

SECULARISM, SECULARIZATION AND MINORITISATION

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1. Introduction

It was when I was reading article "A Way of Life" by P.R. Ram in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, (a Sameeksha Trust Publication), Vol. XXXI No.9, (1996), pp.519ff. on the Supreme Court judgment - 'Hindutva and Hinduism, I was prompted to think on the secularism of our country. Hindutva and Hinduism are related to a way of life rather than to narrow limits of religion. Here P.R. Ram has traced the growth of Hinduism and Hindutva and concluded that Hinduism is a religion, while Hindutva is a political movement for upper caste hegemony based on Hinduism. He concludes by stating that, "it is to the discredit of our secular and democratic spirit that Hinduism, a religion and Hindutva a political force, appear to be a 'way of life'". It was this article which set me thinking on what is secularism, secularization, the issues of minorities and the process of minoritisation.

2. Secularism in India

Now we will study these concepts from the sociologists' point of view.

Today in India there is a growing cynicism with regard to the survival of secularism. Though we cannot deny the grounds for this cynicism and the need for it, we must remember that it is not for the first time that the people have expressed their reservation about secularism, and morally it will not be for the last time either. Since the success or failure of secularism is closely associated with the ups and downs of certain political parties, societies go through these periods of cynicism every now and then. In India itself there have been several occasions when it was felt that the death knell of secularism had been sounded. But in spite of these doomsday prophecies, secularism in India is active and kicking. The terms secularism and communalism are used in a very loose sense in everyday usage. Secularism contains within it a host of alternative ideological possibilities, ranging from Maoism to liberal conservatism, and so also communalism includes sectarianism, ascriptive loyalties, racism and after such ideological dispositions

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Against this background it becomes clear that secularism has had its ups and downs, but it must be remembered that these are not permanent fixtures.

3. Secularism and Secularization

Here we must not forget the distinction between secularization and secularism as propounded by the sociologists. According to them secularization is an impersonal social process whose effects are felt at the conscious level, but whose working happens behind our backs. Secularization sets into motion a social order, which frees individuals from the various kinds of stratified differentiation that prevailed in traditional societies. Consequently religion, and other forms of ascriptive ties, has lost their unquestioned status as systematic principles of organization process. Hence the sociological distinction between the two concepts is – that secularization is a process and that secularism is an ideology. It was on the basis of this understanding that the sociologists concluded that the religions had lost their force in public life and were now replaced by 'civil religion'. In modern societies, as a consequence, commitment is not in the name of a transcendental faith but in terms of a public ethic, which is grounded in the world. It is this public ethic that makes up the 'civil religions' of today. Like religion, civil religion too excites passion, but what is more important is that it functions as the key organizing principle of contemporary secular social orders. However, it must be remembered that the concept of 'civil religion' is really a secularist utopia - the belief that, once 'civil religion' set in there is no scope for religion and other ascriptive ties to exercise any ideological influence in society. This is not true, for there is nothing to prevent religion from taking on a politically persuasive role, and hence the need to separate "religious function", which is private from "religious performance", which is public. In religious performance, religion is applied publicly to address problems that have emerged in other sub-systems of society but were not attended to.

4. Secularization and the Issue of Minorities

The importance of making a distinction between the process of secularization and ideology of secularism is clearly understood in the context of minorities. The minorities are viewed as permanent entities, with fixed and definite empirical manifestations. For e.g., from 1993 onwards the official and permanent minorities in India are the Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Buddhists and Sikhs (See Government of India, Ministry of Welfare

