



INDIAN POLITICS: THE CONTESTATIONS BETWEEN SECULARISM AND RELIGION

* *Ruchika Raina*

**Doctoral and ICSSR Fellow, Department of Politics and Governance, Central University of Kashmir, Ganderbal*

Abstract:

In pre-partition India, there was a long history of cultural and religious tolerance, but in fact, Primordial identity, which is deeply embedded in Indian civilizations, leads individuals to place their emotions and sentiments ahead of modern ideals such as secularism. The focus of the study is on how Indian politics has combined secularism with religious nationalism since independence. How did secularism and religious discourses become tools for political leaders to maintain power? How are secularism and religious nationalism's principles transforming into religious radicalism? The key finding of the paper considers that political leadership and power seekers have exploited the altered ideology of political and religious icons to achieve political goals for the majority or minority. Majority nationalism is not giving way to Hindu Rashtra; rather, it is fueling minority nationalism, is another finding of the study. Through official and informal incidents, political pronouncements, and concepts from the past and present in Indian politics, this paper examines the principles of secularism and religious nationalism for Indian political leadership from the past to the present

Keywords: *Secularism, nationalism, religious nationalism, Hinduism, Hindutva*

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Introduction

In the third world, nationalism was imported from the west in the wake of independence movements to oppose colonial rulers, but these colonies lacked the conditions that allowed nationalism to grow in Europe during the establishment of nation- states (Upreti 2006). In contrast to the west's concept of nationalism as 'unity in uniformity', India adopted the concept of 'unity in diversity'. The seeds of western-style nationalism, on the other hand, were sown during the pre-independence period. Savarkar and Jinnah were the first to promote the European/western concept of nationalism in India. While Savarkar presented a model of action and philosophy as well as a conceptual framework for developing homogeneous nationalism, Jinnah claimed that Hindus and Muslims are two independent nations based on their religious affiliations (Chakrabarty 2020).

In general, India's nationalism disputes remained dominated by Hindu-Muslim rivalries, which have existed in Indian politics and society since colonialism. There were 72 communal riots in 1923-26, compared to 16 in the preceding 20 years (Datta 2002). Hindu nationalism took concrete form in the



1920s, and it even harkens back to more nascent nineteenth-century shapes (Jaffrelot 2007). In contrast to the so-called artificially produced nationhood, Tagore attacked exclusive western nationalism and aimed to build inclusive Hindu-Muslim unity. With the partition of British India, philosophy of inclusive nationalism came to an end, and Hindu-Muslim political leadership began to engage in religious nationalism.

The Indian constitution envisions a vision of combined principles of Religious Freedom and Secularism in post-colonial India; however, the pervasive nature of religion in the country, indeed in all South Asian states, has made religion problematic in the private sphere and its abolition unachievable (T. Madan 1997). The core doctrine of the Indian constitution proclaims India as a secular state with no official religion, guaranteeing every person equal rights to profess and propagate any religion under fundamental rights, as stated in the 42nd amendment of 1976. Initially, India's complex and diverse communities reacted to the new scheduled term 'secularism' with a more or less positive attitude. Gradually, with the parallel politics of right-wing agencies and power seekers, the paths to mainstream politics were stretched out, and the ensuing religious nationalism overcame Secularism and became the substitute for power-sharing for all others.

Purpose of the paper

This study addresses the questions: How has secularism and religious nationalism coexisted in Indian politics since independence? How did secularism and religious discourses become instruments for the political mainstream to maintain power, and how were individuals employed in different periods of history? What are the ways in which secularism and tolerance are being transformed into religious radicalization? This paper examines the concepts of nationalism and secularism in the context of India, as well as the study of history, partition, and the current state of religion in India. The paper looked at the history of India and the preservation of primal identities in Indian political philosophy and leadership. To comprehend the changes in the Indian political system, formal and informal cases, political pronouncements, and thoughts of former and contemporary leadership have been analysed and contrasted. Secondary research was conducted using an analytical method to data from internet sources, books, journals, political declarations/statements, and government of India archives.

