



INDIAN SECULARISM AND ITS MISGIVINGS: A FOUCAULDIAN READING

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Abstract

The concept of secularism in both the West and the East can be analysed with respect to both historical and philosophical backgrounds. As its philosophy, it promotes multi-value character. In the Indian context, it is a potential practical asset to meet the demand of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-caste plural heterogeneous society. In the broader sense, secularism in India stands for the spirit of toleration. It can tighten the bonds that exists between the different religious communities in the country. It is the need of the nation as a whole to ensure economic progress and maintain social stability and harmony. The forefathers proposed secularism to combat communalism. It had also for its aim to provide a basis for the democratic functioning of the state. But, peaceful coexistence which was intended by the theory of secularism has been thwarted in the recent times due to the frequent actions of the communal forces. These forces for the gratification of their vested interests exercise power. This article seeks to link this discussion to the contemporary debates on power and religion. This article offers another reading of Foucault's views on power along the lines of Indian secularism by throwing light on Foucault's crucial and widely identified key themes like power and governmentality.

Keywords: Historical, Philosophical, Forefathers.

Introduction

The term secularism is open to different meanings. Secularism is a system which seeks to interpret and order life on principles taken solely from this world without recourse to belief in God and a future life. (Cross 1236) There can be no agreed and precise definition of secularism as it is a dynamic concept. Secularism has often been equated with anti-religion, materialism and atheism. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: "Some people think that (the secular state) means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; that, as a state, it does not allow itself to be attached to one faith or religion, which then becomes the state religion". (Gopal 330) It is not only a political concept, but also a philosophy of life whose ideal is progress of man irrespective of his religion.

The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism

India is designated as a secular polity. The introduction of English education with its emphasis on scientific temper and rationalism paved the way for Indian renaissance. The abolition of sati, widow remarriage, setting up of institutions for promoting girls education, prohibition of untouchability, child marriage, devadasi dedication and polygamy, legal recognition of inter-caste marriages, introduction of temple entry rights for Harijans; all significantly cultivated to build platforms for a secular state. Swami Vivekananda, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Syed Ahmed Khan; to name a few, were important pioneers in this direction. The Constitution of India as formulated by the Constituent Assembly had all the basic ingredients of a secular state.

The Western connotation of secularism was the product of renaissance and enlightenment. It forwarded freedom of the individual from the bondage of ecclesiastical authority. It implied the principle of rationalism and autonomy. In India, secularism is not freedom from religion but, freedom of religion. It emphasises the principle of accommodation and all-inclusiveness. For the last decades Indians have been talking of secularism, yet the term remains vague and ambiguous. One may therefore, be justified in asking what does secularism really mean - especially in the Indian context? (Mushir 6)

The Constitution intelligentsia envisaged a secular state for India. Many reasons can be accounted for this like need for a peaceful coexistence due to the presence of various religious communities, the protection of the minorities and the bitter experiences people had to suffer at the time of partition. Diversities and difficulties in a society like India have to be handled in a non-antagonistic fashion and secularism provides the best approach to resolve them. (Pavithran 62) There were two opinions in the Constituent Assembly regarding whether India should be a Hindu state or a secular state. Loknath Misra asserted in the Constituent Assembly that if you accept religion, you must accept Hinduism as it is practiced by an overwhelming majority of the people of India. (C. A. D., Vol. VII, P. 822) There were many upholders of secular state. H. V.



Kamat said that after all, the state represents all the people, who live within its territories and therefore, it cannot afford to identify itself with the religion of any particular section of the population. (C. A. D., Vol. VII 825) Another member of the Constituent Assembly Tajmal Hussain opined, " This is a secular state and a secular state should not have nothing to do with religion. We should not, being a secular state, be recognised by our dress. If you have a particular kind of dress, you know at once that so and so is a Hindu or a Muslim. This thing should be done away". (C. A. D. Vo. VII, 818-819) Thus, it shows that the members of the Constituent Assembly were interested to adopt a secular state rather than a theocratic state or a Hindu state.

