



MEANING OF SECULARISM AND SECULAR EDUCATION: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

In a truly secular country or state, all citizens irrespective of religion would be covered by a single set of laws. In India, however, people of different religion beliefs are covered by different laws. The 42nd amendment to the Constitution of India inserted the word "secular" into the preamble thus making India a "secular" Republic. But is India truly a secular country? Secularism is adopted by most of the contemporary states. The three intrinsic principles of secularism are freedom of belief, that every person living in that particular state has his own belief system and he can believe and worship any God, second is the institutional separation and third is the 'no discrimination' on the basis of religion. The largest democracy of the world, India claims to be a secular state. It brings democratic values to education and can include self-determination within a community of equals, as well as such values as justice, respect and trust. There were various reasons to declare a state as a secular, in which one was domestic reasons and other was global. If we talk about the internal reason, we know that most of the people in India follow the religion of Hinduism, but apart from Hinduism there are many religions such as the Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism etc. The state of India declares itself as a secular to get the support of the heterogeneous population. As far as the global reason is concerned, India proclaims itself as a secular state to portray a positive image in the world.

KEYWORDS : Secularism, Secular Education

INTRODUCTION

The idea of secularism is politically potent. Throughout the history it has been applied to emphasize different theological, philosophical, and social trends. Semantic debates about the meaning and connotations of the word "secular" determine its interpretation and application. The meaning of the word "secular" is highly contested. Secular is whatever has reference to this life. Literally, secularism has a broad, contemporary mission. This paper explains the meaning of secularism and shows how, on the one hand, the policy of religious neutrality – and later avowed secularism – and on the other, a desire for inculcation of moral, "spiritual" and "Indian" values tended to favour a natural religion approach.

BROAD MEANING OF SECULARISM

The term 'secular', coined by George Jacob Holyoke in 1850, literally means 'This-worldly' and 'secularism' means 'this-worldliness' as different from and opposed to 'other-worldliness'. It requires that in all their worldly affairs human beings - people and citizens of countries - should desist from making a reference to the otherworldly context. In simple terms it means that since religion primarily has a supernatural and supramundane overtone and reference, it should not be allowed to become the sole basis of our worldly human-relationships. While establishing our relationships as citizens we should function purely as human beings as naturally, rationally, objectively, and as free from religious prejudices and preferences, as is humanly possible. No discrimination should ever be made between citizens on religious grounds. Superstitions and mythical beliefs and practices should be eschewed. State and religion should be separated - each allowed to remain and function in its own respective domain, without meddling with the other.¹

Secularism, thus involves two ingredients (1) a secular state and (2) citizens with secular attitude. A secular state has to have no religion of its own but has to allow its citizen the freedom of choice of religion. That is, the state has to maintain equidistant from all religions in practice in the state but has to give the individuals and groups the freedom to adopt, practice and propagate any religion of their choice. Such a brand of secularism can be most suitable as a state policy to make and keep a multi-religious society cohesive and trouble-free. It can also prove bedrock for democracy.

Secular attitude means that people should behave in the most

rational and scientific manner, giving no quarter to religious bigotry, superstitions and mythical beliefs and practices. Religion should be made an ethical basis of conduct, an instrument for unifying people, and not a wedge for dividing them.²

SECULAR EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SECULAR STATE

The concept of secular education is a key concept in the modern Indian educational thought. Different and conflicting views, ranging from one extreme to the other, about the problems are held and freely expressed. However, the proper meaning of the term "Secular Education" cannot be explained without a reference to the context of secular State pragmatic, rational, non-religious and non-communal principles of conduct in all public activities.

Indians have chosen the path of democracy. The concept of the secular state assumed great importance as soon as the country achieved Independence on 15 August 1947, though some speculation in that direction had already started as early as 1930. The questions raised were 'What kind of a state was free India to become?' 'Would the policy to be established under the new Constitution treat various religions equally providing freedom of worship for all communities?'³

'Might not the dominant community so frame the Constitution of free India as to monopolize privileges to the disadvantages of minority communities? Was the newly created state to be identified with any particular religion?'⁴

Questions like these and many more arose in thoughtful minds and this was not without reason because it is well known how painful the birth of free India was. After years of strenuous struggle for freedom, India has the bitter experience of partition which made relation between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority fraught with tension. The infusion of religious fanaticism into political affairs by the Hindu Mahasabha, Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and Muslim League embittered the position of the two groups. The two-nation theory was propounded by V.D. Sarvarkar and Hedgewar (1923) and later accepted and advocated by M.A. Jinnah:

"Ask any Indian or Pakistani: "Who first propounded the two-nation theory?" The immediate response will be "Mohammad

Ali Jinnah". Not correct.

