

Secularism in India

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Abstract: National integration is an idea of belongingness to a nation. Secularism, a word patronized by G.H. Holyoaks means separation of the church from the state and gives a position of neutrality between different religions. Integration is more of a geographical identity and touches the core of sensitivity to national activities and causes. Secularism is an important aspect of Indian society, for this India is known in the entire world. A unique feature of our country is that it is the playground of all the major religions of the world and these have flourished here since their inception in the country. The Sanatana Dharma as understood from Vedas talks of essential unity of manhood. From time immemorial we find the common people in villages lived harmoniously for centuries without being disturbed by the wars waged by the rulers. The invasions of Mughal and Aryans and their like added cultures and religions to the already diversified India. The disrupters of communal harmony has its roots in the divide & rule policy practiced by the British and after the independence, it is due to the electoral politics pursued by the politicians. The cross border import of communalism encouraged by the vested interests also fueled tensions within the religion and then the country. Underneath the turbulence of communal discord, we find a natural tendency of the people for an inherent secularism in our country. One can worship a god of one's choice based on family values or adherences, and respect others for having their own sense of this. An attempt is made in this article to explain the sources of discord among the religions and we tried to present a few solutions as well. The article tries to study the inherent secular values of the Indians and try to portray things from Indian perspective.

Keywords: Secularism, Integration, Communal Harmony, secular values.

1. INTRODUCTION

National integration is an idea of belongingness to a nation. It is more of a geographical identity and touches the core of sensitivity to national activities and causes. A thorough belongingness in the face of diversities and differences is the hall mark of national integration. Despite all the differences India is one political entity. In Maha Bharat, we come across a great dialogue from Yudhistara that they are hundred and five brothers when confronted with an enemy but five Pandavas and hundred Kauravas in times of peace. This single dialogue epitomizes the concept of national integration in Indian context since India is a source and sustenance of a plethora of religions- some are born here, some are brought here; some are preached, practiced and perfected here for generations and yet all lived and let others lived by the sheer power of Sanatana Dharma which strongly advocated humanism and integrity and the separation of religion from the state constitutes the core of the philosophy of secularism in India, it also goes further and is identified as tolerance among different religions. No religion arrogates some privileges to itself while denying the same to others.

2. IDEA OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Vishnu Purana [11.3:1] talks of the oneness of the nation in geographical context in the following verse:

Uttaram yat samudrasya
Himaadreshchaiva Dakshenam
Varsham tada Bharatam Naam

Bharati Yatra Santatih’.

North of the ocean and south of the Himalayas is the land of Bharat (India) and people residing in that are Bharathiya (Indians). It is amazing that when the ‘Nation State’ concept of the west was not known in any part of the globe till the advent of French and American revolutions (1789 AD 1783 AD), Indians could talk of a geographical identity and had a sense of unity at least by around 4th century AD when Vishnu Purana was believed to have been compiled. With a common Sanskrit language, Shankara established centers of learning (Peethas) in four corners of India and propagated the philosophy of advaita across the length and breadth of the country. The ideas of ahimsa (non violence) and satyagraha (holding to truth) could be easily ingrained in the minds of the people of India irrespective of their caste, creed, region and religion by Mahatma Gandhi since the people are culturally and emotionally united as a nation. India was invaded by Greeks, Kushans, Arabs, Turks, Mughuls, Huns and the like and, in due course of time, they integrated into the mainstream of Indian polity. A country with hundreds of languages and dialects and scores of religions and regions presented a unified identity in freedom struggle and belied the prophecies of the western leaders that India would crumble if the British governance is withdrawn from the country. India is known for its cultural heterogeneity with respect to language and religion. Hindus constitute the majority while Muslims constitute the largest minority, while there are many other religions that are a part of Indian society. The animosity among the religions and regions was a creation of the British who believed in the theory of divide and rule, this has till date been the reason of communal riots and violent outburst. In spite of all the apparent diversities at the surface have proved a great strength and the dynamics of their inter play is sustaining our democracy much to the surprise of pseudo intellectuals of the west. The idea of unity is imbibed in our culture and upbringing, no matter how diversified our actions and interests. This is a country which went all out to welcome and incorporated its invaders, their culture and religions be it Huns, Dravidians, Chinese, Portuguese’s to name a few, all have assimilated into the Indian culture.

