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RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND INDIAN SECULARISM : THE PRESENT CRISIS

Indian secularism emerged as a basic political ideology in the course of the Indian national struggle for independence. It emerged as the concept of Secular Nationalism in opposition to the nationalism based on the interests of one or the other of the religious communities, therefore also called communalism. The Hindu Nationalism with its goal of "Akhand Hindustan" and drawing its strength from Hindu revivalism appeared with militancy in the latter half of the first decade of the century in the Congress in opposition to the weakness of the Liberal Nationalism of the earlier period. With its weakening in the Congress it found organized expression in the Hindu Mahasabha and later in the RSS; and the two-nations theory that India consists of the Hindu and the Islamic nations which is to be separated at independence found organized expression in the Muslim League. The idea of Secular Nationalism became dominant in the Indian national movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. It provided an ideological framework within which the many religious communities of India as well as the plurality of traditional linguistic caste and ethnic cultures (in the formation of which one or other of the religions had played a dominant role) could participate together with the adherents of secular ideologies like Liberalism and Socialism (which emerged in India in the framework and impact of modern humanism of the west and mediated through western power and English education). Therefore dialogue between Religion and Secular Humanism as well as between Religions began to take place within the national context on the meaning, values and goals of modern Indian nationhood.

Gandhi represented the long history of Renascent Hinduism from Raja Rammohan Roy through Swami Vivekananda to Gandhi himself, in which Hindu religion and culture were being renewed in interaction with Western Christianity and Modern secular culture; and Nehru represented the dynamic of European Enlightenment and the Liberal Democratic and Marxian Socialist ideologies which emerged in its ethos. Thus India's Secular Nationalism was a dialogic integration between Renascent

religion and Secular ideologies. The middle class who were in the leadership of the national movement was the bearer of this idea of Secular Nationalism for pluralistic India.

When India became independent it was this middle class committed to Secularism that drew up the Constitution of the Indian Nation-state. They imposed the idea of secular nationalism on the Indian peoples because they were convinced that it was the best basis for unity of pluralistic India and the best path towards building a new society based on the values of liberty, equality and justice. They also hoped to build indigenous roots for it in the various religions and cultures of India by reforming them from within and legal intervention and developing a composite culture supportive of a State which is common to all peoples living in India equally and of a modernized society with dignity and justice for all. Ram Jethmalani specify the clauses in the Constitution defining Indian Secularism in his article in the Indian Express (Feb. 14, 1993) on Clearing Confusion: "The most important component of secularism of the Indian variety is to be found in Articles 14, 15 (2) and 16 (2). These Articles compel equality of all citizens before the law and entitle them to equal protection of the laws. They outlaw discrimination against any citizen on the ground only of his religion, whether it be in the matter of public employment or access to public places and even charity. Another facet of it was in Article 19 (1) (a) which granted freedom of speech and expression and article 25 which preserved the practice and propagate religion. Of course this right was subject to reasonable restrictions in the interest of public order, morality and health and the power of the State to legislate for social welfare " Of course the partition of India and the establishment of Pakistan as an Islamic state and the Hindu-Muslim riots which happened in the wake of independence did strengthen the idea of Hindu State in India. But the assassination of Gandhiji by the advocates of Hindu Rashtra boomeranged and Gandhi's martyrdom and Nehru's leadership in exposing the Fascist nature of Hindutva reestablished Indian Secularism as the basis of Indian polity and nationhood.

Nehru's characterization of Hindutva of the RSS as Fascist assumes that Hindu Nationalism is one way of relating itself to the modern western religious cum secular impact on India. For, fascism too is a western ideology. In fact Hindutva is a reaction in self –

defence of the traditional religious and social structure utilizing the technocratic and political power-means imported from the modern West. Savarkar asked for "Hinduisation of Indian politics and militarisation of Hinduism" to establish and defend Akhand Hindustan.

Now, how do we account for the emergence to new strength, of RSS-VHP-BJP parivar and their Hindutva ideology after four decades of the working of Indian Secularism to the extent of threatening the secular pluralistic basis of Indian polity? Their new strength is clear in their electoral successes and the appeal of their agitation and their new confidence about coming to power as rulers of India. It is their new vitality and popular support in the country of Gandhi and Nehru that needs interpretation.

There are, no doubt, many reasons for a complex phenomenon like this. Here I mention a few, actually three.

