

## Secularism in India : A Historical Perspective

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The foundation of India is secularism. The evolution and growth of secularism with all its triumphs and tensions, both as a concept and an ideology, is a fascinating study, a golden chapter in the history of India. Indian concept of secularism is different from the western concept of secularism. While western secularism rejects all religious system, Indian secularism accepts and respects all religions. Similarly, while western secularism stands for improving material conditions of human beings, in the Indian model it is the mind which rules the matters enriching the quality of life and the concept of nation-hood at the same time.

Secularism in India has to be understood against its multi-religious and multi-lingual background with its tremendous diversity. There are about 122 languages in India (Census 2011) out of which 22 are listed in 8<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution as official languages of the Republic of India and people of all major religions of the world live here. As a result of centuries of common living, there is cultural unity in the country which binds men of different faiths, sects, and communities. In a larger perspective, secularism in India has flourished because of the resilience of its democratic traditions and the prevalence of the phenomenon called 'Unity in diversity' in spite of internal unrest and external invasions. Another

significant point to note here that the cultural continuity of India in the last five thousand years of its recorded history is incredible. Indian culture has continued because of its dynamism, its resilience, its capacity to change, assimilate, adopt and renew. According to Prof. A. L. Basham: "No land on earth has a long cultural continuity as India". In his classic work 'A Cultural History of India', he says: "There are four main cradles of civilization from where the elements of culture have spread to other parts of the world viz. China, India, Greece and Italy. Of these four areas, India deserves a larger share of credit than she is usually given because on a minimal assessment she has deeply affected the religious life of most of Asia and has provided very important elements in the culture of the whole of South –East Asia, as well as extending her influence directly or indirectly to other parts of the world."

At the dawn of India's history a secular and sophisticated civilization existed here, called the Indus Valley Civilization, which looks like a modern civilization with all its artistic finery and civic amenities. According to Rabindranath Tagore, the first civilized Indian was secular who lived in harmony with others. The people of Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Ropar, Lothal, Kalibangan and a hundred other sites of Saraswati

and Ghaghra worshipped all Gods and Goddesses, mainly the Mother Goddess which is represented in every village as the tutelary deity (*Gram Devata*) and is known by various secular names such as *Mata, Amba, Amma, Kali and Karali*.

The Aryans were secular people and the process of Aryanisation was based on liberal principles of co-mingling with the non-Aryans which led to the process of amalgamation and absorption. The Rig Vedic poetry clearly shows that nature played a very important role in the daily lives of the Aryans. There are splendid hymns in the Rig Veda to prove their reverence to the dawn, the Sun, the Moon, the Sky, the Fire and the Rain. On the philosophical plane the doctrine of Karma which is the most outstanding thought of the Indian culture, is binding equally on all Gods and all mortals.

Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was silent about God. His 'Four Noble Truths' and 'Eight –fold Path' were secular message to the masses. As Will Durant says; 'There is nothing stranger in the history of religion than the sight of Buddha founding a worldwide religion, and yet refusing to be drawn into any discussion about eternity, immortality, or God.'

Ashoka, the great Mauryan monarch stood for Ahimsa, the non-violence towards both men and animals. Prof. R. K. Mukherjee says: Ashoka was attracted more by the ethical than the philosophical aspect of Buddhism and laid stress upon the practical, benevolent activities and pious thoughts inculcated by it. His Law of Piety (*Dharma*) was marked by liberalism, charity and compassion. He stood for a moral order where character and conduct played a greater role than rituals and ceremonies. Till today he evokes the highest admiration both as man and monarch

mainly because of his secular and humanitarian measures. His twelfth Rock Edict is a passionate appeal not only for toleration of all religious sects but also for developing a spirit of reverence for them.

Harshavardhana, the ruler of a large empire in northern India (A.D.606-647) followed a tolerant religious policy. In his 5-yearly assemblies at Prayag he worshipped Shiva, Surya and Buddha simultaneously and gave away his entire wealth to the leaders of religions. He had banned the killing of animals in his kingdom and, like Ashoka, had established a number of animal hospitals. There was not a single case of religious discrimination in his whole reign of about 40 years.

The cultural continuity of the country was maintained throughout the middle ages in spite of foreign invasions. The Bhakti Movement gave a new vitality to the cultural fabric of the people of India who had built around themselves. The Muslim Sufi saints like Amir Khusro, Baba Farid, Hazrat Nizamudin Auliya, Moinuddin Chishti and Hindu saints like Kabir, Eknath, Tukaram, Tulsidas, Surdas, Raidas, brought a new synthesis through their songs and hymns. Guru Nanak brought Hindus and Muslims closer to each other. The 'Adi Granth' of the Sikhs contains the hymns of both Hindu and Muslim saints in addition to the Sikh Gurus who enormously strengthened the forces of secularism in the country.