The first man to talk of Hindus and Muslims as separate nations was V.D. Sarvarkar who coined the word '*Hindutva*' in a book with the same title in 1923. Other Hindu leaders who accepted the two-nation theory were Dr. Moonje of the Hindu-Mahasabha, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, founder of Banaras Hindu University, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bhai Parmanand, Swami Shradhdhanand. Eminent Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya also supported the motion".⁵

The two-nation theory at last resulted in the partition of the country, followed by death, dishonour, and the disastrous displacement of millions of people from both communities.

This was the background out of which free India emerged yet inspired by the belief that "whatever the past, Free India should have a fresh start".⁶ It was realised that the ideal should be an India free from all narrow partiality or special privileges for any community and that all, irrespective of caste or community, should receive equal treatment from the state. Thus, the concept of secularism in India was originally born as a political concept. This concept, as is evident, genuinely attempted to establish a kind of harmony between the two major communities of India, the Hindus and the Muslims, and during the days of India's struggle for political freedom and more particularly after independence, this doctrine has been studiously pursued mainly on the political plane. This doctrine has inspired and enabled the nation to resist the theory of two nations. India now believes that a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious community can never subscribe the Indian community can never subscribe to the theory of two nations based on the religions of the citizens.

The Constitution of free India came into force on 26th January 1950. As the Preamble declared The people of India solemnly resolved, "to constitute India into a Sovereign Democratic Republic and to secure for all its citizens justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and of opportunity and to promote among them Fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation".⁷

It is however remarkable that the words "Secular" and "Secularism" were nowhere used in the Indian Constitution (before 42nd Amendment) and yet the concept of Secularism is writ large in almost every significant and important provision of the Constitution. The Constitution has promised to the citizens of India the establishment of a welfare state and it has given them the solemn assurance that justice, social, political and economic will triumph and prevail in this country.

It is stated that Indian citizenship is a purely and entirely secular status. The fundamental rights are guaranteed to the citizens. The basic concept of fundamental rights guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of laws to all the citizens. This guarantee is enshrined in Article 14 of the Constitution. In one sense this equality of protection is the basis of the Indian Constitution. It is from this basic concept of equality that all other fundamental rights flow and this brings out the secular character of the Indian Constitution. This secular character is all embracing and it affords benevolent protection not only to the Hindus and Muslims of this country but to all the communities and religions. This country is multi-religious and multi-lingual and the Constitution has assured to all its citizens the same basic fundamental rights.

Consistently with its policy that all religions practised in India must receive equal protection, the Constitution has made specific provisions in this regard. Article 25 guarantees freedom of conscience and freedom of profession, practice and propagation of religion, while Article 26 guarantees

freedom to manage religious affairs. These two articles afford equal protection to all religions. The most significant part in regard to this protection is that this is subject to certain overriding considerations: Article 25(1) provides that "Subject to public order, morality and health and to other provisions of this part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience".

In short the fundamental elements of India's policy as a secular state are:

- (i) A state policy of neutrality towards all religions.
- (ii) A social structure free from the inequalities imposed by religion.
- (iii) A state in which all citizens enjoy equal rights irrespective of religion.⁸

Alongwith other provisions, Articles 26,27 and 28 mention the State's policy and principles regarding religious denomination; taxes payable for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious education. Article 28 (1) states that no religious instructions shall be provided in any educational institutions wholly maintained out of state funds.⁹ This is in a broad sense the Constitutional meaning of secular education that is provision for education without religious instruction. In conformity with the secular policy of the state religious instruction in government institutions has been prohibited. It is not stressed under Article 28 of the Constitution that no religious instruction of any kind or of any religious faith shall be provided in State controlled educational or other institutions, nor can any attempt be made to propagate or publicise any belief or doctrine, faith or creed of any kind through such institutions. This is the Constitutional context of the concept of secular education in India.¹⁰