Notification dt. Oct. 23, 1993). However, one must be aware of the fact that minority communities are not fixed and permanent entities but keep fluctuating. For e.g., In the report of Advisory Committee on Minorities (dt. May 11, 1949) Muslims, S.C., and Indian Christians were considered to be minorities (Shiva Rao 1968a. Vol. 4:604). Earlier, in the constituent assembly debates, K.M. Panikkar wanted Nambudiris to be listed as minorities (Vol: 2:259). If the secularists have their way, they would happily add to the list of official minorities, without realizing that in due course of time these category rigidify and become impervious to the actualities that secularization generates on the ground. The most critical fallout of this tendency is that it is blind to the process of minoritisation, which often breaks protocol and targets there, who are not official and permanent minorities. When secularism as an ideology distances itself from the dynamics of secularization as a process, it results in the most backward forms of positivist posturing, and allows its enemies to function both legitimately and effectively in the political system. And when that happens, almost anybody can become the next minority, for the process of minoritisation has no permanent or official favorites. This has led to the unhealthy clamour of certain groups to be listed as a minority, regardless of Dr. Ambedkar's warning early in 1948 itself when he said it would be "equally wrong for minorities to perpetuate themselves". In this melee of the clamour for protecting minorities it is easy to overlook how such provisions can create vested interests and in this process go counter to some of the express intentions of the constitutionalists.

Now that we are convinced about the irrelevancy of the stability of minorities and majorities it becomes difficult to predict who will be the new minority tomorrow. The Sikhs till 1984 never imagined that they would be attacked and murdered. But this happened after Indira Gandhi's assassination. It is this fact that makes the inclusion of the Sikhs among the minorities today acceptable, though earlier their claims were not seriously entertained. The South Indians in Bombay had no foreknowledge that they would be the victims of Shiv Sena wrath prior to mid 1960s.

Secularism, an ideology which is the product of contemporary times thinks in terms of majorities and minorities, and it refuses to accept the inherent dynamic character of the social process of secularization. Consequently, it sees majorities and minorities as permanent distinctions leading to the development of vested interests as Ambedkar had visualized,

and the tendency of minority spokes-peoples to emerge as permanent champions of the opposed. It also undermines the ideology of secularism, for professional secularists are closely identified with such minority interests.

4.1. Minorities and Minoritisation

To continue with our argument further, no purpose is served by making an elaborate list of minorities, for it does not take into account the process of secularization, which can easily nullify at one stroke the most elaborate listing of this kind. Instead of wasting our time in listing out minorities, we need to turn our attention to the question of minoritisation and to examining the effect of that process. For in the process of minoritisation, nobody can tell whether the next minority will be you.

These are two important aspects of secularism as an ideology. The first is of the 'civil religion' trend and the second is governed by majority/minority considerations. The first makes it seem as if there is no scope any longer for bigotry on a social scale, now that religion has been effectively privatized, and the latter is predisposed to see the world in terms of bigotry which can be avoided by supporting the sectional interests of these persecuted groups. The common feature that binds secularism of both the groups is that they both see the world as a finished product. In one case there is an assertion that minority persecution will be on expected lines, and hence the need to pay attention to certain designated minorities on a permanent basis.

But in fact prejudice is injustice and can go any lengths. Does this imply that with advancing secularization there is no scope for secularism? Does it mean that due to the uncertainties of minoritisation we can only observe the process of secularization that brings it about without any scope for intervention? No doubt that will power and good intentions by themselves are not enough, but will power when coupled with humanism which takes cognisance and learns from the obstacles to objective social process, then the chances of process are manifold.

The making of minorities is quite different from the process of minoritisation. Minority consciousness grows from within the community and is recognized as such by those outside it. The formation of minority consciousness may have several historical or sociological causes behind it. There is common factor in the making of the different minority groups other

than the issue of numbers. And of these the most effective minority is the largest minority. But other than being smaller in numbers than the majority community, there is nothing that Parsees, Sikhs, Muslims or Buddhist have in common.

The acceptance of such communities as minorities is on the basis of minority and majority consciousness. Unfortunately, therefore democracy is often played out in such cases as a game of numbers, and community representatives on all sides are happy with this, for it answers them of a stable constituency.