The routes to a secular state are many, but the underlying theme is one ; which is of non-discrimination. A state is said to be secular when it has no official state established religion and does not discriminate amongst its citizens on the basis of religion. But, this general opinion is under debate. However, with regard to the purpose and object of a "secular state" there is hardly any unanimity among the scholars and practitioners of secularism. (Perumal 59) The basic feature of secularism is humanism based on reason and not on religious dogmas. The Indian conception of secularism is a positive interpretation. It is the treatment of all religions in an equal fashion and ruling out discrimination of any Indian on the basis of his/her religion. Moreover, India does not endorse any official religion. In the words of Hussain Imam, a member of the Constituent Assembly, "A secular state does not mean that it is anti-religious state. It means that it is not irreligious but non-religious and as such, there is a world of difference between irreligious and non-religious". (C. A. D. Vo. VII, P. 289)

Secularism in India is generally conceived as an indigenous concept of honour, tolerance and reverence; i.e., sarva dharma sambhava. It is synonymous with religious pluralism and anti-communalism. Another Sanskrit phrase used to designate Indian secularism is dharmanirapaksata which can be translated as neutrality, non-interference and impartiality towards religious matters. In the words of our country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, "We talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for "secular." Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. It is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities". (Gopal 330) Religious tolerance is the essence of Indian secularism. Indian secularism is not absolute as religious liberty guaranteed is subject to the conditions of public order, morality and welfare of the citizens, and the state can impose reasonable restrictions if necessary.

Indian Secularism in A State of Jeopardy

Indian nationalism with the aim to free India from the British colonial rule took a divergent route when many political parties were set up on religious lines. As a result, communal politics developed. The process of discontent than the politicization of that discontent then gets its expression of violent action against political object and actors. (Gurr 35) In the post-independent India, the emergence of Hindu nationalists in the 1980's, the large massacre of Sikhs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by the Hindu militants in 1992 and the Godhra riots in 2002, secularism has become a hot topic that received national attention. It is saddening to witness such heinous crimes in a secular country like India.

The Dialectics of Communalism

Communalism was one of the by-products of the British colonial rule in India. Communalism is defined as the faith, that because a set of people come behind a distinct religion they have, as a result of general, social, political and financial interests. (Chandra 1) As an ideology, it has deeper implications as it is a pointer towards the society and polity. It affects the lives of those who are not communal minded. Communalism takes many decades to become a crystalline material forceful form in the society. To wage a conscious anti-communal struggle is a strenuous task. Economic development, spread of education, class struggle, growth of anti-imperialist struggle were not successful in wiping out the buds of communal ideology in India. Under the pressure of communal propaganda, the masses are unable to locate the real causes of their exploitation, oppression and suffering and imagine a fictitious communal source of their origin. (Shah 185)

The Articulation of Power

Communalism works on the principle of power. One of the beautiful expositions of power had been brought by the French poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault. In his 1976, College de France course, he reflects: "The question what is power? is obviously a theoretical question that would provide an answer to everything, which is just what I don't want to do". (Foucault *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the College de France 1973-1974* 13) Foucault conceived power at two levels according to later theorists; one at the empirical level and the other at the theoretical level. Power fosters dynamic relationships. The traditional conception of power was considered to be hierarchical in nature displaying its



operations from top to bottom manner. Foucault shifted this view. He broadens our perspective to consider power as a strategy to mould population by disciplining them. It employs the forms of social control through disciplinary institutions and the role of knowledge. The empirical efficacy is brought about by the way individuals guide their behaviours as per the required desired standards.

Religion is the instrument of power. Foucault writes: "It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transports, strengthens or reverses them; as the support which force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault **The History of Sexuality Vol. I** 92) Religion is the instrumental reason of communalism as it is a potential force to make a strong emotional appeal.