MEANING OF SECULARISM AND SECULAR EDUCATION

Bertrand Russell once remarked that human knowledge must always be content to accept some terms as intelligible without definition to serve as starting points for defining other terms. Secularism is certainly one such term and considering the variety of meanings it has acquired since it was coined by G.J. Holyoake, in 1850, one despairs of defining it in a brief sentence. Like all other similar concepts secularism is also rather elusive. That is why there are varying shades of opinions about its real meaning and comprehensive definition.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Secularism means, "A movement intentionally ethical, negatively religious, with political and philosophical antecedents. It described as a theory of life and as it is proposed to fulfill a function of religion apart from all religious associations, it may be regarded as negatively religious".¹¹

The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains secularism as the doctrine stressing, "Morality should be based solely on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from the belief in God or in future state".¹²

The more recent explanation we find in *Webster's New International Dictionary*: (i) "a system of social ethics based upon a doctrine advanced by G.J. Holyoake (1817-1906) that ethical standard and conduct should be determined exclusively with reference to the present Life and social being"¹³, (ii) secondly it is interpreted as "any view of life, education etc., or any policy or programme referring to such based on the premise that religion and religious consideration as of God and a future life should be ignored".¹⁴

From the above definitions, secularism seems to be based solely on considerations of practical morality with a view to the physical, social and moral improvement of society. It neither

affirms nor denies the theistic promises of religion and is thus a particular variety of utilitarianism.

The word "secular" is highly contested. It comes from the Latin *saecularis* meaning "an age," "a generation," or "a long time." It corresponds to the Greek *aeon*, "of the times, of the age." In ecclesiastical Latin, "secular" came to mean "in the world" as opposed to "in the church." Its meaning was, until the 19th century, highly specific. Still today, in technical scientific vocabulary it refers to a long indefinite period of time and is used to describe something that is not recurrent or periodical as for example "The Secular cooling of the Earth".¹⁵

From all these interpretations it is clear that the term 'Secular' in a general sense indicates a state not connected with, or separated from, religion, or to use a terminology which is generally employed to indicate such relationship between the state and religion it is a condition where there is separation of the State and the Church i.e. religion.¹⁶

But what then is the meaning of Secularism in Education? Secularism in Education means the attitude of empiricism, skepticism and rationalism as applied to all matters of education. "A secularist in education has no supernatural or religious aims, no religiously biased curriculum or preconceived and rigid notion about methodology. His aims in education are human and social, his approach is humanistic and utilitarian, rationalistic and scientific and his method is empirical. Thus a secularist has an entirely different outlook towards the whole system of education".¹⁷

"Instead of bringing up his children in liturgical exercises, he instructs them in the scientific method. Concerning any meaning of the world beyond what the natural and social sciences reveal, he is agnostic or at least holds himself in a state of suspended judgment. If the secularist has any religion at all, it is likely that scientific doctrines constitute the presuppositions of that religion and the scientists are its high priests".¹⁸

According to John Child, the edifice of secular education had been built on the foundation of two basic ideas namely (i) confidence in the authority of man and (ii) moral autonomy in the sphere of human experience.¹⁹

Secularism in education has a very wide appeal in the modern democracies. The autonomy and enrichment of secular living has become the goal of democratic education. There is no place a fixed-in-advance values in secular education. George Counts says: "A critical factor must play an important role in any adequate educational programme at least in any such programme fashioned the modern world".²⁰

The development of experimental thinking is an inherent implication of secular education. Any imposition of indoctrination is foreign to the secular concept of education. It emphasizes the social setting of education, and it "implies ways of thinking and living appropriate to a heterogeneous society."²¹

Thus we can draw the conclusion that secularism in education means an educational system imbued with rationalism, scientific and analytic spirit, free from the cramping control on. It means the teaching of secular subjects and emphasizing spirit of free enquiry which is the most effective instrument of progress. It also means non-parochial non-denominational public control of education.²²

It may be concluded that the concept of secularism in the Indian context, is drastically different from the concept of secularism as it developed in the West. Indian secularism is not hostile or antagonistic to religion. It is rather

accommodative of religion. The Indian State has no religion of its own, but citizens are free to follow any religion of their choice. The State has simply to maintain equidistance from all religions. State dealings are to be free from all religious considerations, i.e., citizens are not to be discriminated against on grounds of their religious affiliations.

Secular education, likewise, means that in educational institutions wholly maintained by the State on public funds, no denominational education is to be imparted. However, in private and aided educational institutions, especially of minorities, religious education can be imparted under certain conditions. Secular education, comprising mostly the teaching of sciences, social sciences and humanities, is to aim at developing scientific attitude and empirical stance, and a broad humanistic outlook in Students.

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