

Religion, Secularism and the State

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Secularism has been the topic of discussion and controversy in this society for the past two decades or so. In a way this issue is linked with the issue of the separation or non-separation of religion from politics. With Indian Independence, came the formation of the Constituent Assembly, which after long deliberations formulated the Constitution in a way, which had all the basic ingredients of a secular state. We are using the term secularism here to mean Dharma Nirpekshata (i.e. religious authorities should have no say in matters of the State). There is another interpretation also which is being imputed to secularism, Sarva Dharma Samabhava (equal respect for all religions).

In the years immediately after Independence, the State was criticized for not being 'secular enough' and for compromising with religion. This is a far cry from the present attacks on secularism. The present attacks and misinterpretation of secularism are on the ground that - (a) secularism is a western concept and it has been brought into the Indian Constitution as a result of our 'mental slavery to the West, (b) secularism is anti-religion and is unsuitable in a religious country like India, and that if at all secularism is to be practiced in India it should mean equal respect for all religions.

Religion has multiple subsets like institutional, ritualistic, doctrinal, mythical and ethical components. Religious experience has a definite reference to the transcendental which is expressed in various religious goals like 'Kingdom of Heaven', 'Nirvana' or 'Moksha'. Religious beliefs are social compilation of pre-modern human wisdom related to the entire world-view. 'Ritualistic dimension' of religion provides an occasion for community sharing of religion and creating social bonds. 'Ethical and moral dimensions' of religion set the norms of behavior for human beings.

The most predominant aspect of religion, however, is the clergy (*dharmaguru*), which is supposed to mediate between 'man' and 'God'. This clergy has different levels of organisation, varying from the most well organised clergy in Christianity to the most fragmented priestly class in Hinduism. Religion has played diverse social roles in history. For example, the clergy has mostly served to provide legitimation to the existing social systems. On the other hand, some religions have also provided the vehicle for expression of social dissent. The major change in the role of religion takes place with the advent of industrialization, and this process is known as secularization. Secularization is the broad term referring to the changes in the social relationships between different social groups and also the change in power equations at social level. In Feudal societies (Kingdoms). In feudal societies clergy is the legitimizer of the prevalent social hierarchies of class, caste and gender and holds a powerful place in the society.

From 17th Century discoveries of science began challenging the deeply held beliefs and faith which were integral part of broad canvas of religion. This phenomenon was first observed in Europe, where medieval period was characterised by supremacy of church over all aspects of life. There were a few who had through life-long dedication discovered the secrets of nature, but were seen as heretics, blasphemous or otherwise. For example, in 1553 Servatus was burnt at stake for publishing his work in the field of medicine which was labelled by church as against the

idea of trinity. Similarly Palissy who was a great natural scientist with several contributions in the field of minerals, geology and chemistry had to die in prison in 1590 for converting to Protestantism. Copernicus had to present his discovery that Earth went around the Sun, merely as a mathematical formulation rather than as a real life phenomenon for the fear of persecution.

European secularisation movement took root during the period of Renaissance and French enlightenment. The vast mass of peasantry crushed under feudal exploitation, could see the liberatory potential of 'Liberty, Equality & Fraternity', the call given by the rising French bourgeoisies to break the hold of Feudal-church nexus on the society. The struggle against feudal absolutism also involved struggle against the hold of Church/Religion on the society. Here on the one hand the requirements of the newly emerging industries required the peasants to be released from the social grip of feudal lord and the concomitant religious grip of the church. It is in this backdrop that one can begin to understand the meaning of social norms developing around modern rationality.

Similar to French experience industrial revolution in England projected the ideal of democratic form of government and rights of individuals as citizens proved a turning point. Thus, secularisation of civil society and polity was actually the culmination of numerous factors as new scientific discoveries and technological advancement which revolutionised the mode of production both in agriculture and industry, unleashing a novel socio-religious processes, renaissance and reformation. Navigation and new markets, emergence and rise of new class of bourgeoisie and consequent contractual relationship brought in free labour and capital accumulation.

Thus modernity and secularisation do not just emerge from ideological constructs of the philosophers and ideologues. Primarily these twin processes are the outcome of the struggles of the emerging bourgeoisie (industrialists and their paraphernalia) and the expression of the struggles of peasants under the clutches of feudal lords. These processes get social roots in these sectors of society who emerge pari passu with development of science and technology which form the infrastructure of the newer production processes.

