of secularism evolved as part of the struggle of nationalist forces against communal forces that wanted to use religion for political purposes and divide the emerging nation on the basis of religion.

In keeping with this provision every individual has the liberty to profess, practice and propagate his or her religion. People belonging to any sect or religious community can open their own school. Similarly, people belonging to any minority community can open their own institution for the promotion of their religion and language. Besides, complete freedom of admission has been given to people of all religions and linguistic persuasion to any institution run by the government. Thus, the Central and the State Governments cannot interfere in the religious life of the citizens. However, the state can interfere in the matters of religion where the issues of country's security, prestige, welfare and progress of its citizens are involved.

The chapter on fundamental rights guarantees the interests of the minority groups which could not be overridden in a majoritarian democracy. In part III on fundamental rights and the right to equality article 15 prohibits the Indian state from discriminating any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Similarly, Articles 25-28 focus upon the religious rights. The State in independent India is officially secular as it is not allied with any particular religion or an instrument of any church/temple. Yet, in practice, the Indian State does not separate itself from religion, but tries to give a picture of itself as a neutral country by publicly recognizing all religions and their social practices.

Secularism in Post Independent India

When the Indian Constitution came into force on January 26, 1950, India became a republic. A great challenge for independent India was how to cope with the volatile situation caused by the continuation of the social structures based on caste and religious division established under the colonial rule, once the colonial weight from above, which had kept violence from erupting among different groups, was lifted.

The political history of India after World War I can be divided into three periods: the first period, leading up to independence in 1947; the second period from 1947 to the fourth general election held in 1967, in which the Congress Party suffered a crushing defeat; and the third period from then onward. In the first period Mahatma Gandhi, an ardent advocate of swaraj (home rule) for India, succeeded in involving the peasant and masses along with the middle class in fight for independence. This combination of men was secular in nature, with a common objective of Independence. The flow of emotions to fight an external enemy paved the way for secular sentiments.

Built on the legacy of the first period was the 'Nehruvian Model of Development' of the second period (which was launched after the Congress Party's victory in the first general election in 1952). There were two major factors that sustained the Indian people's dreams for democracy, development, and progress during this period: the presence of a social consensus for nation building through modernisation and the practical possibility of realising a socialist society embodied in a mixed economy. Because of this consensus and vision, in the early stages of independence, India was able to deal with the issue of communalism with relative ease, bringing it under control.

In the third period, communalism-prompted riots quickly became widespread under the influence of the second and third India-Pakistan wars in 1965 and 1971, on the one hand, and strife between the Congress Party and other newly formed parties. Different parties aligned themselves with different religions and propagated them to fight people belonging to other religious sects. The events that ushered in the fourth period occurred in 1984, when Indira Gandhi was assassinated (igniting communal clashes between Hindus and Sikhs mainly in the capital city of New Delhi) and her son Rajiv Gandhi succeeded her as Prime Minister, and 1989, when the Cold War structure collapsed. In terms of the domestic political phenomena of contemporary India, the fourth-period upsurge of communalism is characterised by the political instability caused by the rise of Hindu nationalists coinciding with the advent of the multi-party era following the end of prolonged single-party rule by the Indian National Congress Party.

On December 6, 1992, the Babri masjid riots in Ayodhya opened a new chapter in communal disharmony in India. Although the Hindu-Muslim confrontation over the holy city of Ayodhya had already begun during the colonial period, Hindu nationalists took the dangerous, dramatic first step toward communalism that we see currently. In Bombay, two major waves of riots followed the toppling of the Babri Masjid. The first, which flared as a more-or-less spontaneous reaction, only a day later, lasted until December 17, 1992, leaving 227 people dead. The second case of violence, which occurred the following year, March 12, 1993, was planned in advance and the toll was much higher (approximately 500 dead).

This series of communal riots provided a decisive turning point. The crescendo of communalism and the crisis of secularism became a serious plague in India ever since. In the unsettled period of reflexive modernisation, as people began realising that their dreams were illusory, the insecure and delicate relationship between religion and politics began to take belligerent forms. In other words, the contradictory structure inherent in the twisted relationship between secularism and communalism began to resurface in new forms.

Condition of Minorities in India

Six religious communities i.e Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Zoroastrians (Parsis) and Jains have been notified as minority communities under Section 2(c) of the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992. India is a home to all major religions known to mankind. Pluralism is the hallmark of our society. This acceptance of diversity is not something new but can be traced back to leaders associated with the national movement and the drafting of the Constitution. While religious communities were acknowledged from a cultural point of view, they were not given official recognition in social and political terms.

Hindu nationalists have long been hostile, primarily towards Muslims, but over the last several years, their offensive against Christians has grown intense as well. More recently, their attacks on Christians in the State of Gujarat, commencing towards the end of year 1998, drew much attention, and all of India was

shocked when an Australian missionary and his two children were killed on the night of January 22, 1999, in a village in the State of Orissa. These incidents seem to be the result of fervour for expulsion of minority religious groups deemed strangers in the holy land of India, probably inspired by the ideology of Hindutva.

The idea alone, however, cannot fully explain why Christians are targets of Hindu attacks at present. Anger on the part of Hindus over conversion of Indians to Christianity may be one reason, but it cannot be the complete answer. Their attacks on Christians cannot be sufficiently explained on the grounds of advancing their noble cause. Dipankar Gupta argues that Muslims and Sikhs, who once suffered Hindu assaults without much resistance, are now fighting back, making the defenseless and weak Christians easier targets of Hindu rage.

He asserts that such Hindu nationalist fanatics, who kill but avoid self-sacrifice, should be distinguished from fundamentalists who are ready to die for great causes. They are quick to identify objects of harassment in an attempt to justify their inglorious lives by sacrificing others. His analysis is helpful in attempting to understand the communalism of today. His view echoes Ashis Nandy's assertion that communalism, contrary to its superficial appearance, is moving further and further away from religion in the true sense. The racial attacks on Dalits, honour killings in the name of religion, forced conversions, child marriages in the name of religion etc have tarnished the image of our country on a world platform. While our country is making laurels in scientific research, space science, on the other hand the attacks on minorities is denying our country the rightful place of becoming a super power.

Conclusion

In a multi-religious society, if politics is not based on issues but on identities, it can prove highly divisive. Politicians are tempted to primordial identities rather than to solve the problems. Today we have national parties drawn purely on religious lines. They even stoop down to magnify the sufferings of a particular section of people for their own vested interests thereby further widening the gap between religious communities thus bringing the secularism of the country at threat. The modern Indian society, has proved to be more divisive as it based on competition. This competition becomes more acute if the development is uneven and unjust, which poses a serious threat to the unity and integrity of the nation. Through the Preamble to the Constitution, we have given to our selves the idea of Indian being a secular state, so it's the responsibility of every citizen to strive towards achieving this noble aim.

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