Politics of Religion: A basis of Indian Secularism

Secularism in India has always faced numerous hurdles and criticisms. According to Rajarajan, the critics of secularism emphasised that the Indian context of secularism is in danger, making it vulnerable to communalist attacks in order to unite the majority Hindu vote-bank, stoking anti-minority feelings (Rajarajan 2007). Madan says, "It is impracticable as a basis for state action either because Buddhism and Islam have been declared state or state-protected religions or because the stance of religious neutrality or equidistance is difficult to maintain since religious minorities do not share the majority's



view of what this entails for the state (T. N. Madan 1987).” As an anti-secularist, Ashish Nandy believes that the ideals of Akbar and Ashoka are more accessible in India than the term ‘secularism’ (Surendranath 2014). Indian state, with a low capacity to secularise its society, travelled a long way with the idea of secularization (Nandy Spring 1995).”

Despite internal criticism and challenges to the concept of Indian secularism, Rajeev Bhargava responded, Secularism, too, has a history made largely by Europeans at one time, then a little later by North Americans, and much later by nonwestern countries. Non-western societies inherited certain versions of secularism from their western equivalents, but not necessarily in the form in which they were received (Bhargava 2007). According to him, Indian secularism is a morally responsible compromise that allows for ongoing revisions in the notion while maintaining the principle of ‘Sarva Dharma Sambhava’ (equal regard for all religions) without creating a tight dividing wall between state and religion.

Gandhi and Savarkar, two key personalities in the Indian independence movement, expressed opposing views on religion and politics. V. D. Savarkar was the original and foremost ideologue of strong Hindu nationalism; later successors such as M. S. Golwalkar followed in his footsteps, although they merely rehashed his arguments rather than advancing them (Heredia, 2009). The idea of Hindutva became overlapped and merged with Hinduism in public projection as the substance of successors was repeated. M.K. Gandhi took the inclusive approach by not separating religion from politics, but rather introducing religious morality into politics; he attempted to build more ethically robust and devout political norms. When it came to different religions, he made room for everyone and promoted the theme ‘Sarva Dharma Sambhava’ to keep India's traditional tolerance and variety alive. Savarkar, on the other hand, classified India only as a Hindu land, and all people whose Fatherland and Holy Land, the pair, is India, as Hindus. Hinduism is as old as the Rig Veda and is related with the Indus Valley (Savarkar 1969). Savarkar distinguished between Hinduism and Hindutva as a religious system and political philosophy, respectively, whereas Gandhi's inclusive approach brought a religious morality to politics rather than political militancy into religious communities (Heredia, 2009). Besides, Jawaharlal Nehru, at times, propagated intolerance and Secularism to condemn the idea of the Hindu state and communal politics. He feared that the concept of communal divides would result in small enclaves in the Indian sub-continent. He, consequently, declared in the speech on August 15, 1947, “As long as I am at the helm of affairs, India will not become a Hindu state”.

Independent India: Realities of Secularism

Despite the constitutional declaration of equal rights, respect, and dignity for all people regardless of religion or caste, India has seen a number of communal riots, lynchings, and massacres at various times and parts of the country, revealing the persistence of exclusion, bigotry, chauvinism, intolerance, and



discrimination in the post-partitioned secular State. 2700 Sikhs were slaughtered in 1984, Kashmiri Pundits were expelled from Kashmir, Gujarat's Godhra riots (2002) resulted in the massacre of over 1000 Muslims, and many other instances demonstrate the violence and antagonism towards distinct religious identities.ⁱ With the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, the case of mainstream hardline Hindu nationalist ideology was brought to light. The poisoned sectarian climate, as well as the massive loss of life and property, put the Indian constitution's cornerstones of secularism and the rule of law to the test.

