

Nehru and Foundation of Secular India



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Abstract

Nehru concretized secularism in India by giving it a legal and constitutional dimension through the Indian Constitution. The Nehruvian model sought to incorporate certain basic ideas in the Indian Constitution. Such ideas as freedom of religion, right to equality, equality of citizenship and separation of state and religion are part and parcel of the constitution. In the west, there is a clear-cut demarcation between activities of the state and religious institutions. But Nehru was of the opinion that the socio-economic conditions in India were such that, a mechanical separation of the State and religion was not practical. Nehru took the position that the Indian State must encourage every religion on an equal footing. The secular state in the conception of Nehru's conception was neither a 'theocratic' nor an 'irreligious' state. He incorporated the resolution on Fundamental rights at the Karachi Congress where he asserted that every citizen of India should enjoy freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice any religion, subject to public order and morality.

Keywords: Secularism, Democracy, Fanaticism, Religion, Culture, Socialism, Communalism.

Introduction

Secularism has been a critically important development in the modern world. For a long time the institutional religion operated as an instrument of suppression of the people. It was with the path-breaking discoveries in the domain of physical sciences and the movements like reformation and the renaissance that shattered the hegemony of the obscurantism of the middle Ages. Gradually, a wall of separation between the church and the state began to be built in the west and in turn laid the foundation of the secularism. It first appeared to begin with, as a rival to Christianity. In due course of time, it was identified as a way of life and an interpretation of life that did not admit any communal bigotry. By and by, the secular attitude became necessary for a modern rational society.

Moreover, in the history, the evolutionary trajectory of the concept has been contributed by so many thinkers. In France, Montesquieu attacked the idea that there should be religious uniformity in a state. Voltaire protested against religious prejudice and bigotry. Rousseau talked of the qualities of good citizen in preference to the qualities of being a good member of the church. He rejected the idea that a religion commanded superior and exclusive loyalty. It was the French revolution 1789 that helped to establish the principle of secularism in France. In United State of America the idea of secularism came in to being in the last quarter of the 18th century. The growth of science and scientific temper was one of the principal causes of secularization. The scientific temper meant rationalization. The spread of rationalization meant a decline in the religious belief it also meant a decline in the authority of the religious institutions. Nation building and state building strengthened and consolidated the forces of secularization. The idea of Liberalism and Socialism accentuated the process of secularization. The historical process of secularization resulting from various sources mentioned above, later led to the universalization of concept of secularism. In effect, this had certain meanings for the relationship between state, individual and religion for the Europeans; it had clear implications for their attitude towards the church.

However, the process of secularization apart from being historical was also a process of philosophical evolution. Aristotle contributed to the origin of the idea of secularism. What he intended was not radical separation of politics from ethics. But he argued that they must be separated at least for analytical purposes. Machiavelli pleaded for moral indifference. Other than Aristotle and Machiavelli, The evolution of the idea has also been contributed by so many western thinkers like to Galerius, Marsillio, John Lock, Toynbee etc. Though basically a western notion, secularism has become a preferred political value for the non-European systems as well. In the middle of the nineteenth century Marx gave a new

interpretation to secularism where secular states shall recognize not only equality between different religions but also complete equality between religion and irreligion. He began to identify religion as a symbol of oppressed culture, the heart of the heartless world and the spirit of the spiritless.

In Indian context, the early nineteenth century produced two streams of responses i.e. Conservatives and reformists to shape the secularism. For any democratic polity, in fact, secularism is considered to be an additional positive value. That is the reason that while opting for a democratic republic, the nationalist leaders and constitution makers of India opted for secularism with many arguing that for a multicultural and plural society of India, secularism was the only choice. Many of them had western secular democracies as their point of reference while many others argued that secularism had been a tradition of India since times unknown.