1. The Spiritual Vacuum created by a Closed Secularism

Recently Rustom Bharucha's The Question of Faith (published as No. 3 Tracts for the Times by Orient Longman 1993) raises the question of the relation of Indian Secularism to religion as Faith. The Editor in the Preface says that the Tract "polemises against a form of narrow sectarian secularism which refuses to be sensitive to tradition and faith" and argues that secularism needs to be rethought taking religious faith seriously, that "only then can Secularism reclaim the ideological space which Fundamentalists are threatening to take over, only then can Secularists capture the minds of the people" (p. vii). And the author Bharuch explains, "If by Secularism we mean a total avoidance of religious matters, the secular weapons may not be enough" to fight fundamentalism. The point is that "if we do not intervene in the debates concerning the interpretation of religion, we are simply playing into the hands of fundamentalists. Merely non-anti-religious terms will only strengthen the deadlock" (p. 4). The author discusses melas and lilas, Aanantha Murthy's novels, Lohia and Gandhi, to show that there is religion as faith which is distinct from religions as ideology and it is an ally of political secularism. His conclusion is that "a reductive Secularism that has tended to equate almost anything religious with a fundamentalist purpose" is not the best way to resist the onslaught of fundamentalism. Therefore he asks for discrimination

between terms like Religious, Communal and Fundamentalism (p. 88). He adds that encountering fundamentalism on rigidly political lines is not enough; "alternatives have to be explored within the larger secular drives of neo-religious forms and philosophies" (p. 92). In this connection he speaks of the significance of the Liberation Theology movements in all religions and notes the significance of "the radical religious movements of our past history" especially the Bhakti.

I have already indicated that the tradition of Neo Hindu movements represented by Gandhi has been a religious force behind Indian Secularism. Nehru could recodify Hindu personal law only because the Neo-Hindu movements had prepared the Hindu religious mind for it. Nehru saw no such neo-Muslim movement in Islam to touch Muslim personal law. The Neo-Hinduism of Sri Narayana Guru challenging caste structure religiously was the basis of a good deal of the radical secular politics of social justice in Kerala. But Indian secularism in recent years has been too closed to take any real interest in religious movements of renewal and denied religious spirituality of spiritually based morality any role in "public" life. Alternatively, it has made secularism to mean keeping as vote-banks a federation of fundamentalist / conservative religious communities each resisting any social change towards equality in its traditionally sanctioned social structure and showing indifference to the reforming liberal elements working in these communities. One may point to the politics of the Congress of the Left to illustrate it. Actually Indian Secularists in the recent past did not care to put down roots in the indigenous soil of the religious or vernacular linguistic cultures of the country. As a result, when electoral politics enlarged the political community of India by bringing the groups other than the middle class into it, it produced popular leaders more inclined to the traditions. That is to say the dialogue between Religion and Secularism came to a stop leaving the field to closed secularism on the one hand and revival of communally oriented fundamentalist religion and culture on the other.

2. Religious Fundamentalism

Whether all religious fundamentalisms emerge out of reaction to closed secularism or not is debatable. It may also arise from the insecurity of faith when its religious expressions are faced with the

necessity to change.   Whatever its origin, religious fundamentalism which rejects change in religion or its social structure ends up by isolating itself from the influences of other religions or of the values of secular humanism, and in the long run tends to make religious community centered on its self-righteousness and eventually its self-interest.

In the many quotes from Bharucha, religious fundamentalism, almost becomes the basic enemy of Indian secularism.   Therefore, we must define Religious Fundamentalism a little more clearly.

The word 'Fundamentalists' came into vogue in 1920 in relation to the Christian group who earlier published a set of 12 booklets under the title Fundamentals.   These booklets opposed the application of modern critical historical approach to the Bible and the traditional dogmas of Christianity, because in their opinion, it would destroy their suprarational and supernatural elements which belong to their very essence.   Thus Fundamentalism and Modernism, Faith and Reason, were separated into two water-tight compartment.   It contrast, some other believers maintained that the interaction between them was essential to discriminate the truly suprarational elements necessary to religious faith from irrational superstitions which distort faith; that it was also necessary to make faith reasonable and to express it intelligently to the moderns so as to offer them a faith that liberates reason from becoming idolatrous and inhuman.

This debate was crucial in distinguishing and relating scientifically objective history and the mythical interpretations of it expressing the divine and subjective meaning of the same for the community of faith.   This was crucial especially in relation to the Genesis account of Creation, story of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus in the Gospels and the N.T. accounts in which the hope of the consummation of the Kingdom of God in the future was expressed. The debate included also the distinction and relation between the history of the Church as part of the general religious history of humankind and as God's elect community as the universal sign of Divine salvation for all, etc.

In the 80's when the Fundamentalists emerged in USA with control of the electronic media and formed the electronic church, they also formed the Moral Majority movement with a conservative ideology

backing Reagan's policies of "laissez-faire" economics and of dismantling social welfare entitlement and of opposition to equal rights for blacks and women. At this point Religious Fundamentalism became a political ideological religion.

I have related this history of Christian fundamentalism to clarify what fundamentalism means and to show that it is justifiable to characterize as fundamentalist similar movements in any religion which buttress traditional beliefs and social order from reform or change through communal isolation from critical reason or secular humanism or through search for political power to destroy democratic freedoms and social change in society and culture.