It would have been possible to arrest this process at the time of the drafting of the constitution, but it was not to be. Though an attempt was made to do so by advocating that religious worship and not religious practice be allowed as a fundamental right. For freedom of religious practice meant that the playing of music before mosques, or the institution of *sati*, would have to be tolerated. For it has been argued that freedom be allowed only for the function of religion but not for the practice of it.

Once minority and majority consciousness is in place, it seems to appear that the job of secularism is done. The minority communities are kept passive by co-opting their leaders with important position in government organizations. Indira Gandhi's 15-point programme is a fine example of a political strategy of this kind that seeks to cater specifically majority/minority consciousness. This 15-point programme makes several allowances for minorities at all levels: for loans, for housing, for education, etc. without making these provisions statutory and binding. It appears then that if Muslims get any education at all it is because of the generosity of Indira Gandhi, or because of the militancy of certain minority leaders and not because as citizens. Muslims have every right to be treated as equals. In a patronage scenario of this kind there is enough room to play back room politics, and to grandstand as heroes of minority communities.

However, these calculations do not take into account the fact that secularization is a dynamic process and therefore new minorities may emerge without much warning. It is this process which we call as minoritisation. When minoritisation takes place the communities that are picked for persecution are decided upon by the majority, who is on the outside. The formation of minority identity in these cases takes place from the outside rather than from the inside as is the case with self-constituted minorities. Our

earlier examples of the Sikhs and the South Indians of Bombay are good examples of this minoritisation process in recent times. Further, as nobody likes to be minoritised, for a newly minoritised community has neither spokespersons, nor a stable constituency laid out for them in advance. This does not exhaust all the other subtleties of this process of minoritisation, which we will now look into briefly.

While Muslims are official minorities today, they were not so regarded in pre-independent India. A lot depended upon which community holds power. During the partition days, Muslims of Karal Bagh and of Pahargang in Delhi, who were congress partisans, nevertheless died uncomprehendingly at the hands of Hindus. Though Muslims, they had never identified themselves as minorities, and hence when minoritised they became vulnerable. A variation of this theme occurred in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil speaking Muslims saw themselves as Muslims first and then as Tamils in 1947 – a clear departure from their earlier priorities. Minoritisation can therefore strengthen minority consciousness as much as it can create new minorities. The points to be noted here is that nobody wants to be minoritised for that can happen so fast and without warning. One never knows what combinations will be brought to bear in the next round of minoritisation, and nobody is therefore completely safe. But there is a vested interest in self-constituted minority awareness, for that enables one to effectively play the minority card, and both majority and minority spokespeople are fully aware of this since the process of minoritisation is not based on consensus, any attempt to list the minorities would be futile.

5. Citizenship Should be the Criterion

Hence we must now search for a new criterion for protecting cultural rights and communities and that criterion is that of 'citizenship'. It is only by protecting the dignity of the individual as a citizen that one can mitigate the harshness of minoritisation when it takes place. This idea was proposed in the constituent assembly debates, but to no avail then and today too. But the time is ripe to take a fresh look at this subject, for the problems of cultural persecution have not improved with the minority/majority framework in operation, in fact it has given secularism a somewhat bad name, as there is far too much politicking and horse trading that is legitimized on the basis of such minority provisions. The fact that minoritisation cannot be wished away, as secularization gives us no hope of it, shows up the hollowness of minority

provisions. Hence the need to strengthen the idea of citizenship. It is only by protecting one's identity, and not allowing it to be swamped by minority and majority legislations, that the ideals of secularism can best be met. There is no guarantee of course, that communalism will die, but the sides will be clearly distinguished, and will bring the fight into open and not in the corridors of power.

Unfortunately, this is not the stand of the secularists who refuse to take a second look at this issue from different perspective. The more honest among them hesitate to look over their shoulder, for they would then see the havoc being created by vested interests in the name of secularism. The time is ripe to look them in the eye and call their bluff!

Reference

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