Modernity\ secularisation occur at a particular juncture in history when the newer production processes are trying to integrate the achievements of science and technology into its gambit. The newer requirements want a labor force which till that time is not 'free floating' as it is, gripped by the traditional hierarchies, is at the service of feudal lords and its legitimiser the clergy. The prevalent system is a mix of pre-scientific social wisdom, and gender related hierarchies which are sustained by the preachings of clergy, pandits and mullahs. The secularisation movement is heralded by two parallel but opposite groups, whose interests are common at this point of time. The rising industrialist needs more social powers, and a labour force which can be hired at contractual terms. The victims of prevalent hierarchies, poor peasantry, looks forward to the work in industries as a 'relative' liberation from the prevalent oppressive hierarchies. And along with it goes the struggle for social consent, ideas in social space where the scientific reason battles it out with the pre-scientific social ideas. Thus the complex of modernity/ secularisation can not be located in any one single arena, it is a comprehensive arrival of newer social relationships (Industrialist-labor: on social contractual terms), newer rationality (around science and reason) on one hand arrayed against the feudal-church nexu (based on birth based hierarchies) and prescientific social ideas.

#####The secularisation process in India has been an extremely complex and painful one. The European powers were out to colonise the rest of the world to enrich their industrial development and for creating markets for their industrial products. India came mainly under the sway of the British who colonised the country, and keeping their needs in mind, initiated a

ruthless plunder of India's wealth and raw materials. They increased the taxation on land, forced the shift to cash crops, and simultaneously ensured intense plunder by laying down the railways and telegraphs as the efficient means of communication. To supplement their needs for trained-educated manpower, they introduced English education in the country. To support their efforts many an Indian came up as their 'assistant', who themselves started laying down the foundations of modern industries and eventually graduated as 'modern' business-professionals. At this time these 'modern ideas also found their way through the newer education system and through a class of intelligentsia which started going to England for their education.

This process again required the release of peasants from their 'ties', to the lands, and subjugation to the feudal lords and Brahmins. Simultaneously we see the twin movements, which contributed to the secularisation process. The first of these was the independence movement, aimed against the control of colonial masters, and the second was a series of regional movements against the social hierarchy, caste system and gender oppression, aimed to gain self respect and breaking the social stranglehold of landlords, Brahmins and the caste system.

This exposure to new learning also laid the foundation of Indian Renaissance. The positive and negative factors of alien rule e.g. Western liberalism, free press, modern system of communications, along with racial arrogance, economic exploitation of India and assertion of cultural superiority by the English, filled the Indian mind with a new spirit of national consciousness. The British policies put into motion a number of contradictory processes. The development of modernity was not just against the religious clergy and landlords but had to take on the British rulers also.

The process of breaking of the hegemony of the priest and the zamindar was painfully slow and remained incomplete for decades to come, leaving its remnants in different pockets even today. This process was initiated by Mahatma Jotirao Phule who founded the Satyashodhak Samaj in Maharashtra with its alliance of middle and low castes, shudra and ati-shudra.

In Tamil Nadu, Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker began the 'Self Respect Movement' in 1926. This developed into a political party Dravida Kazhgam in 1944, which centered around the struggle for secularisation of the hitherto inarticulate levels of Tamil society. Another major attempt, the one which had the deepest impact in secularising the society, was initiated by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (Babasaheb) who attempted at organising a broad based caste-class front of dalits and non Brahmins. He was able to arouse the self-respect in large sections of dalits.

Indian State and Secularism - Secularism was the guiding principle of anti-British struggle. It was recognised as an ideological platform for the multi-religious, multi-caste, multi-ethnic population of the subcontinent. It was the collective expression of the aspirations of the rising classes against the power of its colonial masters and the entrenched feudal interests in the country. The resultant constitution, made different provisions to ensure that secularism has a place in the society i.e.

- (i) the state by itself shall not espouse or establish or practice any religion
- (ii) public revenues will not be used to promote any religion
- (iii) the state shall have the power to regulate any economic, financial or other secular activity associated with religious practice (Article 25 (2)(9) of constitution)
- (iv) every individual will have, in that order, an equal right to freedom of conscience and religion.

In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru "What it means is that it is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; that as a state, it does not allow itself to be attached

to one faith or religion.... In a country like India, real nationalism is a relic of the past and no longer relevant today" (Forward in Raghunath Singh, Dharma Nirpeksha Raj).

In a similar vein Mahatma Gandhi said" "I swear by my religion, I will die for it.

