

Exploring Religion and Identity Politics in India: A Brief Overview

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses the country as diverse as India. Religion plays an important role in determining the political dialogue and mobilizes the people. Religion is significant role in Indian politics. The paper highlights the country's politics and its democracy. India has numerous religions and tradition and citizens have strong beliefs. The concept of religion disquiets the confidential subject what pertains to individual trust and believe. Religion and politics as two pillar - right from the ancient times religion in India has been seen playing the role of continuation the dharma. Religion and caste contain profound chronological ancestry in India, shaping the social, cultural, and political fabric.

Key words: Religion, politics, conflicts, communal, Secularism, political, leadership and regionalism

INTRODUCTION

Religion in politics is a major challenge facing the secular state. Communalism in India reproduces religious apprehension, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. Religion and politics stand in a paradoxical relationship with each other. In democracies, speculation comes to mean the separation of politics from religion, while it is difficult to assume that religion does not influence politics. In a country like India, religion is deep-rooted in the veins of our social fabric. Like caste, religion plays a significant role in the life of the people. We are born in a religion and it is seldom that we change it. Religion is found in our rituals, customs, conduct, behavior and times, in our activities, faith usually dominates more than rationalism.

Secularism implies equal respect for all religions in the same measure as we have for our own. In our country, the liberty of 'belief, faith and worship', as enshrined in the constitution, has been implemented by incorporating the Fundamental Rights of all citizens to 'free of religion' vide Article 25-29. Secularism, as any theologian would tell us, lies at very root of all religions and faiths in this world. "Religion in politics covers various topics related to the effects of religion on politics. Religion has been claimed to be "the source of some of the most remarkable political mobilizations of our times"(Jelen, Ted G. 2002:1)

In no other country in the world, we do find the predominance of religion in political affairs, as we find it in India. Religious conflicts and communal skirmishes form an integral part of Indian history. However, it would be wrong to assume that religious strife is a regional phenomenon, confined to the Indian subcontinent only. In fact, that is far from true. Even a nation like United Kingdom witnesses bitter religious strife between the protestant and Catholics under the solitary banner of Christianity. Violence has often intruded preaching and practicing of a religion. But what makes the situation an entirely different one in India, is the simultaneous presence of so many religions in the land. In India, we find the pattern of a mini-world. Diverse religious sects, castes and sub-caste exists here together. Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, Bramho Samaj, Bahai faith and several other religions flourish here. As noted columnist, Charles Newton, rightly remarked "India is the real seat of spiritual perfection".

In no other land do we find the peaceful coexistence of so many religions side by side. While the peaceful coexistence of so many religions has been a matter of pride for India. At the same time, it has been an impediment to larger progress, and unity of the nation. It has made the demographic situation within the country a unique and complex one. In order to analyze

the correlation between religion and politics, it is imperative to trace the complexities of communal strife in India since the pre-Independence days. In their book *Freedom at Midnight* Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre give us a beautiful picture of the religious complexities existing in India since pre-independence days. It would be essential to remember that this work is basically a political reconstruction of the pre-independence days. We get a clear picture in the book, as to how Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated. We also come to know how the assassination was planned and executed by Nathuram Godse- a Hindu fundamentalist. In this political bestseller, Collins and Lapierre try to trace clearly how the partition was planned and executed. In describing the political complexities of the nation, the authors devote pages, describing the animosity prevalent between the two predominant religions- Hinduism and Islam. The difference between the two religion lies both in practicing and preaching. Even since pre-independence period, the communal strife within India has been primarily confined between these two regions.

It is true that earliest force of civilization was religion. In the West, it was religion, whether pagan or Christian, that consolidated the ideas of political sovereignty. In the East, it was religion again that provided the foundation of the state. The glorious structure of the ideal Hindu state or Ram Rajya was religious to the backbone. The ideas of the Islamic state in the imperialistic history of Islam, as distinguished from the domestic history of few ideal Muslim rulers, is nothing but the conquering sword of Islam dripping with the blood of the victims of the religion of Islam. For a time, religion was a necessity and a boon to keep people together within the organization of a state. But as fanaticism increased, the force of reason declined. Faith became corrupt, and religion became a source of discord and bloodshed. Some of the greatest wars of the world and the bloodshed massacres have been perpetrated in the name of the religion. The history of the middle Ages in Europe is a record of the havoc which religion played in the national and international fields. It was, therefore, found necessary that States should tear themselves away from the world-devouring force religion.

