Secularism and politics in post-liberal india.

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This article analyzes the concept of secularism and its relevance in post-liberal India. Rise of right-wing forces in post liberal India had brought a challenge to the secular construction of society. Secularism at theoretical level implies separation of religion and politics. This paper attempts to study the relevance of secularism in South Asia with special reference to India and highlights how communalization of politics and society has put forth a challenge to the concept of secularism ultimately leading to marginalization of minorities from mainstream politics. In retreat of secular state in India after 1980's rise of caste and caste politics has crucial dimension analyzed in this paper. I would like to divide this article in two sections, first section will deal with conceptual understanding of term Secularism and second section will deal with challenges to secularism from 1980 onwards.

India achieved its independence in 1947 with wounds of partition, where violence in name of identity politics was best manifested and intensity of violence was much high to trouble relationship of both communities in post independent India. Identity politics based on religion started marking its appearance in colonial period and should be in colonial policies. *Gyanendra Pandey (1990),* argues that beginning of communalism in India should be in colonial policies of divide and rule through introduction of census in 1871, introduction of separate electorate in 1909, Communal Award 1932, which led to emergence of conscious religious identity. In short need for construction of Secularism was felt with arrival of colonial modernity. It is generally understood that, therefore secularism was constructed to oust religion and religious forces from mainstream model of politics.

There exists considerable difference between Secularism of west where it emerged out of historical processes of Enlightenment and Reformation movement but in India no such reform movement has occurred, and secular construction of India was based upon model of eliminating identity politics based on a particular religion and to promote model of composite culture. Secularism construction in India implies mutual respect for all religion i.e., *sarvadharma Sam bhava* and no discrimination on basis of religion. i.e., *Dharma nirpekshita* or religious neutrality.

Considering theoretical perspectives on Secularism, *Ashish Nandy (1988),* argues that Nehruvian construction of Secularism which is a western conception upon traditional Indian society has led to the elimination of traditional forces from public sphere and by doing so vacant space was created which has been occupied by cultural forces leading to movement of cultural resistance and thereby witnessing process of communalization of politics. Secularism according to Nandy is a mere theoretical construction

far away from practical realities of India. According to Nandy, religion as a faith is way of life and on the other hand constructed ideologies. Elimination of religion in a diversified complex society of India which historically being controlled by religion by mere construction of western conception of secularism was unjust. Since religion is determining factor of life of individuals in India so complete separation of religion from politics is not possible.

Complex diversities in India had forced state to provide support to minorities to balance democratic processes and this marks contradiction with concept of Secularism. Simultaneously under such a situation state came under critique of retrogressive forces. Nandy further argues that **Modernity first propagated constructed ideologies and then came secularism to meet its challenge to the ideologies of modern statecraft. (Quoted in Bhargava, 1998:523).** Here modern statecraft implies scientific management by state institutions. According to Nandy, there has been no secular construction but only a mere management of it by state.

T. Madan has too contested conceptualization of secularism on the ground, **that if secularism is viewed as shared credo of life, it is impossible in South Asia. Second, that it is impracticable as a basis for state action. Finally, it is impotent as a blueprint for the foreseeable future. (Quoted in Bhargava, 1998:522).** Madan is of the opinion that secularism which implies separation of religion from politics is impossible in Indian context as Indians in totality are strong believers in faith. Further so, it is impossible for state under such circumstances to maintain equidistance with religion and religious forces and thereby Secularism is not worthy to resist challenge to religious fundamentalism.

Rajeev Bhargava holds a different notion in relation to conceptualization of secularism, as he defends concept of Indian secularism by advocating theory of principal distancing. Bhargava argues that Indian secularism is different as it has not emerged as like western conception of intra religious crisis but rather it has evolved in context of inter religious crisis. Bhargava argues that Indian Secularism does not imply complete exclusion of religion and politics nor one sided exclusion as operational in France but Bhargava argues, **Indeed, the relation between religion and politics require neither fusion nor disengagement , but what can be called principled distance.(Bhargava,1998:493).**Bhargava has entirely shifted debate of secularism, as he is of opinion Indian secularism is different from western conceptualization of exclusion and rests upon notion of principal distancing which implies that state can be both interventionist and noninterventionist.

