Compatibility of Secularism in India: A Contested Discourse

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Abstract: *The idea of Indian secularism is deeply rooted in its own socio-cultural and historical traditions. It has its own concept of secularism which is different from the Western concept. The uniqueness of the Indian conception of secularism has been discussed extensively and has been one of the most debated and contested issues in recent times. There are apprehensions about whether the concept would find a suited field of application in the Indian social and political context. . Conceptually Indian secularism dwells in an entirely unique discursive domain. This paper particularly tries to analyse the compatibility of secular idea in India and questions some of its fundamental foundations. The research delineates the secular distinctiveness of the Indian nation-state and various contestations and debates among scholars for its effectiveness in the Indian society.*
Keywords: *Secularism, Religious Tolerance, Indian Constitution, Sarva Dharma Sambhava, Minority Rights*

I.   Introduction

Indian secularism is a distinctive concept of secularism which provides an alternative in a religious and diverse society like India. Bhargava elaborates its three unique features which differentiate it from the western model these are, *principled distance, community-specific rights and contextual secularism*. He elaborates these in a systematic manner and tries to prove that India in a real sense is a secular state. He argues that the idea of principled distance based on the premise in which a state is secular by institutionally separated from religion but 'must engage with religion at the level of law and social policy' and this 'engagement must be governed by principles of a secular state'. The state can interfere more or less in different religions depending upon the historical and social condition of these religions. If there found any social evils and intra-religious discriminations such as caste hierarchies in Hinduism than the state have the right to interfere to eliminate such discrepancies. This interference must be guided by non-sectarian motives. So he argues that for eradicating oppressive customs of a religion if a state interferes more in one religion than other it does not depart from secularism. Unlike western model which imposes 'active hostility or benign indifference', in Indian secularism 'respect of religions is entirely consistent with the identification of local faults within them. The second characteristic which deviate Indian secularism from the normative western model is community-specific rights. But in Indian social context, it was necessary for our leaders to provide specific minority rights to install confidence in minority communities particularly Muslims minority. The Constituent Assembly provided community-specific *cultural rights* to minority communities instead of *political rights*. These cultural rights were provided so that minority communities can become able to resist assimilation and proper recognition to be granted to them. Bhargava argues that secularism is a multi-value concept and there should be reconciliation and harmonization among its various values. In contextual secularism, the form and content of secularism vary from context to context and from place to place and also have contextual moral reasoning (Bhargava 2010: 94). It recognizes the difference between individual rights and group rights, between equality and liberty and finds a solution based on the circumstances that prevail on particular time and place. Secularism in India is not a mechanical concept based on the water-tight compartment of values it is an amalgam of various values originated by deliberations in the constituent assembly. It tries to bring together seemingly incompatible values such as individual rights and group-specific rights which provide strength to Indian democracy. Bhargava argues that ' the Indianness of Indian secularism is derived entirely from its strong link with home-grown traditions and that therefore India had worked out its own conception of secularism that is neither Christian nor western' (ibid. 102).

II.   '*Sarva Dharma Sambhava*'concept of Indian Secularism

Many scholars argue that Indian secularism is based on the ideal of '*Sarva Dharma Sambhava'* which means religious coexistence, inter-religious tolerance and equal respect of all religions. These ideals are important ingredients of secularism but they do not cover entire concept of secularism. The main idea of toleration is to refrain from intervening into other religious affairs even if one finds it not conducive i.e. to tolerate customs and beliefs of other religions. This type of toleration can be possible in a state which has a dominant religious majority which may not respect other religion on equal terms. 'Respecting other religions as equals does not entail their blind acceptance or endorsement…..the idea of equal respect for all religions is closely linked with the proposal for an inter-faith dialogue' (ibid. 103). Indian secularism respects all religions

and also allows the state to intervene in religious affairs to transform religion for eradicating caste and gender-related injustices. Indian secularism has qualities of both, western model of secularism and traditional inter-religious tolerance. To compare it only with western model and to judge its reliability on that basis is erroneous. As aforementioned India has a public presence of its religions and the Constitution has accorded due recognition to its religious communities and granted various cultural rights to them. But by rejecting the separate electorates for religious communities, Indian Constitution showed that there is a need of separation between religion and politics on the particular context which could increase communal differences and sectarianism. So the Indian secularism endorses such values which suited its cultural heritage

According to Chandhok (1999) secularism was adopted in India due to three reasons: first to manage irreconcilable differences between religious groups. The historical situation present at the time of independence favours secularism as a vision to curb divisive and the sectarian environment exists between different communities. Indian secularism was designed to regulate bitter religious conflicts and to assure minority communities that their specific religious rights would remain safe in a newly formed state. Secularism was a modern concept and which aligned to equally modern concepts of equality and freedom, this became the second reason to endorse secularism in India. The third factor responsible for adopting secularism was its alignment with state legitimacy as did not discriminate between religions and committed to equality among them. 'The dominant themes of secularism – freedom of religious belief and conscience, equality of all religions, and equidistance of the state from all religion – were backed up by special provision for minority rights' (Chandhok 1999: 56).

