

SOME HINDU CRITIQUES OF THE SECULAR STATE IN INDIA

Arvind Sharma*

I would like to develop the case against the secular state from a Hindu standpoint. The position or positions I will assume in the course of developing this case do not reflect my own thinking on the subject but rather the broad spectrum of views I have encountered when the case against the secular state is argued from a Hindu standpoint.

In the course of these discussions one could identify three broad approaches critical of the secular state in India. For the sake of convenience I shall label these as:

1. The extremist Hindu critiques;
2. The Hindu nationalist critique, and
3. The liberal Hindu critique.

1. Let us begin by presenting the extremist Hindu critique. The basic assumption underlying this view is that India is for the Hindus.

On this view the history of India can be roughly divided into four periods: (1) Hindu period extending from the earliest times till 1200 AD; (2) Muslim period extending from 1200 AD to circa 1800 AD; (3) a Christian period extending from circa 1800 AD to 1947 AD and (4) a Secular period extending from 1947 onwards. To those who would object to the post-Muslim period being called the Christian rather than the British period it would be pointed out that the expense of maintaining the Anglican Church in India was defrayed from the Indian exchequer. Further, on this view, the secular period is a post-Christian period in the sense that during the Christian period the Hindus were made to feel so ashamed about their religion that they have become a people who on the one hand are unable to abandon their traditional religion and on the other, unable to affirm it.

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*Prof. Arvind Sharma is a Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, Canada.

It is clear from the description of the various periods of Indian history that the key element in the situation on this view is the relationship of the state to religion in the public realm. It is further obvious that such a view, when pressed, would lead to the following conclusions, among others:

(1) The reunification of the sub-continent under a single political authority will be actively sought.

(2) The continued existence of Pakistan will lead to the emergence of what may be called Hindu Zionism. It should not be forgotten that the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of the Hindus, were revealed in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. This is potentially as offensive to a Hindu as Mecca and Medina being under Christian rule would be to a Muslim. Similarly, if the Jews could regain their lost home after three thousand years, what is there to prevent the Hindus from doing so over the next thirty or even hundred years?

(3) The extremist Hindu position would not merely involve a ban on cow-slaughter within India, it would actively promote it elsewhere and it could easily be made a *casus belli* in relation to the Semitic religions.

2. While the Hindu extremist critique refuses to accept the fact of the Partition of India, the traditionalist Hindu position accepts the doctrine on which it was based: the two nation theory, that the Hindus and Muslims constitute two separate nations. The nationalist Hindu critique then proceeds in two versions: a mild version and a severe version.

According to the mild version India need not, in intent, cease to be a secular state but in effect it will have to be a Hindu nation. According to this view only the Hindu element in the Indian polity is truly secular, and a secular Indian in effect supports the minorities. Thus Balraj Madhok writes:

Whatever secular element is to be found in the Indian state today it is because of its Hindu tradition and complexion and not because of Gandhi, Nehru or for that matter any other leader or party.

But the Indian state as it exists today is transgressing the limits of true secularism as understood all over the world. Secularism demands that there should be no discrimination between citizens on the basis of religion and that there should be common civil law for all

Indians. The Indian constitution specifically enjoins this on the state. But Muslims in India are governed by separate Islamic laws in the matter of marriage and inheritance to the great detriment of not only the nation but also of Muslim women.

He elaborates the point further thus:

The Indian state as it exists today has conferred special rights and privileges on educational and other institutions run by Muslims and other minority groups which are denied to the institutions run by the majority which constitutes the main body of the nation. Secularism demands equal treatment to followers of all religions and not special treatment to followers of some religions in the name of minority rights. Can minority be give rights, which are denied to the nation or the majority?

These discrepancies and deviations can be corrected if India becomes a truly Hindu state. India's Hinduness is the only guarantee that it will remain non-sectarian. Preservation of Hinduness of Hindustan demands that it should be formally declared a Hindu state. Hindu state and true secularism are not only compatible but complementary. Therefore there is no justification whatsoever for opposing the demand for India being declared a Hindu state on the plea that it will become a theocratic state.