Bhargava agrees with first set of Nandy and Madan formulation that separation of religion and politics is impossible in cultural context of India but argues that Indian model of Secularism is not based on complete model of separation of religion and politics but is in entire difference with western model. Bhargava then states separation is essential between religion and politics as if these two are not separated can thwart autonomy. Separation is also essential from perspective of equality and to avoid concentration of power in single hands. Bhargava also notices that State has coercive power, and no state can handle religious issues in coercive manner, and this implies that separation between two institutions of religion and politics is essential. Also, for mere existence of ordinary life and to maintain minimum level of personal conduct, separation between religion and politics is essential pre-requisite. After justifying separation between two,

argues that complete exclusion is not possible so both can be related by following conception of principal distancing. Under such a model of secularism state can be both non- interventionist and interventionist which implies that at first stance, state will maintain religious neutrality and secondly state can counter evils of religions by invoking legislation. Religion according to Bhargava is always not progressive but it certainly follows retrogressive practices as for ex caste system in Hindu religion is a retrogressive practice and is intra religion domination that needs to be countered. Secondly to maintain democratic balance it needs to provide protection to minorities to avoid inter religious disputes. This is where Indian form of secularism is unique in character and unlike from western model of secularism. It is on basis of Bhargava model of secularism argument of Madan and Nandy can be contested as they are of opinion that secular states are anti-religious state, as they had not differentiated between Indian model of secularism and Western model of Secularism.

 Here I would like to argue that need for secularism in India was not only felt to manage inter religion dispute unlike west where it emerged to resolve intra religion dispute, but it was also formulated to counter intra religious domination and this marks the relevance of Indian secularism, as largely it is understood in context of complete exclusion but that is not the case with Indian secularism. It neither follows complete wall separation thesis by provoking complete exclusion nor one sided exclusion but is based on principal distancing to resolve both inter religious and intra religious domination.

From perspective of inter religion and intra religion dispute concept of secularism is still relevant as it provides a balance to democratic process by providing protection to minorities against majoritarian exploitation. Art 25-28 of Indian constitution provides specific example in Indian constitution where state has intervened in matter of religion. I would like to examine in detail Article 25-28 of Indian constitution which provide protection to Indian minorities which is an exclusive feature of Indian Secularism and would like to justify construction of Article 25-28 considering attack by retrogressive forces.

Article 25: Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice, and propagation of religion.

Article 26: Freedom to manage religious affairs.

Article 27: Freedom as to payment of taxes for promotion of any religion.

Article 28: Freedom as to attendance at religious instruction or religious worship in certain educational institution.

India is having complex diversity and to provide protection to minorities and to maintain diversities constitution provides for Art 25-28, where minorities are given protection and support against majoritarian religion. This has been debated and established as evidence by academicians, scholars, and retrogressive forces to argue that complete exclusion is not possible. However, I would like to argue that construction of Art 25-28 has been constructed to avoid and counter inter-religious domination which provides positive freedom and protection to culture of minorities. Indian secularism is not aiming at complete exclusion of religion which has been understood by number of academicians and scholars but is based upon a unique model of providing protection to minorities as well as also aiming at diluting intra religious domination.

Another characteristic feature of Indian secularism is that it contests intra religious domination or it opposes religious dominance in any form. Caste has been a recurrent problem in India, existing for several centuries. Hindu religious order contains series of evil practices in name of caste in which untouchability occupies center stage. With emergence of social reformers like Jyothiba Phule and Dr B.R Ambedkar intra religious dominance was highlighted so construction of secularism is essential from this perspective to eradicate or to counter retrogressive trends of any religion and was being done through construction of Untouchability offence Act 1955 and through Affirmative action.

Section II

In this section I would like to discuss major challenges to Secularism in post independent India from 1980 onwards. Though I would not deny that challenges to secularism were not there before 1980's but were miniscule in nature. Democracy is a number game where each political party contests each other on basis of number. Since independence, Caste has been master signifier of Indian politics. According to **Kothari**, what he calls as congress system was perfectly based upon model of client- master relationship in which certain zamindars were acting as clientele for congress and major vote bank of congress consisting of Brahmins, Muslims, and Harijans. However, from 1970 onwards politics started witnessing a shift, owing to change in nature of society and economy. Attempts made by Nehru through Abolition of Zamindari and by Ceiling Act, followed by Green Revolution and white revolution has brought about certain mobility in status of lower castes. Though I would not deny that large number of classes remained outside ambit of mobility, but it had provided space for mobility to a limited section of lower castes. From 1980 onwards these lower castes also started demanding share in power structure. With Rise of Mulayam Singh Yadav, Kanshiram and Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh shift in politics became obvious though their leadership emerged during and after 1990's. Fuel was added by the Mandalization of politics by V.P Singh, introducing reservation in jobs, because of which change witnessed in Hindu-Social and Moral order.