3. COMMUNAL HARMONY AND INTEGRATION

A unique feature of our country is that it is the play ground of all the major religions of the world like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism. Geographically our land is diverse and there are amazing differences in climate. Despite all these differences India is a political entity governed by a single constitution. We have been living together peacefully, by respecting the culture and religion of our fellow Indians.

If we take the historical perspective we find that religious harmony is the capstone of our civilization, though we find certain aberrations here and there. The Sanatana Dharma as understood from Vedas talk of essential unity of manhood. ‘Ekam sat, viprah bahuda vadanti’ is the famous dictum of Rig Veda which believed that there is only one Truth and only men describe it in different ways’. When India was exposed to the intrusions of warriors, they brought with them new religions like Islam and Christianity. But the new religions culturally become the part and parcel of Indian psyche only to enrich and get enriched from the Hinduism. Buddhism, an offshoot of a rebellion against the dominant philosophies of Hinduism, in due course of time, adopted many principles of Hinduism and the Buddha has been taken to the fold of Hindus as one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Guru Nanak who propounded Sikhism was a Hindu by birth and Sikhism was never viewed upon as an antagonistic religion in India. The Zoroastrians, who were subject to persecution in Europe, fled to India and contributed for the prosperity and rich cultural landscape of India. This made Mahatma Gandhi to comment that "In numbers Parsis are beneath contempt, but in contribution, beyond compare" (Taraporevala, 2000) Dadabhai Navroji, Zubin Mehta, Ratan Tata, Nani Palhivala, Homi Bhaba, Sohrab Mody and H.B. Wadia are few famous Parsis whose contribution to India cannot be forgotten.

History records the charities given out by Muslim rulers to Hindu temples throughout Middle Ages. Rulers like Tipu Sultan, Shershah and Akbar not only tolerated and respected the other religions but contributed for the growth of other religions. The Sufi movement is the offspring of the cultural synthesis of Hindus and Muslims. The contribution of the Indian Sufis to society lies in their sincere and dedicated struggle to find a unity for the heterogeneous elements that make up its totality. They appreciated the multi-racial, multi-religious and multilingual pattern of Indian society and, to use Rabindranath Tagore’s words, ‘set at naught all differences of men, by the overflow of their consciousness of God’(Tagore, 1917). Their efforts were directed towards the creation of a healthy social order free from dissensions, discords and conflicts. The synthesis of Hinduism and Islam also gave rise to the development of one of the beautiful languages of the world that is Urdu.

The Christianity reached India much before it reached the west. St Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus is believed to have visited India in 1st century AD and quite a number of people in Kerala embraced Christianity. The contributions of Christianity to India are praise worthy- be it the introduction of English language, passing of quite a few progressive legislations etc. A few Christian scholars became ardent lovers of Sanskrit and helped the enrichment of Indian literature, particularly Sanskrit and Telugu. If A.L.Basham was amazed with the 'Wonder that was India', scholars like C.P.Brown, Sir William Jones Charles Wilkins, Thomas Munroe, Max Muller and Thomas Colebrooke were fascinated by the richness of Indian culture and contributed for the growth of Indology. Many Christian missionaries became the ardent disciples of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda and Raman Maharshi. The cultural synthesis helped in projecting the greatness of our civilization to the west. It also helped in the rise of Romantic Poets like Rabindra Nath Tagore, Kamala Das, Sarojini Naidu, Pritish Nandy who enriched the Indian literature.

Indian music, dance, art, architecture and other arts speak volumes of religious harmony and toleration that has been present in Indian social landscape. The foregoing analysis clearly indicates the harmony of major religions on Indian soil greatly benefitting the people of India.