Communal philosophy and ideas constantly propagated in communal papers and journals and from communal platforms have so poisoned the mind of the ignorant sections of the two communities and even of certain sections of the educated and literate class that every action of a member of the opposite community is looked upon with distrust and suspicion. In some cases, officials whose duty is to hold the balance evenly between the two communities are not found free of this taint. (Engineer 47) History teaches that communalism as an invisible ideology took its cohesive presence in the form of communal violence and riots. Many evil thoughts are imparted into the minds of individuals from a very early age resulting in hatred towards the other community. It can be philosophically analysed that the communal violence is the instrument of power and the expression of frustration from the community's point of view.

The Nomenclature of Governmentality

"It seems to me that one of the basic phenomena of nineteenth century was what might be called powers hold over life ... that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be called state control of the biological". (Foucault **Society Must be defended Lectures at the college de France 1975-1976** 240) **This disciplinary and regulatory control can be extended beyond the biological to include the ideological realm where religion occupies an indispensable place.** Foucault first conceived governmentality in a series of lectures held at College de France in 1978-1979 while bringing about his investigations of political power. It is the art of government or conduct of conduct. He remarks: "First, by "governmentality" I understand the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. Second, by "governmentality" I understand the tendency, the line of force, that for a long time, and throughout the West, has constantly led towards the pre-eminence over all other types of power - sovereignty, discipline, and so on - of the type of power that we can call "government" and which has led to the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses on the one hand and, on the other to the development of a series of knowledges. Finally, by "governmentality" I think we should understand the process, or rather, the result of the process, by which the state of justice of the middle ages became the administrative state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and was gradually "governmentalized". (Foucault **Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978** 108-109)

Governmentality is a form of thinking about the nature of the practice of government ... capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it is practiced. (Burchell 3) Governmentality is understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour. Government of children, government of souls and consciences, government of a household, of a state, or of oneself. (Foucault **Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth** 82) Governmentality has its operation in different sites with different aims. The calculated particular strategies employed may be both direct or indirect. It is not permanent or universal, but contingent contextually. Thus, the citizens are made docile and forced to be productive. This sovereignty exercised proceeds to the condition of normalization. Thus, the citizens are restricted in their possibilities of thinking and acting. It permeates the whole of the society. This displays the links between forms of power and the process of subjectification.

In India, religion covers all aspects of life and as such it is impossible to restrict it to private realm. Religion is fused into political boundaries. Power in this respect is a more intimate phenomenon. It knows the individual better, it does not act on individuals at a distance and from the outside. It acts on the interior of the person, through their self. (Miller 2)



Politics has been communalized both quantitatively and qualitatively. Political parties in order to flourish and propagate their vested interests, uphold the batons of communalism. Politicians inject venomous thoughts into the masses to dissociate harmonious living. Political violence, to do of interruption, demolition, bruise, whose purpose, choice of object or victims of surrounding environment, execution and effects, have political importance, that is moulding to qualify the behaviour of others in bargaining situations that has consequences for the social system. (Nieburg 18) If communal ideologies are bracketted out from their policies, the party is doomed to disintegrate. Fundamentalists and fanatics provoke political bickering. The lay citizens fail to realize this. They should be made aware of the prevailing underground political conditions and their exploitation which hamper nation's advancement. Efforts should be taken to build politics on a moral foundation. There should be an effort to adopt a form of political secularism. It is a position where the relation between religion and politics involves neither fusion nor disengagement, but a policy of principled equidistance. (

Conclusion

It is sad to admit that Indian version of secularism is an ideal yet to be realized. The positive potentialities of religion should be embraced. Religion must foster ethical practices for social harmony. It should take serious efforts to revive its beliefs when harmful and should adopt a tolerant behaviour in times of difference. To achieve this, governmentality must be reconfigured by examining the prevalent empirical flaws. The remedy lies in opening up new avenues for inter-religious and intra-religious dialogues. Man's blood should not be used as a lubricant to turn the wheels of political vandalism. The theory and practice of a secular state should bring about toleration of religious, cultural and ethnic differences. Society should be based on the secular values of life. Then only, equality before law, justice, social welfare and individual freedom as characteristic features of a secular society can be enjoyed by each and every citizen.

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