Relationship between religion and politics has existed in every society and in every age. Religion symbols, ideas and institutions have been used by rulers to perpetuate their control over the ruled. Clashes between opposing religions are also facts of history, religion factions within and between religions have dominated the course of history in every age and in all societies. Like caste, religion works both ways, positively, it mobilizes people of the same faith, negatively, it constitutes sources of cleavage. Religion has assumed a special significance in the traditional societies of the third world countries in general and in multi-religious societies like ours in particular. "In contrast to religious states, secular states recognize no religion. This is often called the principle of the separation of church and state. A more strictly prescribed version, *Laïcité*, is practiced in France, which prohibits all religious expressions in many public contexts" (Winkler, Elizabeth: 2006:55)

India is a land of multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual people with a plethora of castes and sub-caste. All the major religions in the country, viz, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism teach their followers to imbibe the love of truth, faith in God and love for all human beings. Yet our people have developed ethno-centric attitudes and peculiar spiritual attitudes regarding their own religion. Today, religion the opiate of the masses disintegrates people through communal violence and riots at the behest of political parties and their unscrupulous leaders. Religion as an ally of politics is fraught with danger. Thus, we cannot do without religion but something has to be done regarding the cancerous spread of communalism in the country. The 42nd Constitutional Amendment has proclaimed India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic Republic. In the Indian Context, secularism means equal respect for all religions. India does not have any Official Religion like Nepal (Hinduism) or the Islamic nations. The state does not interfere in any religious affairs. According to articles 25 of the Indian constitution, people have the freedom of conscience and are free to profess, practice and propagate religion. The Constitution thus upholds the unity of all religions, based on their moral precepts and humanistic teachings with the sole objective of building unity in diversity. This shows that India as secular state is either religious or anti-religious; it is completely detached from all religious dogmas. The irony, however, is that we are far from realization of this noble ideal of secularism both in thought and in our deeds.

In India's context, communalization of politics has been a byproduct of politicization of religion. The process began in 1909 when the British granted communal/ separate representation to the Muslim in India councils, leading ultimately to the communalization of politics before and after independence of India. Indeed, there were numerous religions before the advent of the British in India, but there were never communal conflicts. The British, following their policy of 'divide and rule', exploited the differences to suit their imperialistic designs. They welcomed the formation of political parties based on religion. Thus were welcomed the AI, India Muslim league, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Akali Dal, Christian organizations. So were encouraged the communal representation in legislatures during the British rule. So was accepted the demand for a Muslim state and the country was partitioned in 1947. The entry of religion into politics communalized all political issues and when the country became independent, religion remained the significant factor but now as determining the electoral politics. Politics is now completely communalized, the state is declared secular but the society remains bases on religion as it is on caste. The electoral politics has made political parties and political leadership use religion as an instrument of politics, appealing religious minorities and at the times communalizing politics.

Secularism aims at promoting mutual tolerance and respect among the multi-religious Indians. Religion, on the other hand, encourages communalism, fundamentalism, secessionism, ruthless violence and rank Casteism in a society that has assimilated several religions and strains of thought over the millennia. The British created an incurable rift between Hindus and Muslims that led to the partition of the sub-continent of 1947. The rift has widened since then. Today, Ram Janmabhoomi and Babri Masjid are there to speak of communal violence, the latest being the 1992-93 Mumbai riots. Further, the desecration of statues of leaders like Dr. B. R Ambedkar, persecution of Christian missionaries and the exploitation of minorities, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes- all these point to the sad fact that we are all drifting away from the ideal of secularism which aims at binding together the multi-racial, multi religious , multi-lingual and multi-ethnic social fabric of India. This is not; however, to say the working of secularism in India has always has been flawless and smooth. There is a growing feeling in the country that the functioning of secularism has suffered some setbacks. The factors and forces that have been working against the smooth working secularism can be counted very easily.

Communalization of politics and the politicization of religion stay in India. The communal riots on the eve of India's partition , in the wake of pre and post Indira Gandhi's assassination, the construction of ram Temple at Ayodha, the Gujarat riots, or the terroristic attacks engineered from across the borders are all example of communalization of politics. The politicization of religion is seen during elections and thereafter in the formation and running of governments. Though, a great number of political parties demonstrate a secular and non-religious outlook, some others stick on to their religious base. And yet, party manifestoes speak of the protection and promotion of religious and cultural minorities, party tickets are given on religious considerations, ministerial berths are distributed to accommodate certain religions.

In any traditional society as that of ours, the role of religion in our social life is always significant while it influences politics, despite our efforts to secularize. This can hardly be denied. Political leadership does not mind using religion for its political advantage. Political parties do not, at all, ignore the role of religion in their political activities and use it when it is to serve them. The fundamentalists use religion for their sectarian gains, at times to create dissension and promote terrorism. "Identity schemes based on religion have become a major source of conflict not in the international context but since the early 1990s it has also become a challenge for Indian democracy and secularism" (Ravi Ranjan, 206)