III. Challenges To The Secular Principles in India

There are many challenges to the concept of secularism in India. Some favour the secular credential while others criticise it. The supporters of secularism in India backed it as they argue that it is the right choice adopted at the time of independence otherwise there could be a danger of sectarian strife. Critics of Indian secularism accused the state of practising pseudo-secularism, and of pampering the minorities (ibid. 65). The state did not enact a uniform civil code which gave undue privilege to a particular minority community. No concept works in an isolation it is influenced by prevailing social and political environment and also affects them. Indian secularism, as argued earlier, was a product of vision and deliberation of our forefathers who devised a unique way to accommodate India's socio-cultural heritage with modern democratic principles. Indian secularism works on principles of religious tolerance, non-discrimination and non-establishment of the state. And if secularism tends to downgrade minority cultures or it advances towards homogenized citizenship then its basic concepts need modifications. As Chandhok states, 'if secularism is reworked to fit the demands of substantive equality by supplementing it with minority rights, there may be some prospect of regulating inter-group relationships in a fair and just manner' (ibid. 94). The concept of inter-group and intra-group equality strengthens the basis of secularism.

IV. Compatibility of Secularism in India

Indian secularism has been subjected to fierce criticism. Right from the independent it has been remaining a subject of contestation between various scholars. The focus of the debate has remained its imported western ideology. Is this imported concept of secularism suitable for Indian multi-religious society? Some critics of Indian secularism called it in 'crisis' as it is inappropriately applied to Indian society. According to these critics, this imported ideology of secularism should be abandoned as it gives rise to sectarian and religious strife. It is a modernist rational concept which is not compatible with Indian political and social culture.

T.N. Madan and AshisNandy criticised secularism on the basis of its consequential effects on Indian society. Nandy focuses on the effects of the practice of secularism and modernization on traditional societies like India. He argues that the process of secularization pushed aside the traditional and religious concepts which resulted in the alienation of major part of the population. Secularism is a product of modernity and rationality which side-lines morality. It provides no alternative for moral values or the good life. In this way, it encourages religious fundamentalism and ethnic revivalism.

As AshutoshVarshaney argues the Indian model of secularism was based on equidistance from all religions but it has translated into equal proximity consequently. He further said, 'if it is alleged that the state is moving towards one particular religion, the state, to equalising step may be aimed at soothing the religious communities. But the state gets more embroiled in religion. An unstable equilibrium results, breeding distrust all around' (Varshaney 1993). For him, secularism should be syncretised with the pluralistic idea of India's past culture and mobilise people on such understanding.

Indian secularism also criticised for interfering into the religious matters of a particular community which contravene the idea of separation of religion and state. It is true that Indian Constitution allows the state to do religious reforms on the ground that it these laws abuse the basic principles of equality and justice.

Personal laws can be amended in such a manner that they keep on representing both minority rights of the community and individual equality and justice. But such reforms should not be done with force from the above and without taking the religious community in confidence.

Some scholars argue that there is some intrinsic incompleteness in the Indian secularism. AmartyaSen elaborates various arguments existing against Indian secularism. First, the non-existence critique, in which western scholars denies the presence of secularism in India due to its large cultural complexities. Second, there are charges of favouritism and minority appeasement on Indian secularism. Third, various scholars consider Hinduism as a source of cultural cohesion and Indian secularism does not give it due importance. Fourth, the claiming of the cultural unity of India is false as Muslims do not identify themselves with this unity. Fifthly, many critiques term secularism as a modern and alien concept which is against the interests of tradition societies like India. Lastly, Hinduism is the essence of the Indian society and Indian secularism ignores its importance. Sen counters all these criticism with historical and factual data and argues that all these opposition of Indian secularism are indeed non-logical. He argues that Indian state needs to be a secular state in the political sense (Sen 1996: 13).