There is no denial of the fact that the Indian national movement has given India innumerable heroes who gave their life to free the nation from the Shackle of imperialism but few personalities who profoundly shape the nation and jacketed the nation with a thorough and visionary constitution and also dared to change the world political Landscape of 20th century. One among them was Pandit Jawaharlal Lal Nehru. He can also be ranked among the leading political thinkers in modern Indian political thought. His political orientation was shaped by many people, key political events and the then socio-political situation prevailed in the sub-continent. There are wide ranges of influences, among them he was quite influenced by Gandhi and had great regard for him. However, he was not a blind follower of Gandhi. Along with Gandhism, it was the humanist liberalism and the Marxist-Leninist philosophy that exercised a determining influence on the development of Nehru as a thinker and a politician.

His vision of nationalism and independence was more for the confederation in the modern world instead of just mugging up for fighting among nation according to him "National independence should not mean for us merely an addition to the warring groups of nations. It should be a step towards the creation of a world commonwealth of nations in which we can assist in the fullest measure to bring about cooperation and world harmony. "His concept of Swaraj was not oligarchic but more egalitarian where everybody can be part of the government. As Nehru quotes, "You know the literal meaning of Swaraj is self-government. But there are various kinds of self-government... In my opinion, in self-government, not one Indian or a thousand Indians should be made a raja or rajas but every Indian, every Hindu, Mussalman, Sikh or Christian, who lives in India and who is proud of calling it his motherland should be free and should have a right to take part in the government of the country." His envisioning of nationalism was more of secular outlook. He discarded the religious division. In fact, he was against any divisions in the nation and society. On 2nd June, 1931, he made it very clear that he wanted to see unified India. He said, "India is one and India is going to remain one. So there can be no question of a division of India and

Indian states. This is one fundamental fact of which you need not have the slightest doubt." Moreover, he was aware of the hollowness of the term independence without equality. As he said, "young men must envisage a new order of things and remove the evils which make progress impossible.

Young men must remember that 'freedom' and 'independence' are mere words till a new order is fashioned which ends inequalities, exploitation and religious bigotry... Therefore you should be quite clear about the ideal of complete freedom and social equality."

Aim of the Study

In the study, attempt has been made to understand the historicity of secularism in India with special focus on the uniqueness it has gained in the sub-continent. Attempt will also be there to understand and explore the complexity and dynamics of the Indian freedom struggle. In the study, efforts will also be there to understand the role of reformist, conservatives, extremists in the freedom struggle of India and their role in emergence of communalism in the Indian sub-continent. Special focus will be there to understand, discover Nehru's idea of secularism and his contribution to the formation of secular India both in the period of pre and post- independent India. Similarly, effort will also be there to appreciate how he understands and countered the menace of communalism in India.

Nehru and Making of Secular Constitution

The idea of secularism which originally has its roots in the west is rather diverse to the Indian sub-continent. The diverseness rooted in the sub-continental context has been institutionalized by the many in the modern India. The contribution of the Nehru to the idea of secularism and its institutionalization was immense. The position of Nehru was not discriminate toward against any particular religion nor did it recognize special rights of the followers of any religion. His attitude was not only of 'tolerance' but of respect towards all religions that all citizens were equal before the law, irrespective of religion, creed, caste or sex and that no disability will attach to citizens for these reasons in regard to public employment and in the exercise of any trade or calling. These formed the basis of the articles in the constitution.

The other outstanding contribution of Nehru was the "objectives Resolution" which was the foundation of the constitution of India. Among the eight points, which Nehru stress in the objective Resolution, points 5 and 6 stressed the secular nature of the constitution. The relevant portions of the objectives Resolution, namely paragraph 1, 5 and 6 are as follows: 1. This constituent Assembly declares its firm and solemn resolve to proclaim India as an Independent Sovereign Republic and to draw up for her future governance a Constitution, 5. Wherein shall be guaranteed and secured to all the people of India justice, social, economic and political; equality of status of opportunity, and before the law, freedom of thought, expression, belief, Faith, Worship, Vocation, Association and Action, subject to law and public morality; and 6. Wherein, adequate safeguards shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other classes. These points in the

objectives Resolution were not only embodied in various Articles in the Constitution of India but were also retained in the Preamble of the Constitution. In order to understand as to what extent the concept of secular state has been embodied in the Constitution, it is necessary to know the specific provisions of the Constitution also.