In India, the use of the word Fundamentalism has developed certain special nuances which are worth noting.

V.M. Tarkunde, himself a Radical Humanist, in his JP Memorial Lecture on "Communalism and Human Rights" (PUCL Bulletin June 1993) clearly distinguishes Fundamentalism from Communalism. He says, "Fundamentalism consists of uncritical adherence to ancient beliefs and practices. Communalism on the other hand consists of animosity of persons belonging to one religion toward persons of another religion. A fundamentalist need not be communalist at all . . . On the other hand a communalist need not be a fundamentalist at all . . . Fundamentalism requires to be opposed by all Humanists and Democrats, but that opposition should not be mixed up with fundamentalist bodies may be helpful to us in promoting communal amity in the country." Tarkunde is right in distinguishing between them, but he underestimates the inability of fundamentalism to embrace people of other religions or secular humanists within their theological or community circle predisposing them theocratic politics in the interests of "true religion and virtue," and I would add he underestimates the role of fundamentalism in strengthening both Muslim and Hindu communalism in India.

Fundamentalist Hindu opposition to change of the traditional Hindu social order had played a large part in the creation and strengthening of the RSS ideology of opposition to other religions and to movements of Hindu reformation. This is clear from what Golwalker says in his writings on Hindutva and from Lohia's essay on Hinduism which he wrote soon after the assassination of Gandhiji. Golwalker says, that

Hindutva is hostile to Islam because "Islam was the first religion to interfere with our social organization of chaturvarna... Islam in India challenged our scheme of class-caste organization. All post-Islamic sects tried to counter Islam by seeking to take the wind out of Islamic sails by themselves making the same challenge. That is why these sects have now become a source of national division and weakness." Here the RSS chief's opposition to Islam, the sufi and bhakti sects and by extension to Christianity, Liberal Democracy and Socialism, are all one piece. This led Golwalker to characterize those "who advocated Hindu-Muslim unity as necessary to fight for swaraj" as the perpetrators of the "greatest treason in our society" (Yogindra Sikand: Religion and Religious Nationalism, Frontier 9-5-92). Lohia writing on the motivation behind Gandhi's assassination coupled Hindutva hostility to Islam and to the democratic transformation of Hindu society. He wrote, "No Hindu can be genuinely tolerant to Muslim unless he acts at the same time actively against caste and property and for women." To Lohia, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi was not so much an episode of Hindu-Muslim fight as of the war between the Liberal and the Fanatical in Hinduism" ("Hinduism" in Fragments of a World Mind). That is, Hindutva's Communalism is closely related to its Fundamentalism. M.N. Srinivas makes a distinction between Orthodoxy and Fundamentalism. He sees that substantial numbers of Hindus have moved into the middle class who have been most affected by the process of secularization.

This process has been strengthened, not necessarily by the philosophy of secularism, but by the "recent great developments in communications, transport, urbanization and education." As a result, "ideas of purity and impurity which were so pervasive in the lives of Hindus have become much weaker; and in the life-style of the middle class they are "becoming confined to rites of passage, pilgrimages and a few festivals; Middle class from other religions are also affected, but Purity-impurity ideas were weaker among them initially." Unemployment has added economic insecurity and the religious uprooting. "This provides the ideal soil for sowing fundamentalist seeds." But he adds: "Fundamentalism has to be distinguished from Orthodoxy; for while the latter involves strict adherence to tradition, the former interprets traditions for political or other purposes" (Towards a New Philosophy, in Times of India 9-7-93). But in the light of the history of Christian fundamentalism, Srinivas' Orthodoxy is Fundamentalism

and his Fundamentalism is the ideology of Communalism. Purity-impurity ideas were the religious foundation of caste and it is the return to it by the middle class for spiritual and economic stability that makes for their shift from Secularism to Hindutva. The middle class of other religions may also be showing a new passion to the securities of their religious tradition. In their case the sense of being part of a minority community may add to their insecurity.

It is necessary, however, to state that scholars like Ashish Nandy see no genuinely religious motivation in Communalisms, and, therefore, avoids relating them to Fundamentalism which has a basic religious concern in its motivation. Hindutva like Closed Secularism itself "assumes the world to be a desacralised place, where only the laws of the market, history, judiciary and empirical social sciences work." It is "blatantly non-Indian and recognizable as illegitimate child of colonialism," which introduced the idea of priority of State over Religion against the Indian concept of building the State on a "secondary allegiance of the state" as in the case of Ashoka and Akbar and in modern India Mahatma Gandhi. It is the somatization of Hinduism in the 19th century that now "reaches its final form in political Hinduism - Brahmanic, steam-rolling . . . The ultimate product of this process was Nathuram Vinayak Godse . . ." In Nandy's opinion, serious believers cannot use their faith instrumentally as ideology. Hinduism is a Faith; Hindutva an Ideology." It is Secularism's disowned double, the poor man's Statism (Indian Express Feb. 1990). Therefore, the tradition of Hindu tolerance practiced within a world assumed to be the realm of the sacred, has no relevance for Hindutva as for Secularism. Here we are back to the necessity of religious faith dialoging with both Secularism and Hindutva to convert them to a genuine basis of what Nandy calls "the plural patriotism on which the most important strand of the freedom movement was based, and is no culturally orphan." I suppose he means a return to Gandhism.