Akbar, the great Mughal emperor stood for tolerance in religious matters and promoted national solidarity with liberal outlook. His '*Din-i-Ilahi*' (Divine Faith) is a shining chapter in the history of Indian secular thought. He promulgated '*Din-i-ilahi*' in 1582 after detailed discussions at '*Ibadat Khana*' (Hall of Worship) at Fatepur Sikri with the Muslims, Sufis, Hindu Pundits and Sikh saints, Jains, Jews, Zoroastrians, Portugese,

Jesuits and the Catholics. Din-illahi was neither inspired by revelation nor based on any definite philosophy or theology, a religion without any priest or book or even prescribed forms of worship. Its regulations were intended to raise the ethical standards of its followers, its crux being the universalism of God and the brotherhood of man. He finally stressed the values of *Sulh-e-Kul* (peace for all). He continuously emphasized the futility of conflicting elements of various religions which bring forth hatred and bitterness amongst the communities. And that is secularism: equal respect for all religions and living in peace with all.

The Maratha rule in India in the 18th century and the Sikh rule in the 19th century India further accelerated the secular march of India's composite culture. Secularism was Ranjit Singh's greatest strength. He trusted the Muslims who stood by him through thick and thin. Punjab monarchy was a secular monarchy where merit alone was the criteria for services.

Freedom from all religious prejudices has been the main theme of all religious movements of the 16th century such as the Bhakti Movement of Ramananda, Kabir and Nanak and the social movements such as Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj and Theosophical Society in the 19th century. Both the movements inspired among the people a sense of unity and solidarity about India as a nation.

Tolerance, acceptance and humility, the hallmark of Indian culture was best expressed by Swami Vivekananda in his famous address to the parliament of Religions at Chicago on 11th September, 1893. 'I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance, I am proud to belong

to a nation; he stated which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to Southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I will quote you brethren, a few lines from the hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is everyday repeated by millions of human beings: 'As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee'.

The national movement was based on the vision of a secular society and a secular state. To counter communalism and give expression to its secular commitment, the National Congress declared in 1931 in its famous Karachi Resolution that in free India 'every citizen shall enjoy freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice his religion,' that all citizens would be 'equal before the law, irrespective of caste, creed or sex' that no disability would attach to any citizen, on grounds of creed or caste' in regard to public employment, office of power or honour, and in the exercise trade or calling' and that 'the state shall observe neutrality in regard to all religions.' The freedom struggle was unique because people of all religions rallied round the secular banner of the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. According to Gandhiji, 'Hindustan belongs to all those who are born and bred here and who have no other country to look to. Free

India will be no Hindu Raj, it will be Indian Raj based not on the majority of any religious sect or community but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion'. He further stated: 'If officers of the government as well as the members of the public undertook the responsibility and worked whole-heartedly for the creation of a secular state, then only would we build a new India that would be the glory of the world'.

On the midnight of 14-15 August 1947, India had, as Jawaharlal Nehru put it, her 'tryst with destiny'. A little over two years later (on 26 November 1949), she had another memorable interface with destiny as 'the people of India' happened to 'adopt, enact and give' to themselves the Constitution of India, which came into force on 26 January 1950. The word 'secular' was not in the Constitution adopted and enforced 71 years ago and was added later. The Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976 changed the description of India from a 'sovereign democratic republic' to a 'sovereign socialist secular democratic republic' and also changed the words 'unity of the nation' to 'unity and integrity of the nation.'

However, the Fundamental Rights of the citizens which are enforceable in the courts have been parts of the Constitution from the start and it is they which make India a secular state. Articles 25-28 relates to the religious freedom guaranteed to every citizen of India as a Fundamental Right. Article 25 provides 'Freedom of Conscience' that is, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practise and propagate religion. As per Article 26, every

religious group or individual has the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purpose and to manage its own affairs in matters of religion. As per Article 27, the state shall not compel any citizen to pay any taxes for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious institution. Similarly, Article 28 allows educational institutions maintained by different religious groups to impart religious instruction.

The Constitution also enjoins on every citizen as Fundamental Duty vide Article 51A 'to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectoral diversities, to value and preserve the rich heritage of our common culture.' Articles 29 and 30 protect the cultural and educational rights of religious and linguistic minorities. While Article 29 mandates that no discrimination would be done on the ground of religion, race, caste, language or any of them, Article 30 mandates that all minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

From the above analysis it is evident that secularism in India is not only a part of our heritage and is at present a constitutional obligation, it is as well a cultural necessity, a social obligation and a ladder for development.

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