Earlier, Vajpayee attempted to secularise the BJP and avoided addressing issues relating to Hinduism's one dominant faith. Subsequently, after 2014 general elections, RSS workers began campaigns against interfaith marriages (especially Love-Jihaad), cow-slaughtering, and promoted Hindu nationalism (Hindu Rashtra) and conversion to Hinduism (Ghar-Vapsi) with aggressive chants of 'Bharat me rehna hoga toh Jai shree ram kehna hoga' (one have to recite 'Hail Lord Rama' to live in India). Following that, lynching practises relating to 'Love-Jihaad' and 'Cow-slaughtering' have increased. A mob in Bikaner, Rajasthan, lynched a 22-year-old guy in an alleged love jihad case.ⁱⁱ 'Love jihad' is a term coined by the political and religious right to describe an alleged phenomenon in which Muslim men entice Hindu women to marry them and convert to Islam by any means necessary.ⁱⁱⁱ While announcing his intention to enact a law against 'love jihad', Uttar Pradesh's chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, also declared that Muslim men who commit the crime should be killed.^{iv} Similarly, incidences of cow vigilantism have proliferated under the guise of cow protection being a fundamental Hindu responsibility. According to an IndiaSpend analysis from 2017, Muslims are the target of almost half of all cow-related attacks, accounting for 84 percent of those killed in 60 occurrences.^v On September 28, 2015, an enraged mob killed Mohammad Akhlaq, a native of Bisara village near Dadri in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, and badly injured his 22-year-old son, believing he had butchered a cow and was in possession of beef (Gupta 2019).

Opposition politicians from various political parties appear to have attempted to sway public opinion by participating in religious rites. According to liberal analysts, the promotion of 'soft Hindutva' through temple visits and arithmetic, emphasising the Brahmin ancestry, and referencing the Gita against the historic INC's ideas of secularism, pluralism, and an inclusive government has become the campaigning trend for political success.^{vi}

In turn, the historical judgements on the 'Ayodhya Verdict' and the 'Triple-talaq Act' have stoked discontent among various Muslim sects. Arvind Kejriwal, the Delhi Chief Minister and founder of the AamAadmi Party (AAP), announced "facilitating free pilgrimage for Delhi's senior citizens to the Ram temple in Ayodhya and asserted that his government follows 10 principles inspired by the concept of 'Ram Rajya' to serve the people" on the lines of soft Hindutava politics.^{vii} Triple Talaq was declared



unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in August 2017. The Supreme Court, in a 3-2 decision, overturned the centuries-old practise of a Muslim man being able to divorce his wife by saying the word 'talaq' three times.^{viii} The AIMPLB argues that uncodified Muslim personal law is not subject to constitutional judicial review, and that these are fundamental Islamic practises protected under Article 25 of the Constitution.^{ix}

Analysis

The arguments on nationalism, minorities, and secularism in India were held by Indian liberation warriors and thinkers of the new India. Nehru opposed the development of a state based on religion and advocated for a secular state that treated all religions equally. He presented modern India with a secular and economic foundation as well as an international view. But, alongside covert efforts to promote cultural nationalism, parallel right-wing political agencies with the genetics of fundamental identity politics were always there. From pre-partition to today, primordial orientations have manifested themselves wherever possibilities arose, whether in caste/communal politics or aspirations, in both majority and minority populations.

Political use of religion has devolved into an intolerant and hostile account of political party workers on the ground. Political party personnel have no actual grasp of the party's platform or even the basic principles of their ideology's icons. It is quite distasteful to cow vagilants that Savarkar believed in cow protection, not in worshipping which is an insult to humanity and divinity (Sampath, 2019). The admirers of Savarkar continue to labour in the direction of their political leadership for political purposes only, disregard to basic ideals of icons.