3. The Tension Between Religions on Conversion

Lastly I should mention briefly a third factor contributing to the crisis of Indian Secularism - namely the tension between Hinduism and the missionary religions on the question of conversion, which continues unresolved. Not only the Hindutva of the RSS but also the Neo-Hinduism of the Gandhian line considers the mission of conversion of people from one religion to another as religious imperialism and destructive

of inter-religious harmony. Recently H.V. Sheshadri the general secretary of the RSS issued a commentary on the RSS call to the minorities. In it he makes the point that Hindutva being by nature "all embracing and looks upon every sincere religious and spiritual pursuit with equal respect, is the opposite of Fundamentalism" which is intolerant of plurality. Fundamentalism, he says, "represents a mind-set confined within one Prophet, one Book, a single way of worship" which by nature leads to the "concept of believers going to heaven and non-believers going to hell, with a religious duty cast upon its followers to convert the rest by any means whatsoever" (Indian Express, 1993).

The more liberal Krishan Kant, Governor of Andra in his address to the Assembly of the National Council of Churches in 1991 and following it in a Press interview with Neerge Choudhury (Indian Express 21 Oct, 1991) "called for an end to religious conversion in the country not by law but by a voluntary consensus of religious leaders," because in his opinion communal strife in India is closely linked to conversion. His main argument is as follows: "The word Hindu which had essentially geographic and cultural meaning began to acquire religious connotations" and communal overtones when missionary religions began converting the untouchables and the lower castes of Hindu society with promise of their liberation from caste-indignities. It produced in Hindus the feeling that "in an age of competitive politics" in which power-sharing is "determined by numbers" conversion would reduce them to insignificance. In any case, says Kant, conversion did not bring liberation to the converted people from caste, because caste is not just a Hindu phenomenon but an Indian reality and is practiced by all religions in India, So the "social logic" of conversion is no more there. But it is with conversion that the "false concept of majority and minority emerged, making Hinduism a Religion and Caste only a Hindu phenomenon"; and only the stoppage of conversion will be "a starting point for harmony in society and for lessening mental insecurity, fanaticism and the prevalent climate of confrontation."

The fundamental law of religious freedom in the Constitution of India includes the freedom to "propagate" religion. But the debate on it was endless. It was the announcement by Mukherji and D'Sousa that the Christian Community had decided to forgo special communal representation in the legislature and other communal safeguards so that there would not be political exploitation of increase of numbers

through conversion that there was a spontaneous decision in the Constituent Assembly to include propagation of religion as a fundamental human right of the citizen. But even afterwards there were attempts to legislate against conversion in the Parliament. It was Nehru's opposition to them that defeated them. But O.P. Tyagi Bill got the support of the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai and it was the fall of the Desai ministry that defeated the bill. But the question has continued to agitate Hindu minds. The question raises very sensitive theological as well as social issues on which Hinduism with its central mystic orientation and Christianity and Islam with their basic prophetic historical orientation differ in a fundamental sense. But the ecumenical inter-religious dialogues in recent years have been exploring new paths to break the deadlock. The Indian situation certainly calls for mutual understanding at depth and consensus about permitted parameters of religious practices, for which inter-faith dialogues among religions and secular ideologies at various levels may be necessary specifically within the Indian context. Since freedom of propagation and conversion involves not only matters of religion, but also of culture and political ideas, any restriction at this point will affect the fundamental rights of the human person in general. I suppose that must be the reason for Governor Kant proposing a consensus of religious leaders on this matter outside the law.

In fact the difference in the character of mystic and prophetic, Indian and Semitic, spiritualities needs to be discussed at depth. Nehru used to say he preferred the cultural attitude related to the spirit of Paganism which allowed many gods including an unknown god to coexist; it reinforces democratic toleration. He also thought that the totalitarianism of Communism and Fascism was a secularisation of the semitic religious outlook. Lohia saw the same difference but thought if the attitude of coexistence of gods is allowed to go extreme in matters of society and politics, it would cut active dialogue between different points of view and bring about stagnation. He realised that the other approach brought about strife. So he asked for a synthesis of the two, failing which he would prefer strife rather than stagnation. This discussion shows that there are clear political and cultural implications for all religious attitudes. So inter-faith dialogue must include these implications also.