

Secularism in Search of Identity

Abstract

In the West, the word secular implies three things; freedom of religion, equal citizenship to each citizen regardless of his or her religion, and the separation of religion and state. One of the core principles in the constitution of Western democracies has been this separation, with the state asserting its political authority in matters of law, while accepting every individual's right to pursue his or her own religion and the right of religion to shape its own concepts of spirituality. Everyone is equal under law, and subject to the same laws irrespective of his or her own religion. In contrast, in India, the word secular does not imply separation of religion and state. India doesn't have a state religion but it gives equal treatment to all religions, enforces parliamentary laws instead of religious laws and accept pluralism. But in India religion continues to assert its political authority in matters of personal law. The applicable personal law differ if an individual's religion is Islam, Christianity, or Hindu.

Secularism introduces science, technology and rationalism in the society and forms the basis of a modern secular state. In the process , it has to oppose and struggle against the castists, clergy and other vested forces in the society. And as such, the fundamentalist communal onslaught are ' other' of secularism and secularization. . Thus, any person can be called secular he who believes in humanism not castism, who agrees to accept the totality as reality but not addhers to any partial identity, who never believes in any particular religion but God, a super consciousness, the manifestation of one, the origin of all creation but the creation of non.

Keywords: Secularism, Secular.

Introduction

Secularism in India is a debatable topic. People are proud of their caste, religion, region and other particular identity but not secularism. Does secularism implies such an ambiguous connotation that people hesitate to speak about? Or Secularism has such an idealist implication that our too much realistic thinking don't allow any space for it's accommodation.

Basically, Secularism is a principle that separates government institutions and persons particularly the elected one from any religious affiliations. In one way it is the manifestation of assertion to be free from any religious principles, to be neutral on religious belief, and imposition of any religious practices by government upon its people. In other way it is view that public activities and decisions, specially political ones should be uninfluenced by religious beliefs and practices.¹ In political terms secularism is a movement towards the separation of state and religion. This can refer to reducing the ties between government and religion, replacing laws based on scripture (such as Halakha and Sharia law) with civil laws, and eliminating description which is based on religion. This is often called the basis of democracy because it protect the rights of religious minorities.²

The term "secularism" was first used by the British writer George Jacob Holyoake in 1851.³ It is based on the general notions of free thought and draws its intellectual roots from Greek and Roman philosophers such as Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius; from Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Denis Diderot, Voltair, Baruch Spinoza, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine; and from more recent freethinkers and atheists such as Robert Ingersoll and Bertrand Russell. Holyoake describes secularism as a social order which is completely independent of religion but without criticizing or dismissing any religious belief. Being an agnostic, Holyoake argues that "Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in



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secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exit independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life."⁴

Barry Kosmin of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture breaks modern secularism in to two types: hard and soft secularism. According to Kosmin, "the hard secularist considers religious propositions to be epistemologically illegitimate, warranted by neither reason nor experience." However, in the view of soft secularism, "the attainment of absolute truth was impossible and therefore skepticism and tolerance should be the principle and overriding values in the discussion of science and religion."⁵

Scholar like Jacques Berlinerblau of the Program for Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University argues that separation of church and state is but one possible strategy of state secularism. What all secular governments, from the democratic to the authoritarian, share is a concern about relations between church and state. Each secular government may find its own unique policy prescriptions for dealing with that concern (separation being but one of those possible policies, French models in which the state carefully monitors and regulates the church being another).⁶

French secularity (French: *Laïcité*, [la.site]), is the absence of religious involvement in government affairs, especially the prohibition of religious influence in the determination of state policies; it is also the absence of government involvement in religious affairs, especially the prohibition of government influence in the determination of religion.^{7,8} Dictionaries ordinarily translate *laïcité* as secularity or secularism (the latter being the political system),⁹ although it is sometimes rendered in English as *laïcité* or *laicism* by its opponents. Originally the term *laïcité* was equivalent of the term *laity*, that is, everyone who is not clergy. But in its strict and official acceptance, it is the principle of separation of church (or religion) and state. While the term was first used with this meaning in 1871 in the dispute over the removal of religious teachers and instruction from elementary schools, the word *laïcité* dates back to 1842.¹⁰

The word *laïcité* has been used, from the end of the 19th century on to mean the freedom of public institutions, especially primary schools, from the influence of the Catholic Church in countries where it had retained its influence, in the context of a secularization process. Today, the concept covers other religious movements as well.

Proponents assert that French state secularism is based on respect for freedom of thought and freedom of religion. Thus the absence of a state religion, and the subsequent separation of the state and Church, is considered by proponents to be a prerequisite for such freedom of thought. Proponents maintain that *laïcité* is thus distinct from anti-clericalism, which actively opposes the influence of religion and the clergy. *Laïcité* relies on the division

between private life, where adherents believe religion belongs, and the public sphere, in which each individual, adherents believe, should appear as a simple citizen equal to all other citizens, devoid of ethnic, religious or other particularities. According to this concept, the government must refrain from taking position on religious doctrine and only consider religious subjects for their practical consequences on inhabitants' lives.