4. THE ABERRATIONS OF COMMUNAL DISCORD

When two or three great religions come into contact/ confrontation face to face, it is but natural that there is an initial discord due to diversities of etiquette, mannerisms, food habits, religious practices, beliefs and the like. There bound to be disputes, destruction of places of worship, proselytism and adherence to rigors of prophesies of the prophets. This is what has happened on the Indian soil for centuries- may be sometimes with cruelty and in inhuman ways. The destruction and plunder of places of worship stand testimony to the cruelty of the aggressive warriors. The retaliations also gave death blows with disastrous effect. History bears testimony for the fights for soil, for prestige and for promotion of religion. The study of history, however, is not complete if we rely on the events, circumstances and the results of wars alone. A peep in to as to how people reacted to new realities and lived in harmony matters much. As described in the earlier paragraphs of this essay, the common people in villages lived harmoniously for centuries without being disturbed by the wars waged by the rulers. Hindus used to visit Dargas held by Muslim Saints and Muslims used to visit temples and participated in Hindu fairs and festivals. Mahatma Gandhi adopted the pet song in his Bhajans and sung, "Eeswar Allah terenam- sabko sanmati de Bhagvan" (Oh! You are the one- Eswar and Allah. Give good heart to all) much to the delight of the common man. The great question is how there have been frictions in spite of amity at the bottom of the pyramid?

5. THE DISRUPTERS OF COMMUNAL HARMONY

For an understanding of communal conflicts we have to again look back to history and turn its pages. For centuries, the motive of the invaders was broadly to gain power over Indian rulers and once they are victorious they settled down in India and contributed for the development of its literature, religion, arts and music. This went on up to 19th century. History records examples of Kushans, Khiljis, Moghuls etc who concurred India and settled down in India. The colonization and imperialism that were pursued by the French, the Dutch and the English in the 19th century aimed at colonizing India for plunder. With ulterior motives, they pursued the policy of 'the divide and rule policy' and people of India fell prey to their deceitful designs. This policy resulted in clashes and ultimately paved way for the division of country in 1947. The division also saw lot of bloodshed, agony, displacement and discord which were subsequently perpetuated by the politicians for political reasons. The animosity between the Hindus and Muslims is largely the creation of Britishers who introduced communal electorates and pursued 'divide and rule policy'

The communal discord also finds its source in the way the freedom movement was organized. Knowingly or unknowingly some leaders like Bala Gangadhar Tilak organized huge Ganesh celebrations and asked the congregation to fight for Swaraj. The Muslims who were part and parcel of Indian society could not willingly participate in that type of freedom movement when Shivaji was hailed a national leader and Aurangzeb was treated like a traitor. Some later freedom movements of this nature served the purpose of arousing freedom conscious in the minds of majority of the Indians but inclusive participation could not become a reality which later on led to the partition of the country. When the means and ends are not in synchronization, the results would be sometimes disastrous.

Inequalities and poverty that dogged the nation in spite of 5 year plans spawned in the nature of vote banks and political parties find this a great opportunity to spread ill will among communities. Dominant leaders of the minorities have

understood the electoral politics and found it convenient to perpetuate it aiming ministerial berths, power and pelf that go with it. In the words of Prof Ghose, 'the politicians want communalism to flourish and secularism to perish in India'. It has become a vicious circle of community leader- politician nexus that is wrecking havoc in our country today.

Some scholars attribute communal clashes in India to organized militant methods of certain organizations supported directly or indirectly by the politicians. Moin Shakir, in his book, 'Politics of Minorities', says "these communal riots should be viewed as the handiwork of the organized and militant organizations....who seek to achieve certain political objectives through rioting", and it sounds so true to today. Our political leaders are working on the lines of the British they too feel that divide and rule phenomenon works, they propagate the concept of a Hindu Rashtra saying that Muslims and Sikhs should be secondary citizens with no political rights. Such principals are the root cause of communal riots such as Jabalpur riots and the more recent Gujrat ones.