Similarly the Article 25 of the Indian constitution focus on the equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion. Furthermore, the space created by Nehru against the rigid caste system is equally immense in the history of the Indian democratic like clause (a) Regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice; (b) Providing for social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus manifest the legally guarantee the marginal section of the society.

Equally the freedom to Manage Religious Affairs as enshrined Article 26 which focuses on a) the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes; (b) to manage its own affairs in matters of religion; (c) to own and acquire movable and immovable property; and (d) to administer such property in accordance with law. On the other hand, the Freedom as to Payment of Taxes for the Promotion of any Particular Religion as enshrined in the Article 27 is also of great contribution to the constitutional structure of India. Similarly, Freedom as to Attendance at Religious Instruction or Religious Worship in certain Educational Institutions provided in Article 28, No discrimination in Educational Institutions as per Article 29 (2), Article 30 related to the minorities, where societies based on the religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institution of their choice.

Other than that the article 15 and Article 16 and specifically Article 325 which maintained that one general electoral roll for every territorial constituency for election to either House of Parliament or to either House of Legislature of a state and no person shall be ineligible for inclusion in any such roll or claim to be included in any special electoral roll for any such constituency on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, or any of them. It is obvious from the above that various aspects of the "objective Resolution" are enshrined in different Articles of the Indian Constitution. According to Articles 35 (1) and 26 individual and collective freedom of religion has been guaranteed.

Nehru and Uniform Civil Code

For Nehru, Social Reform was as important and urgent as Secularism. Actually social reform was an integral part of his idea and practice of Secularism. On Nehru's urge, the Constituent Assembly adopted Article 44 under the Directive Principle of State policy which states: The state shall Endeavour to secure for the citizens a Uniform Civil Code throughout the territory of India. No attempt has been made by the Indian Constitution to build a wall of separation between Religion and the State. Section 1 of Article 25 guarantees the freedom of religion not only to its citizens but to all persons including aliens like foreign missionaries. Having guaranteed the

freedom, section 2 of the same article gives the State the power to regulate or restrict any 'secular activity' which may be associated with religious practice. The section goes on to further empower the State to provide 'for social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus.

However, well intentioned these provisions might have been, they do not add up to non-interference by the State in the sphere of religion. Nehru wanted interference on behalf of the state but to bring about religious reform and not to grant the position of privilege to one Religion against another. As a first step in this direction, Nehru considered it most important that the beginning should be made from modifying the Hindu Law which itself was different in various parts of the country. The Hindu Code Bill sought to modify Hindu Law in regard to marriage, adoption, guardianship and women's property rights. Many orthodox Hindus considered it a direct invasion or traditional Hinduism. This was a great challenge to Nehru and he in his Presidential Address to the Congress emphasized the progressive outlook inherent in the Bill. Thus the Hindu Code Bill which has given rise to so much argument, because it is a symbol of this conflict between progress and reaction in the social domain, I do not refer to any particular clause of Bill...but rather to the spirit underlying that Bill. This was a spirit of liberation and freeing our people and more especially, our women-folk from out dated customs and shackles that burden them. He was of the opinion that Uniform Civil Code is important for the unity of India as well as for secularism. Yet we cannot accept it. Because, Muslim community is in minority and we do not wish the Hindu majority to do it. These are personal laws and so they remain for the Muslims, unless they want to change. Nehru sought to separate education from Religion. He insisted on Secular and Scientific Education. He was very particular that scientific temper should be the main component of Education. He wrote: I have a partiality for the literary aspects of education and I admire the classics, but I am quite sure that some elementary scientific training in physics and chemistry and especially biology, as also in the application of science, is essential for all boys and girls. Only thus can they understand and fit into the modern world and develop, to some extent at least, the scientific temper.