T.N. Madan in his article entitled, 'Secularism in its place' states that secularism in India is an idea of modernity and is an alien concept which does not suit religious societies like India. He stated that 'the idea of secularism, a gift of Christianity, has been built into Western social theorists' paradigms of modernization, and since these paradigms are believed to have universal applicability, the elements, which converged historically – that is in a unique manner – to constitute modern life in Europe in the sixteenth and the following three centuries, have come to be presented as the requirements of modernization elsewhere, and this must be questioned' (Madan 1987:754). He maintained that secularism in South Asia as a doctrine of shared of life is impossible because the great majority of the people here are an active adherent of some religious faith. It is also impracticable as a basis for state action because the standpoint of religious neutrality is difficult to maintain since religious minorities do not share the majority's view of what this entails for the state (ibid. 748). He argued that for the minority community secularism is a social myth which draws a cover over the failure of its members to separate politics from religion in the society. He further state that secularism is a Christian gift to India and such transfer of secularism in traditional societies will lead to conversion and the loss of one's culture and soul. The transferability of the idea of secularism is beset with many difficulties and should not be taken for granted and in multi-religious societies like India, it should be realised that secularism may not be restricted to rationalism and should be compatible with faith. He concludes that secularism is an alien ideology and has failed to make the desirable headway in India and it has increased religious fundamentalism (ibid. 757).

ParthaChatterjee argues that the Indian secularism has three main deviations from the concept of western secularism which results in its uniqueness. First, the Constitution provides the right to freedom of religion to every citizen which includes the right to profess, practice and propagate religion but it also enables the state to regulate any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice. Second, the right to equality prohibits the state from discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion but special quotas are given to schedule caste and in order to qualify as a member of schedule caste, a person must profess either Hindu or Sikh religion. And third, there shall be no official state religion, no religious instruction in state schools, and no taxes to support any particular religion. But the state has been intervened into the matter of religion that also not equally with all religions. The Indian secular state should favour all religions equally without any discrimination (Chatterjee 1997: 241-248).

In a similar way, AshishNandy raises some fundamental questions about the suitability of secularism in India. He states that 'much of the fanaticism and violence associated with religion today comes from the sense of defeat of the believers, from their feeling of impotency, and from their free-floating anger and self-hatred while facing the world which is increasingly secular and desacralized' (Nandy 1998: 332). Nandy claims that with the advent of modernisation in India, religious tolerance has decreased and communal violence has increased. He states: 'As India gets modernized, religious violence is increasing...In the earlier centuries, inter-religious riots were rare and localised…..somewhere and somehow, religious violence has something to do with the urban-industrial vision of life and with the political process the vision lets loose' (ibid.: 155).

Nandy categorised religion in two forms, religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology. Religion as a faith is 'a way of life, a tradition which is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural' religion as an ideology it is a 'sub-national, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious usually political or socio-economic, interests' (ibid..: 321-344). Nandy argues that secularism is a concept of modernism which is associated with the ideology of modern statecraft. He observes that 'India's westernized intellectuals have consciously opted for the abolition of religion from the public sphere…it is from non-modern India, from the traditions and principles of religious tolerance encoded in the everyday life associated with different faiths of India, that one will have to seek clues to the renewal of Indian political culture…cosmopolitan intellectuals have failed to be too respectful to the traditions of tolerance in Indian society' (ibid.). This modern, scientific concept of secularism is incompatible with such societies where religion

has a presence in every aspect of life. So religion finds out back door entry into the public life and creates communalisation of politics, mobilisation on the basis of religion. It deepens the feeling of alienation among believers and generates conflicts between religious communities. Nandy advocates for an alternative mode of secularism for India which should be more accommodative and compatible with its situation.

The modernization and secularism ensure to keep religion out of public sphere but it has not contended the development of intolerance towards other faiths. According to Nandy, 'this ideology is nothing but part and parcel of a hegemonic language, in spite of its certain positive contributions, has increasingly become a cover for the complicity of the modern intellectuals and the modernising middle classes of South Asia in the new forms of religious violence' (ibid.: 321). He argues that secularism has not been able to find out the solution of increasing religious intolerance and it should now work out a new conceptual framework for Indian political culture. In India 'new forms of religious violence are becoming paradoxically quite secular' due to the inefficiency of the 'secular' governments. It is the Indian society and people who can ensure religious tolerance as it is deeply embedded within the cultural traditions and psychology of every Indian. As Nandy said, ' the European meaning of secularism would make little sense to the average Indian rooted in a religious world view and not exposed to the kinds of debate the church-state divide produced in pre-modern Europe' (ibid.: 35).