Supporters argue that *laïcité* by itself does not necessarily imply any hostility of the government with respect to religion. It is best described as a belief that government and political issues should be kept separate from religious organizations and religious issues (as long as the latter do not have notable social consequences). This is meant to protect both the government from any possible interference from religious organizations, and to protect the religious organization from political quarrels and controversies. Other countries, following in the French model, have forms of *Laïcité* -examples include Albania, Mexico and Turkey.¹¹

In Belgium, " *laïcité*" refers to the separation between church and state, although under the Belgian constitution ministers of religion are paid with government funds. The constitution was amended in 1991 to give the same right to persons fulfilling secular functions. Public schools must now offer pupils the choice between religion and secular courses.

In Canada, Quebec, the only predominantly French- speaking province, has been greatly influenced by the *laïcité* of France. Since the 1960s Quebec has gone a period of rapid secularization called the Quiet Revolution. Prior to this time, Quebec was seen as a very observant Catholic society and Catholicism was its *de facto* state religion. But now Quebec politicians have tended to adopt a more European- style understanding of secularism i.e., "reasonable accommodation" of religious minorities.¹²

In Mexico, the lower house of the Mexican legislature, in March 2010, introduced legislation to amend the Constitution to make the Mexican government formally "laico"- meaning "lay" or "secular". Critics of the move say the "context surrounding the amendment suggests that it might be a step backwards for religious liberty and true separation of church and state". Coming on the heels of the Church's vocal objection to legalization of abortion as well as same sex unions and adoptions in Mexico city, "together with some statements of its supporters, suggests that it might be an attempt to suppress the Catholic Church's ability to engage in public policy debates. Mexico has had a history of religious suppression and persecution. Critics of the amendment reject the idea that "Utilitarians, Nihilists, Capitalists, and Socialists can all bring their philosophy to bear on public life, but Catholics (or religious minorities) must check their religion at the door" in a sort of "second-class citizenship" which they consider nothing more than religious discrimination.¹³ In Turkey, a strong stance of secularism has held sway since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Turkish revolution in the early 20th century. On March 3, 1924

Turkey removed the caliphate system and all religious influence from the state. Sunni Islam, the majority religion, is now controlled by the Turkish government through the Department of Religious Affairs, and is state-funded while other religions or sects have independence on religious affairs. Islamic views which are deemed political are censored in accordance with the principle of secularism.¹⁴

In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution contains a similar concept, although the term "laïcité" is not used either in the Constitution or elsewhere, and is in fact used as a term to contrast European secularism with American secularism. That amendment includes clauses prohibiting both congressional governmental interference with the "free exercise" of religion, and congressional laws regarding the establishment of religion. Originally this prevented the federal government from interfering with state-established religions. But after the 14th amendment, these clauses have been held by the courts to apply to both the federal and state governments. Together, the "free exercise clause" and "establishment clause" are considered to accomplish a "separation of church and state."¹⁵ This was also the desire of founding fathers of American constitution who made a law that religion and government should stay separate. This means that anyone can choose to practice or not practice any religion they want, and the government cannot make them be a part of a religion if they do not want.¹⁶

In India the word secularism was first added to the Preamble of the constitution under 42nd amendment to the constitution in 1976.¹⁷ But, neither India's constitution nor its laws define the relationship between religion and state. The laws implicitly require the state and its institutions to recognise and accept all religions, enforce parliamentary laws instead of religious laws, and respect pluralism.¹⁸ Above all, India does not have an official state religion. However, in matter of applications, India's code of law is unequal, and India's personal laws - on matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, alimony - varies with an individual's religion. Muslim Indians have Sharia-based Muslim Personal Law, while Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and other non-Muslim Indians live under common law.

Aim of the Study

The present article make an attempt to search for a true meaning of secularism.

In the West, the word secular implies three things; freedom of religion, equal citizenship to each citizen regardless of his or her religion, and the separation of religion and state. One of the core principles in the constitution of Western democracies has been this separation, with the state asserting its political authority in matters of law, while accepting every individual's right to pursue his or her own religion and the right of religion to shape its own concepts of spirituality. Everyone is equal under law, and subject to the same laws irrespective of his or her own religion.¹⁹

In contrast, in India, the word secular does not imply separation of religion and state. It means equal treatment of all religions. Religion in India

continues to assert its political authority in matters of personal law. The applicable personal law differ if an individual's religion is Islam, Christianity, or Hindu. The term secularism in India also differs from the French concept for secularity, namely laïcité. While the French concept demands absence of governmental institutions in religion, as well as absence of religion in governmental institutions and school; the Indian concept, in contrast, provides financial support to religious schools and accepts religious law over governmental institutions. The Indian structure has created incentives for various religious denominations to start and maintain schools, impart religious education, and receive partial but significant financial supports from the Indian government. Similarly, Indian government financially supports, regulates and administers the Warf council (Islam), historic Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries, and certain Christian religious institutions; this direct Indian government involvement in various religions is markedly different from Western secularism.²⁰