Though, the Indian state claims to be secular, it does admit the presence of religion is the public domain. An individual is a citizen and yet he/ she are a person with a religion, for the former is an image in public and the latter, an image in private. As with a religion, an individual is free to profess and propagate and manage one's religion while the state assures him/ her of his/ her of his/ her religion and cultural identities. The state, in fact, does not intervene in his / her religion. "Various strands of political Islam exist, with most of them falling under the umbrella term of Islamism. Graham Fuller has argued for a broader notion of Islamism as a form of identity politics, involving "support for identity, authenticity, broader regionalism, revivalism, and revitalization of the community" (Fuller, Graham E 2003:21)

Ethnicity includes, among many other things, linguistic, nativist and religious affiliations. India's concept of a nation-state implied, immediately after independence, the accommodation of respective languages of numerous diversified areas as well as of regional and nativist feelings, i.e., unity of diversities. The demand to accommodate numerous languages was not regarded as something anti-India or anti-national. It would have been suicidal for the leadership to have sought the imposition of one language over the people speaking different languages, though English language was, immediately after independence, the accepted official language for some times. Hindi was spoken in most regions of the country and that was why it was to be the national language in the future, yet the acceptance and encouragement of the regional were also considering befitting the needs of time. The Indian national Congress had itself proclaimed during the 1920s that after independence, the country would be administratively demarcated on linguistic lines so as to promote and protect diversities. "Some major religious holidays like Diwali (Hindu), Christmas (Christian), Eid (Muslim) and Guru Nanak's birth anniversary (Sikh) are considered national holidays. Private schools offering religious instruction are permitted while government schools are non-religious" (Lipton, Edward P. 2001:22)

The study enhances greater participation at the lower levels and help in rooting democracy deep in Indian soil". This is why, he continues, "national parties had little ideological reluctant to enter each such the agitation for linguistic states". The demand for unilingual system satisfied the advocate of and bounded each such linguistic movement without damaging the linguistic state to the grill of national politics on the other. "Hindu nationalism has been collectively referred to as the expression of political thought, based on the native social and cultural traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Hindu nationalism is a simplistic translation of Hindū Rāṣṭravāda. It is better described as Hindu polity" (web) from single universal principle he continues, several particularistic, even primordial, demands were satisfied. The linguistic states formed in 1950s accommodated ethnicity as expressed in the concept of a host of languages 1960s. the 'sons of soil' began to demand that they be given major economic benefits on the soil of their linguistic states without interference from people belonging to other linguistic communities, The Shiva Sena in Maharashtra and all Assam student Union in Assam were on

ethnicity rather than linguistic reason. National political parties supported such movements to gain electoral allies, though particularize, in the process, came to be encouraged.

The Constitution itself has failed secularism because although articles 48 are couched in secular phrases, it has sanctioned a ban on cow-slaughter, which is a religious sentiment. The unchecked growth of fundamentalism among both, the Hindus and the Muslims, is posing a serious threat to secular character of our policy. Our political parties, including the national parties aid and abet communalism. They do not allow secularism to take precedence over their political interest or others tolerate communalism to retain power. Thus, all are guilty to some extent or other. Top-ranking leaders of the most secular political party of the country had openly led in 1984 anti-Sikh violence, killing thousands of innocent Sikhs by burning them alive in broad day –light and before the eyes of thousands of onlookers. And yet the party continues to claim that it is the standard –bearer of Gandhian values of Ahimsa and non-violence. The main reason for the collapse of the national front Government in October 1990 was the Ramjanma Bhoomi- Babri Masjid issues. Religious zeal on the part of the leadership of another national party had almost rocked the V.P Singh Government. There are several overt and covert ways through which secularism is being diluted. Performance of religious rights and rituals at official functions, misuse of media for propagation of anti-secular material are undermining the very foundations of a secular polity, including official.

India is a land of diverse region. Regional identities, naturally, constitute one of the ethnic elements of our politics. To accommodate regionalism does not amount to accommodating separatism. The ideas of federalism is not unionization of regional disparities, it is rather the acceptance, protection and promotion of diversities as part of the national whole. The rise of the Akali Dal in Punjab, the Dravida Mannetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagan(AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Telagu Desam in Andra Pradesh are examples of regional identities seeking not only recognition but also their protection and promotion as well. Rising almost initially to demand separation, these political parties have settled down to seeking regional identity and regional autonomy under the Indian Union. These regional political parties associated themselves with one or the other national political parties to support them at the national level and enjoy power at the level in the name of regional identity. The concept of nation-state accepts the ideas of regional identity and to that extent accommodates regional autonomy without damaging the Nation's sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

Communal division, based on religious lines, has also been experiential in Indian electoral politics. Secularism is the dire need of the hour for uplifting the nation from the abyss of religious myths and beliefs and waging a united war of all the people as well as political parties against the cancer of communalism and other social evils hindering our country's development and progress. Even though the task appears daunting, the present generation must strive towards moulding the mass opinion and evolve a truly secular and democratic India. Our ultimate aim should be to prove to the world that secularism has nothing to do with religion. It includes chronological, social, and political proportions of Indian democracy.

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