In India, may be due to the excessive prevalence of democracy, journalists are prone to exhibit over enthusiasm to sensationalize the news. While this practice is not entirely bad, it is always not in good taste to publish news or showing the news over TVs to the extent of inciting the feelings of the public. It is essential for the journalists to exercise restraint especially when the communal harmony is sought to be destabilized by the vested interests. One of the reasons for yellow journalism might be due the increasing nexus between news paper barons and the politicians and sometimes the later own the former.

The cross border import of communalism encouraged by countries like Pakistan is fuelling tensions within the country by inciting militant sections of Indian Muslim community. While the role of Pakistan in organized terror cannot be denied, the government of India has also certainly failed to win the confidence of the minorities. For example, the attitude of distrust displayed by the government during the two Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971 when it did not assign any responsible duties of civil defense to the Muslims caused ill will in the minds of progressive sections of Muslims that groused the feeling that they are not on par with other citizens of India.

6. A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR PROMOTING COMMUNAL HARMONY

A careful analysis of communal riots in India indicate that they are patronized and propagated only by a section of people and the population as a whole do not subscribe to sectarian tendencies. A strong political will is the need of the hour to establish communal harmony. Since in a democracy, vote-bank politics is an unavoidable necessity, a strong movement aiming to break communal- politician nexus helps in reducing communal clashes. This is easily said than done. Prof A.R. Desai appeals for "the need to foster moral and spiritual values to replace the growing selfish materialistic ends, the necessity to inculcate a sense of duties and obligations in place of growing clamor for rights and comforts and promotion of spirit of self sacrifice, discipline and obedience instead of the moods of assertion, protest and exhibition of bad manners have become urgent if the Indian nation is to be prevented from being torn to pieces". The educational institutes have to play decisive role in molding the character of students from kindergarten to high levels of learning. Since Indian ethos is receptive to ethics, humanism and cultural homogeneity, it is not difficult to instill spiritual values in their mind frames.

National integration can also be promoted by forming Ekata Committes (as suggested by the Committee of National Integration, 1969) at all wards of Municipalities and encourage participation of all religious leaders for promoting communal harmony.

The majority community must be motivated to exercise more restraint in order to take the confidence of minority communities. Since communal battles are fought in the minds of men, the seeds of communal harmony are to be implanted in the minds of men only. A sense of oneness is to be promoted by encouraging participation of all religious heads in common festivals for common good.

7. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

The creed of secularism was incorporated in Indian constitution to promote religious harmony. The 'secular model' of India is different from the secularism practiced in the west. Unlike in western democracies, our system is not against the separation of state from religion. Here secularism refers to governmental practice of 'sarva dharma samabhava' and not 'sarva dharma abhav'(Jacobsohn, Gary J, 2003). The "ancestral traditionalism" viewpoint of Indian culture created a natural tendency for an inherent secularism in our country. One can worship a god of one's choice based on family values

or adherences, and respect others for having their own sense of this. In this way, Hindus, Muslims, Christians or Jews are seen in the Indian mindset as having equal footing as followers of their own “traditions”. When the British saw the culture of India as an “ism”, we have accepted these other religious traditions more as “castes” within our own structure. It is ironic that our Occidental counterparts accept this when it comes to seeking a place in the “Reservation System”, but then some militant groups within them speak of themselves as propagators of the “only truth”. The discord emanates out of this dichotomy and the politicians perpetuated the discord for political vote bank reasons. The import of cross border communalism sometimes fuelled the discord to disastrous situations especially when the government failed to enlist the confidence of the minorities. Since India has been displaying hospitality to plurality of ideas, sentiments and religious outlooks since immemorial and the communal disharmony now and then is only an aberration, it is not difficult to promote and sustain religious harmony in the Indian soil. A sort of magnanimity from the majority community and affirmative actions in the form of Ekta committees at the ground level play vital role in promoting communal harmony and thereby national integration. The press, the politician, the educational institutes and the public has large stakes in maintaining communal harmony for promoting national integration.

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