Supporters of the Indian concept of secularism claim it respects Muslim men's religious rights and recognizes that they are culturally different from Indians of other religions. Supporters of this form of secularism claim that any attempt to introduce a uniform civil code, that is equal laws for every citizen irrespective of his or her religion, would impose majoritarian Hindu sensibilities ideals, something that is unacceptable to Muslim Indians.²¹ Opponents argue that India's acceptance of Sharia and religious laws violates the principle of equal human rights, discriminates against Muslim women, allows unelected religious personalities to interpret religious laws, and creates plurality of unequal citizenship; they suggest India should move towards separating religion and state.²² Romila Thapar justifies both the views as incomplete. The supporters of first view endorses secularism in theory only but hesitate to apply it properly in practice, the other makes fun of it since their fundamental ideology is not conducive to secularism.²³

In India the post independent scenario was quite complex. The process of secularization/ industrialization was going on at a slow pace. Even at this stage, though constitution was secular, the state apparatus: the bureaucracy, the judiciary the army and the police were infiltrated by communal elements. Hindu God and Gods were allowed to worshiped in many government premises. The congress party though predominantly secular, it's leaders were mostly Hindu by religion. They had an inclination towards Hinduism and had no hesitation to support and promote the Hindu philosophy in the name of secularism. They worked very devotedly for systemic maintenance but not systemic change. This resulted in a social development that was mixed; on the one hand secularism thrived and on the other though communalism remained dormant never dead. With the social changes of the late 70's and the early 80's communalism got a strong boost and it started attacking secularism in a big way. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was quick to take up the mantle of 'the' communal party, riding on the wave of post -

mandal upper class/caste backlash. The BJP began attacking, what they called “pseudo-secularism”, which pampered the minorities at the expense of the majority and demanded that special rights for minorities be taken away.²⁴

Today, the biggest challenge to the Indian nation is coming from forces claiming to represent the mainstream majority. There is an emergence of extremist voices that claim to speak for Hindu and they are laying down demands that threaten the very idea of a secular India. The biggest area of concern is that the state has emerged to be complicit, as an actor and player in moulding this challenge to Indian pluralism, which goes under the name of Hindutva.

The communal forces are actively propagating the myth that Secularism is a new mask of fundamentalism. They denigrate the secular policies, which are a hindrance to Hindu Right's unobstructed march to subjugate the oppressed in general and minorities in particular. They are equating fundamentalism with Islam; and the policies of Indian rulers with secularism, and the appeasement of mullahs as being synonymous with secular policies. Further, Hindutva forces accuse that secularism pampers the Muslim as a vote bank. The Muslims are accused of extra –territorial loyalty and are killed on the suspicion of eating beef. Since Muslims are being thought synonymous to fundamentalism; therefore the assertion that the Indian state is appeasing fundamentalism in the name of secularism.

The Christians are also not spared because their way of living is not conformity with Hindu system of belief. They are accused of being more loyal to the Vatican, another outside force and of trying to convert poor Hindu with inducements of education, health and food. This was the reason for which Graham Staines and his two minor sons were burnt alive by a member of the Bajrang Dal and some sisters in Gujrat were raped, their fault being the spreading of the word of their God.²⁵

Secularism introduces science, technology and rationalism in the society and forms the basis of a modern secular state. In the process, it has to oppose and struggle against the castists and vested forces in the society. And as such, the fundamentalist communal onslaught are ‘other’ of secularism and secularization. In India the oppressed sections join the secular movement to wrest the accompanying liberal space that can be the base for launching the struggles for their rights. Fundamentalism is the regressive reaction of feudal elements and sections of middle classes in league with the clergy, to crush the aspirations of oppressed class, whose movements for their rights is a big source of tension for them.

The burgeoning neo-middle classes have emerged as pivotal points that embraced consumerism as modernity but simultaneously began looking towards culture and tradition for support. The advent of globalization has been welcomed in India but it has also shaken people who fear that their own cultures will be destroyed. Hence they show an inclination towards the conservative Hindu Identity. It is all about culture , religion and ritual, all cleverly juxtaposed with nationalism: what is Hindu is Indian

and from that follows, what is not Hindu is not Indian. There is a blatant attempt to subvert history, change school curricula and create a new set up in line with a Hindu Rastra. There is a new, muscular nationalism, one that holds up the nuclear bomb as a sign of strength and wants to keep neighbours and internal minorities in their place, and which derives its strength from invented mythology; and has taken over polity.²⁶

As Romila Thapar has stated A secular society and polity does not mean abandoning one's own religion. But it means the religious identity of an individual has to give way to the primary identity of a citizen. And the state has to guarantee the rights that come with this identity, as the rights of citizenship.²⁷ Because secularism believes in human rights, rule of law, democracy, diversity and pluralism. Thus, any person can be called secular he who believes in humanism not castism, who agrees to accept the totality as reality but not adheres to any partial identity, who never believes in any particular religion but God, a super consciousness, the manifestation of one, the origin of all creation but the creation of non.

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