V. Conclusion

The main question before makers of India was how to premise the idea of the nation-state on the basis of the multicultural social base. Again unlike the West where the formation of the nation-state was led by the process of the steady decline of Roman Catholic Church, the critical understanding of Indian historical resources and enduring social plurality foregrounded the necessity of a nation state truly reflecting its constitutive plurality. The empirical social reality was conceded simultaneously with the need of transcending it to form a cohesive structure and idea of a nation. As mentioned earlier, Tagore put stress on civilizational components of nationhood that India should strive for. Gandhi acknowledged the peaceful coexistence of various castes, creeds, religions to form a multicultural nation state. This is how the nation state was formed and the idea of India subsequently evolved, that is clearly manifested in the Constituent Assembly Debates,

The practical manifestation of forming of the nation state, minority rights, tolerance and the political creation of multicultural society is evident in the making of Indian Constitution and the Constituent Assembly Debates. Briefly put, these are the distinctive features of Indian multiculturalism emanating from the Constituent Assembly Debates, judicial pronouncements, parliamentary debates and the theoretical formulation of various scholars. Indian constitution in its totality is a multicultural document and proclaims unity and accommodation of diverse ethnic, cultural minority communities even much before the idea of multiculturalism caught the imagination contemporary Western and non-Western scholars. It blends the individual rights with community rights and empowers the minority communities by valuing their cultural and religious identities. It provides a solid foundation to multiculturalism by enhancing and protecting religious, linguistic, cultural diversity through numerous measures like secularism, equality and social justice. Right from the onset, the preamble of the constitution proclaims and guarantees the liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship.

The idea of secularism appears to be borrowed from the western idea but in reality, this seeming resemblance cannot deny the distinctiveness of Indian secularism. The underlying theme of Indian secularism is to provide democratic foundations to its multicultural society. Moreover, it also attaches a great significance to the idea of social justice ensuring of their diverse social locations. Secularism is an essential ingredient of the multicultural political system of India. Indian secularism should adopt non-majoritarian multicultural perspective which recognizes the culturally specific needs of different communities. It should be based on principles of neutrality and tolerance with a vision of cohesive and integrated society. In Bhargava words, 'in a pluralist community one tolerates the other not despite one's disagreement but on the understanding that incommensurable values cannot always be realised at the same time in the same sphere, and that, therefore, one has to tolerate the limitations of others.The rise of religious fundamentalism in modern India compels to think about the workability and suitability of the Indian secularism. Religion has entered the sphere of politics which communalise the politics and encourage fundamentalism and sectarianism. So there is a need to reconceptualize the notion of secularism according to present scenario and need of the society.

The urgent political issue in India today is not so much about whether the Indian state could be termed secular according to some definition of secularism derived from western experience, but about managing the many, intersecting, divisions in the society and the kind of social violence they are generating. Social violence may indeed have increased but one needs to ask whether it is secularism only which has failed or whether the increase of inter-group violence should not also be understood in the context of wider social changes taking place in the society, not all of which could be traced back to the influence of modernity. Perhaps there is a need to support secular policies of the state with the concern for related values such as equality or justice. This might not solve the problem of communal hostilities but it might, at least, widen the support base of the secular state.

It would be entirely mistaken to conclude from this that secular states are sufficient for building inclusive societies. Secular states are part of a wider institutional matrix and a larger public and political culture. They work well only in appropriate public, political, social, and institutional settings. For example, no secular state can work without a properly functioning regime of rights. More generally, they work only with an appropriate legal culture, on that is free from impunity. They also require a democratic culture with space for dialogue, discussion, criticism, as well as accommodation. Without these background conditions, a secular state cannot work well. Yet, a secular state, no matter how imperfect in form, can itself contribute to the creation of these wider cultures. The struggle for a secular state is related to and dependent on a struggle for an appropriate legal, rights-endowed, and democratic culture. But so it the struggle for a rights-endowed, democratic culture dependent upon an appropriate way of relating religion and the state. These cultures and institutions must work in tandem with one another. One plain conclusion from this is that it is not enough to have a single short-term public policy to solve the problem of religion-related exclusion. Rather, it is important to have a package of policies, some that are to be floated together right away and others that must follow today's policies at an appropriate time. In short, every single policy must be complemented with a vision of other succeeding policies.

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