Right-wing followers appear to be perplexed by the duality of Hindu Rashtra and Ramrajya at the moment. Hindu Rashtra is an exclusive notion based on the Hindutva political ideology, whereas Ramrajya is an inclusive platform for all Indians regardless of caste, colour, or faith. The Ramrajya is depicted in Tulsi Das Ramcharit Manas (Ramayana) as follows:

रामराज्यवासी त्वम्, प्रोच्छ्रयस्व ते शिरम्,
न्यायार्थं युद्धस्व, सर्वेषु सम चरा
परिपालय दुर्बलम्, विद्धि धर्मं वरम्
प्रोच्छ्रयस्व ते शिरम्, रामराज्यवासी त्वम्^x

You, the locals of Ramrajya (The Lord Rama's State), with great morality, keep your heads high, struggle for justice, treat everyone equally, defend and help the marginalised since you are the natives of Ramrajya, says the quatrain above. In contrast to Hindu Rashtra, which promotes the political well-being of a single faith, Ramrajya envisions a rule committed to everyone, particularly the poor and



disenfranchised. As a result, amid the diverse Indian society, one can believe that the Ramrajya lean towards secularism. The peaceful development of all religions, according to Gandhi, makes India a divine nation.

Political leadership and power seekers exploit the altered ideology of political and religious icons to achieve political goals for the majority or minority. The developing hatred between different cultures and faiths in Indian society, fueled by vested political interests, has resulted in ideological blocs that are immovable and rock-solid. The consequences of this can be seen in the Triple-Talaq act. The statute made immediate talaq (Talaq-e-biddat) of any type (spoken, written, or with digital assistance) illegal, which is the biggest blow to Islamic practises like polygamy and male dominance. However, it experienced reprisal of various types as a result of previously existing anti-secular propaganda that led to majority cultural and religious dominance. Furthermore, the developing culture of lynching and political silence exacerbated minorities' mistrust of the dominant authority.

In a secular constitutional system, majority nationalism is not giving way to Hindu Rashtra; rather, it is fueling minority nationalism. One can presume that the stark contrasts between diverse cultural and religious nationalisms will prevent these communities from embracing constitutional or reasonable ideals. India's current politics is re-creating the origins of two-nation idea, perhaps even more so this time.

Conclusion

Secularism is required in India as a counterweight to extremist political and social elements. According to Bhargava (2017), Secularism, like many other ideas, has evolved with time, and no modern state has inherited any ideal in its original form, which is true in the concept of Indian Secularism also. Indian Secularism has to evolve with diverse nature of societal arrangements which can be endorsed by the Indian traditional ideals of 'Sarva Dharma Sambhava' (equal respect for every religion) and 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family) without erecting strict wall of separation between State and religion, and elucidating global outlook, respectively. The traditional ideals, along with Gandhi, are still prevailing in the values of India and Indian culture, politics, within a religion or without it, which promotes inclusiveness and togetherness. Without a doubt, India currently stands on the precipice of primitive edges, with inadequate political and emotional unity, due to the vested interests of many political groupings. The constitutional values of social development, secularism, and modernism have been harmed by religious radicalization with intolerance and extremism, seeking to divide and return to the affiliated religious administration. However, in the age of multiculturalism and pluralism, this would be illogical. Nations founded solely on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or language is also attempting to position themselves as secular and tolerant of multiculturalism. The only practicality is to get political mileage from the religious social and political fabrics that furnish the State



with its authoritarian foundation. Communal riots, mob violence, and lynching are all the product of shattered sociopolitical fronts, with the normalisation of hatred as the end result. If not addressed seriously, the narrative of enmity toward each other will intensify diverse religious and cultural nationalism movements inside Indian society by drawing back the essence of Indian secularism into divided identities, more than Hindu-Muslim.

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Endnote

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ⁱⁱ Zee media bureau, May 03, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pragya Tiwari, Opinion|Women Rights, Aljazeera, November 30, 2020.

^{iv} Ibid.

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^{vii} <https://www.ndtv.com/delhi-news/arvind-kejriwal-announces-free-ayodhya-ram-temple-visit-for-delhis-elderly-2388183>

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^x <http://www.shriramcharitmanas.in/p/home-page.html>

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