But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state will look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on but not your and my religion. That is everybody's personal concern". (Gandhi, quoted in T.N. Madan, TSI Vol. 3, Jan. '97).

Secularism is not just an ideological issue. It basically stands for relegation of the clergy to the private realms of one's life. Secularism is not anti-religion but only stands for diminution of political powers of the clergy, it has no antagonism to other components of religion as such.

Religion also plays another role in society, giving expression to the aspirations of the exploited and subjugated sections of society. Many religions have begun as the movement demanding social justice for the downtrodden. Christianity, Islam and Buddhism in earlier times and Liberation theology in recent times are an example of these.

That is to say historically religions have also acted as carriers of different social movements. Roughly religiosity of oppressor classes is linked more to the clergy while cry of the subalterns and exploited gets expressed through some religious movements. The beginnings of Bhakti, sufi, Buddhism, liberation theology and Sikhism is closer to this pattern.

Religion as spirituality is the recognition of importance of spiritual dimension inherent in most human beings for whom this dimension of their life gives them infinite value and satisfaction. A more glaring dimension of religion is a 'hierarchical, authoritarian, male dominated institution which divides rather than unites those who practice it, by inculcating a sense of difference from and superiority to anyone outside a particular religious community' (9). Most of the times 'religion by itself is not reactionary or progressive. Its nature depends on the section which employs it as an instrument to further its interests '(10).

Religion has played diverse social roles in history. It has on one hand served to provide the legitimation to the exploitative social systems by being in the service of kings and feudal lords, on the other, as pointed out above it has also provided the vehicle for expression of social dissent.

2. "Modernity and Secularisation" :

3. Modernity: Secularisation in India

Trajectory of modernity/secularisation process in India has been extremely complex and a painful process. The European powers were out to colonise rest of the world to enrich their industrial development, for the primitive accumulation of capital for their industries and also for creating markets for their industrial products. India came mainly under the sway of British who colonised most of the country and keeping their needs in mind initiated a ruthless plunder of India's wealth and raw materials. They increased the taxation on land, forced the shift to cash crops, resulting in number of severe famines in the country. Simultaneously to ensure the intense plunder they laid down the railways and telegraphs as the efficient means of communication. To supplement their needs for trained/educated manpower they introduced the English education in the country. To support their efforts many Indians came up as their 'assistants' but shortly they themselves learned the ropes and started laying down the foundations of modern industries on their own, and started graduating into 'modern' business professionals. At this time the 'modern' ideas also found their way through the newer

education system and through a class of intelligentsia which started going to England for their education.

This process required again the release of peasants from their 'ties', to the lands and subjugations to the feudal lords and the Brahmins. Simultaneously we see the twin movements which contributed to the secularisation process. The first of these was the independence movement, aimed get rid of the control of colonial masters, and the second was a series of regional movements against the social hierarchy, caste system and gender oppression, aimed to gain self respect, aimed to break the social stranglehold of Brahmins and the caste system. .

This exposure to new learning also laid the foundation of Indian Renaissance "The positive and negative factors of alien rule e.g. New learning, Imperial unity, Western liberalism (free) press, modern system of communications, along with racial arrogance, economic exploitation of India, weaknesses of Judiciary, missionary activity and assertion of cultural superiority of English filled Indian mind with a new spirit of national consciousness" (13). The British policies put into motion a number of contradictory processes. The development of modernity was not just against the religious clergy and landlords but had to take on the British rulers also. The rise of Indian elite here went through two opposite phases, 'This class passed through two clear stages of evolution the first was anglophilism, i.e. to consider the alien rule as divine dispensation and a desire for its continuation. The second was that of anglophobism i.e. the British rule was considered injurious to the progress and prosperity of nation " (14). Thus on one hand we see the Indian Renaissance in bits and pieces and on the other, there are rudiments of the Indian industry.

The process of breaking of the hegemony of the priest and Jamindar was painfully slow and remained incomplete for decades to come, leaving its remnants in different pockets even till the day. The process was initiated by Mahatma Jotirao Phule who founded Satyashodhak Samaj in Maharashtra, with its alliance of middle and low castes, shudra and ati-shudra, it stood the Aryan theory of race on its head. He used popular peasant myths and symbols from Nineteenth century theism to contest the prevailing Brahminic religious hegemony" (15). This "gained widespread following throughout India in 1920s, where it was used especially by untouchable groups throughout India as an assertion of equality and a rejection of Hindu identity" (16).