Right wing forces, deeply got disturbed because of these changes, as splitting of Hindus in number of castes and weakening of Caste ideology was major concern for them. Reservation in many ways has contested dominant caste Hegemony. To dismantle emerging caste politics right wing forces resorted to methodology of communalism which was an attempt to divert attention from issue of caste. In this context religion marked its appearance from the backdoor. Cultural Resistance in India has its roots in element of Caste. It emerged as a result for sustaining dominant caste ideology and to carry upon project of homogenization, inter-religious dispute was propagated.

Political Party, Congress was attacked by rendering it as Pseudo Secular party in famous Shah Bano case. Though I would not deny that Congress was too responsible for polarization of politics as after 1980's. **The Congress responded by appropriative communal themes, especially themes of Hindu hegemony that appeal to the Hindi heartland. (Hasan,1990:29). This sort of strategy catalyzed communal sentiments and provided the Congress an opportunity to become the chief spokesman of majoritarian interests by curiously concluding that in doing so Congress was protecting India from the dangers of communal strife and disunity. (Hasan, 1990:30).** However, this strategy did not work in favor of Congress and again Congress returned to Muslim votes and to woo them supported

conservative Muslim groups. This can be interpreted as evidence where Congress not followed conception of principal distancing. Further Congress to balance democratic situation and to accommodate Hindu sentiments supported Ram Shila processions.

After 1980 right wing parties started agitating on cultural issues and fusion of religion into public sphere underwent on its way. Mandalization of politics, introduction of Reservation, and Liberalization of economy has led to shift of traditional base of congress. Right wing parties started gaining support from new middle class and in particularly started gaining support from those groups whose position started witnessing challenge on account of reservation, caste leadership and liberalization of economy. Hindu fundamentalism was a direct corollary of these long-term changes since 1980's. This is how Hindu community identity started gaining momentum and identity politics marked its appearance in public sphere. Politics of Communalization leading to destruction of Babri Masjid, can be seen as a reaction of growing social change within fold of Hinduism on account of ascendancy of Caste politics and due to Reservation, which has brought a challenge to system of hierarchies operating with in Hinduism. Hence Communalization of politics has inextricable link with caste and basis of inter religious dispute between Hindus and Muslims in India.

From here, I would like to argue that Caste is master signifier of Indian politics. Electoral politics in India is determined on basis of caste. Right wing forces are largely dominated by dominant castes and propagates dominant caste ideology and is aiming at project of homogenization of Hindus. Project of homogenization of Hindus is essential to liquidate caste politics. This project of homogenization requires propagation of cultural symbols, and this has been done by propagating notion of Ram or issue of construction of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. Secondly it projects Muslims as others who are differentiated to Hindus and threat to right wing conceptualization of nation or Hindu Rashtra. In this context Secularism is unsuitable to retrogressive elements as firstly it challenges intra-religious domination within folds of Hindu religion by challenging ideology of caste. It is in this way Secularism challenges dominant caste version of Hinduism. Secondly it provides protection to minorities to whom right wing forces considers as others.

These two sets of formulations in its entirety opposes version of right-wing forces, so to liquidate secular values, attack on second formulation has always been a basic strategy of right-wing politicians. So communal riots, mob lynching projecting cultural ideal is being done to provide a balance to intra religion domination. Therefore, it can be argued it is not inter-religious dispute that has been a major challenge to Secularism, but to balance intra religious disputes existing on basis of caste to maintain dominant caste ideology by propagating inter religion dispute has been major challenge to Secularism. Though prima facie it seems major challenge to secularism is from inter religious dispute of Hindus and Muslims, but which is not the actual reality as what is evident from the backdoor that inter religious dispute is just being constructed to divert mass consciousness from intra religion domination and to keep process of Hindu Homogenization intact.

Therefore, major challenge to Secularism in India is not to be fixed in context of existence of multiple religion or on account of their differences but I would like to argue, that major challenge to Secularism should be fixed in practicing of caste. To shift caste discourse, religious discourse has been fused into public sphere in which Media too has worked in alignment with right wing forces as large media houses are being dominated by upper castes, in fusing religion into public sphere. Since Secularism, contests intra religious domination which is primarily caste hierarchy and since secularism is inextricably linked with caste and is a threat for dominant caste ideology, so it is consistently being challenged through propagating cultural symbols and by adopting methodology of violence, with sole purpose of eliminating caste discourse by creating communal propaganda.

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