Nehru and Communalism

Nehru defined communalism as "the intrusion of religion or so-called religion into political matters", in other words, when one religious group is incited to hate another religious group, it is "religion miss-applied to politics." For Nehru, 'Communalism was the badge of a backward nation'. It was an inheritance from the medieval world. It created parochial sub-nationalism. Nehru condemned Muslim communalists as well as Hindu communalists. He wrote: 'Muslim communal leaders said the most amazing things and seemed to care not at all for Indian nationalism or Indian freedom; Hindu communal leaders, though always speaking arrogantly in the name of nationalism, had little to do with it in practice and, incapable of any real action, sought to humble themselves before the Government,

did that too in vain'. Nehru emphasized that the British government as the third party always intervened to bring about discord between the Hindus and the Muslims. It suited their policy of Divide and Rule. British government in the past and the present has based their policy on creating divisions in their ranks. Divide and rule has always been the way of empires, and the measure, or their success in this policy has been also the measure of their superiority over those whom they thus exploit. We cannot complain of this or, at any rate, we ought not to be surprised as it. To ignore it and not provide against it is in itself a mistake in one's thought Nehru's remedy for communal accord was the creation of a common rational or social outlook. It could not be obtained through bargaining. He wrote, how are we to provide against it? Not surely by bargaining and haggling and generally adopting the tactics of the market-place, for whatever offer we make, however high our bid might be, there is always a third party which can bid higher and, what is more, give substance to its words. If there is no common national or social outlook, there will not be common action against the common adversary. If we think in terms of the existing political and economic structure and merely wish to tamper with it here and there, to reform it, to 'Indianise' it, then all real inducement for joint action is lacking. The object then becomes one of sharing in the spoils, and the third and controlling party inevitably plays the dominant role and hands out its gifts to the prize boys of its choice.

Talking historically, he pointed out how they encouraged one against the other in different periods as it suited their needs and circumstances. He wrote, It is interesting to trace British Policy since the Rising of 1857 in its relation to the communal question. Fundamentally and inevitably it has been one of the preventing the Hindu and Muslim from acting together, and of playing off one community against another. After 1857 the heavy hand of the British fell more on the Muslims than on the Hindus. They considered the Muslims more aggressive and militant... and, therefore more dangerous. The Muslims had also kept away from the new education and had few jobs under the Government. All this made them suspect. However, he agreed that to say that the British government created the Hindu-Muslim problem would be patently wrong. He reminded us of our faults and wrote, we failed in finding a solution for the communal problem agreeable to all parties concerned, and certainly we must share the blame as we have to shoulder the consequences of this failure. Communalism was for Nehru also an economic problem. Thus he wrote, it was also an economic problem. In some places, like Bengal, the peasantry was largely Mohammendan and the landlords were Hindus. There, it was a tenant-landlord problem. In the United Province, it was slightly the other way round; the peasants were largely Hindus and the landlords, Muslims. But in order to hide the main conflict, the color of communalism and religion was given to an essentially economic problem.

Nehru argued that Communalism was associated with the class interests' of the upper middle class. They were fighting for jobs and their class interests. He was of the view that of India's struggle for political freedom could be translated into a

struggle for social freedom also, communalism will vanish. Nehru wanted to evolve suitable policies to safeguard the culture, language and certain special privileges of the minority communities but he believed that the Hindu and Muslim cultures were in the process of transformation under the influence of the modern scientific and technological revolution. He remarked, the real struggle today in India is not between Hindu culture and Muslim culture, but between these two and the conquering scientific culture of modern civilization. Those who are desirous of preserving 'Muslim culture' ... need not worry about Hindu culture, but should withstand the giant from the west. I have no doubt, personally, that all efforts of Hindus or Muslims, to oppose modern scientific and industrial civilization are doomed to failure, and I shall watch this failure, and I shall watch this failure, without regret. Thus the objective reality for Nehru was that Communalism will vanish under the impact and the march of modern civilization. We can only say that Nehru was a great optimist. This optimism proved a lie and led to great frustration. This optimism led to frustration in Nehru's own times. He expressed this frustration by saying. All of us seem to be getting infected with the refugee mentality or, worse still, the R.S.S. mentality.