In Tamilnadu Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker began Self Respect Movement (1926) which developed into a political party Dravida Kazhagam (1944), which "centered around the struggle for secularisation of the hitherto inarticulate levels of Tamil society" (17). Periyar denounced Brahminism and proclaimed atheism. After initial successes ,this movement has by now degenerated and been co-opted by the upper caste politics in Tamil Nadu.

Another major broad attempt, which had deepest impact in secularising the society was the one initiated by Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar who attempted at organising a broad based caste-class front of Dalits and non Brahmins, but could not quite succeed. But he was able to arouse the self respect in large sections of Dalits though workers under the influence of communist parties, which had a different perception of struggle of the oppressed, remained aloof from Babasahebs movement. He initially struggled to gain a place for the Dalits within the fold of Hinduism, but failure of all his attempts forced him to convert to Buddhism with all his followers.

Workers movements began with Narayan Meghaji Lokhande and later on Communist party picked up the thread. Workers movement had deep ramifications in the social dynamics and it broke the long slumber of passivity in social relations. It sent the villages into a turmoil and new value systems began making their inroads into the Jamindar-poor peasant relationship. Thus the existing social relationships came under attack from multiple quarters(a)

Independent struggle, anti British movement led by Gandhi and Nehru (b) the anti-caste movements of Periyar and Ambedkar (c) Workers movement .

The secularisation/industrialisation process was slow in its trajectory because of colonial powers who permitted/initiated only as much modernisation as was needed for their 'plunder' project. The secular democratic movement led by Congress was also predominantly representing the emerging bourgeoisie, which was not very strong, and partly the aspirations of the broad layers of society. It did want to take along the anti-caste and workers movements but with lot of limitations and compromises. It is for this reason that anti-caste, anti-upper class movements never totally subjugated to the Congress, preferring to keep their separate identity as they were clear that their interests are secondary as far as the priorities of the Congress led freedom movement are concerned. The land-reforms, land to the tiller may sound a purely economic demand but it is the social core of secularisation process, as it is this measure which frees the tiller from the clutches of the landlord. One of the reasons, as to why Nehru rejected the offer of coalition government from the Muslim League was his realisation that Muslim League, like its counterpart Hindu Maha Sabha, was dominated by the landlords and they will prevent the measures for land reforms in the states wherever the coalition governments will be formed.

The movement for secularisation of society had enemies within the society itself. The weak secularisation movement, represented by Indian National Congress, as pointed out earlier was voicing, projecting the socio-economic needs of the rising, nascent industrialists, a section of professionals, and the modern businessman, who came up in the wake of newer industrial scenario. The opposition to their social aspirations came from the entrenched social powers, assuming a communal manifestation. The newer developments were breaking the back of established social hierarchy of landlords, moneylenders and the priests. Realising the dangers to their social and political interests these sectors of society hit back and threw up the political formations like Muslim League (Muslim elite, initially business groups later joined by landlords and Nawabs) and Hindu Mahasabha, RSS (Hindu Jamindars, Rajas of Riyasats (small states within Indian territory: paying tribute to British masters but not controlled by them directly), Brahmins and Banias (traditional tradesmen). The complex development of this political triangle: British colonial aspirations, freedom struggles led by Gandhi and Nehru, and the communal forces represented by Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha, RSS, led to the partition of the country and also retarded the growth of secularisation process to a great extent. With Muslim communal elements going to Pakistan and Hindu Communal elements being a small force, the Indian constitution which was drawn up came to represent mainly the aspirations and political agendas of the industrialists, workers and Dalits. Constituent Assembly adopted a secular constitution as a response to the needs of rising industrialist class, and the pressure of social movements of the oppressed sections of society.

Nehru was an overarching figure in bringing in the secular principles at the level of state policy, he had the support of modern industrialists and radical intelligentsia in this endeavour. This initiative of his was strongly supported and prompted by the social impact of aspirations of industrialists and struggles of exploited sectors of society desiring to break free from Brahmin-Bania, landlord-priest nexus. The pressure of social movements of workers and Dalits gave strength and ensured a place for secular ethos in state policies. During this time the main opponent to modernity/ secularisation, the RSS remained a marginal force, and secularism as a state policy continued to enjoy respectability and admiration from different social scientists. One can not deny that there was a strain between the secular Constitution and semi-

secularised society. And if at all state was criticised for inadequate implementation of secular policies and not the other way around.