With this school of thought the example of Nepal, which is a Hindu state and which in effect is said to function as a secular state, carries a lot of weight. Thus it is said:

Nepal is the only Hindu state in the world today. Can any one raise finger against it on the ground that it discriminates against its Muslim citizens on the basis of religion. Muslims enjoy much better position in Nepal than Hindus including Buddhists and Sikhs enjoy in Bangladesh, or any other Muslim state. India therefore has to be Hindu state if it is to continue to be a secular and non-sectarian state committed to *Sarva Dharma/ Panth Sam Bhav*.

It is not entirely clear what followers of this mild version of the nationalist Hindu critique would do apart from declaring India as a Hindu state. The most likely direction they might move in is to pass a bill banning all conversion from Hinduism if not all conversion per se. The fact that the ratio of Hindus to the rest of the population of India has been

declining since 1880 and the trend has continued after 1947 as well carries considerable weight with this school.

We now move to the national Hindu critique in its severe version. This school also accepts the two-nation theory along with the advocates of the mild version; its severity lies in carrying the theory to its logical conclusion. On this view the Partitions of the country on the basis of the two-nation theory implies the vital corollary that there should be a complete exchange of population, and much of the subsequent confusion and difficulties have arisen by not implementing this logical conclusion of the two-nation theory. There is also the further corollary that if Pakistan was to be a Muslim state, India should have been declared a Hindu and not a secular state. It is not entirely clear what the advocates of this view will do about Kashmir but to the extent that the two-nation theory implies hostility between the two nations, Kashmir would be held by India by right of conquest. It is obvious that this school would even now insist on either the expulsion of all Muslims; their transfer to Pakistan or reconversion to Hinduism, last option perhaps to be considered only as a last resort.

3. Now we move on to the liberal Hindu critique of the secular state. Interestingly enough it has really been offered by a Christian and has been appropriated by me as a Hindu. He naturally does not draw the conclusion I will from his analysis but his analysis is illuminating.

Ashish Nandy is a Christian but has criticized modern India secularism for ignoring the fact that India secularism has historically been rooted in religious values, often in the liberal tradition of the particular religious tradition. The three historical figures held up as models of secularism are Ashok, Akbar and Gandhi. The secularism of Ashok was rooted in liberal Buddhism, that of Akbar in liberal Islam and that of Gandhi in liberal Hinduism. Thus if this uniquely Indian feature of secularism is overlooked and a western secularism divorced from any religions whatever is grafted on India then a grave perversion is involved.

If one is to extend this critique then it is clear that Indian secularism will have to be grounded in liberal Hinduism –or better still, in the liberal elements within Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. This may have the further implication of involving the need of imparting a liberal religious education if secularism is to thrive, or even merely survive, in India.

Ashish Nandy further offers a typology of modern Indian leaders based on the commitment to secularism in the private and public realm. Thus in his judgment Gandhi was religious both in private and public life; Mrs. Indira Gandhi was religious in private but secular in public life; Jinnah and Sarvarkar were secular in private life and religious in public life and Pandit Nehru was secular both in public and private life. Since he regards the Jinnah-Sarvarkar types as the most dangerous, it would appear that he would be in favour of liberal religious education at least in one's own tradition in private life. I must emphasize again that though I have utilized Nandy's analysis, the conclusions drawn are my own.

4. Conclusion

It appears that a good number of difficulties arise out of too simplistic an understanding of the word secularism. A little reflection suggest that a distinction could be drawn between three types of secularism:

(1) Neutral Secularism: when the attitude of the state towards religion is neutral. Western democracies are the prime example here.

(2) Negative secularism: when the attitude of the State towards religion is negative. Communist regimes of the old war era would be the main example here.

(3) Positive secularism – when the attitude of the state towards religion is positive i.e., it actively intervenes to promote religious harmony.

The Hindu critique of Indian secularism at its most refined form seems to be that it is not of the third kind.