Nehru was the architect of India's concept of Secularism. It was he who was responsible for its incorporation into the constitution of India. He sought to separate law from religion. He sought to separate social reforms from religion. With the help of the State he sought to bring about religious reforms. He separated Education from religion and insisted on secular and scientific Education. He succeeded a great deal in bringing about in atmosphere of Secularism in Indian Society and polity. However, he had also his failures. As pointed out by S. Gopal, Nehru accepted the creation of Pakistan as a political necessity and not as recognition of the validity of the two nation theory on the basis of religion. Rather, with large religious minorities remaining in India, secularism became all the more important, for it is the only possible basis of a uniform and durable national identity in a multi-religious society... Only secularism can be the corner-stone of an egalitarian, forward-looking India, with religious pluralism, full civil liberties and equal opportunities.

For Nehru, the idea of a Muslim Nation in India was a medieval concept. He condemned it by saying: Stress has been laid on the 'Muslim nation' in India, on 'Muslim culture', on the utter incompatibility of Hindu and Muslim 'culture' The inevitable deduction from this is... that the British must remain in India forever and ever to hold the scales and mediate between the two cultures. A few Hindu communal leaders think exactly on the same lines... Politically, the idea is absurd, economically it is fantastic; it is hardly worth considering, and yet it helps us a little to understand the mentality behind it. Some such separate and unmixable nations existed together in the middle Ages and afterwards. He believed that the idea of having a nation or religious bond was against the spirit of modern civilization. To talk of a 'Muslim nation', therefore, means that there is no nation at all but a religious bond; it means that no nation in the modern sense must be allowed to grow; it means that

modern civilization should be discarded and we should go back to the medieval ways; it means either autocratic government or a foreign government; it means finally, just nothing at all except an emotional state of mind and a conscious or unconscious desire not to face realities, especially economic realities.

He did not even accept the idea of a Muslim culture or that of a Hindu culture. In this matter he was making the popular Marxist mistake of ignoring all signs of ethnicity and religion. But let us allow him to speak for himself, I have tried hard to understand what this 'Muslim Culture' is, but I confess that I have not succeeded. I find a tiny handful of middle-class Muslims as well as Hindus in north India influenced by the Persian language and traditions. And looking to the masses the most obvious symbols of 'Muslim culture' seem to be: a particular type of pajamas, not too long and not too short, a particular way to shaving or clipping the moustache but allowing the beard to grow, just as the corresponding Hindu customs are the wearing of a dhoti, the possession of a topknot. As a matter of fact, even these distinctions are largely urban and they tend to disappear. The Muslim peasantry and industrial workers are hardly distinguishable from the Hindu. In recent years Indian Muslims have had repeated Shocks. and many of their deeply cherished notions have been shattered, Turkey, that champion of Islam, has not only ended the Khilafat, for which India put up such a brave fight in 1920, but has taken step after step away from religion. ... Everywhere religion recedes into the background and nationalism appears in aggressive garbs and behind nationalism other isms which talk in social and economic terms. How wrong Nehru was in his understanding of the march of the history is what we can say today in retrospect.

Conclusion

The contribution of Nehru for building a secular India can be gauged by the fact that the ideas he considered significant has also been institutionalized by him being first prime minister of the independent India for more than a decade. His profound understanding of the menace of communalism can well be measured when he argued that Communalism was associated with the class interests' of the upper middle class. They were fighting for jobs and their class interests. He was of the view that communalism will vanish if India's struggle for political freedom could be translated into a struggle for social freedom as well. Nehru wanted to

evolve suitable policies to safeguard the culture, language and certain special privileges of the minority communities but he believed that the Hindu and Muslim cultures were in the process of transformation under the influence of the modern scientific and technological revolution. His attempt of blending the idea of secularism and its synthesis with different ideological strands, social issues of the society and with the vision of equality for all can be weighed as the most decisive contribution to independent India.

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