



Party Politics and Secularism

* Dr. B. M. Ratnakar

* Department of Political Science, Karnatak University Dharwad

Secularism is the very foundational philosophy of our nation. Observance of religious festivals and rituals were common in early days but later on religious feelings governed our mode of thinking thus there is a clear contradiction between the basic tenets of constitution and the character of our society. These get reflected on our politics and public administration which often work in a manner contrary to what is envisaged in the constitution. The recent communal disturbances accompanied by events of arson, loot and deaths in urban as well as in rural areas of the nation have tarnished the image of Indian secularism.

The Indian National Congress which was forerunner of national movement adopted it since its inception. The Indian National Congress was aware of Composite nature of our society and it always tried its best to carry the minorities with it.

The first three presidents of the congress belonged to minority communities i.e. W.C. Banerjee a Christian, Badrudin Tyabji, a Muslim and Phirozshah Mehta, a parsi. It was the philosophy of secularism which was a guiding force for freedom movement and later the same was adopted by the constitution makers. In free India persons like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Abdul Kalam Azad were firmly committed to this philosophy and never allowed any compromise at least in principle though in practice there were dreadful challenges. Nehru severely criticized obscurantist practices and wrote letters to all chief ministers as not to associate themselves with any religious rituals in their official capacity. Maulana Azad went to the extent of denying contesting election from Rampur in 1952 parliamentary Constituency as it was Muslim majority constituency.

But this ideal lasted for few years. After Nehru's demise in 1964, there emerged two categories of anti secular trend, one within the congress represented by tendons and others, the second category embodied Janasangh. Nehru and others were critical about anti secular trend within congress and attacked severely the Janasangh as apolitically reactionary party.

But Nehru was immensely shocked with Jabalpur riots in 1961 and could not recover of this shock till he breathed his last. Secularism did not grow steadily after his death. When Mrs. Indira Gandhi took over she laid emphasis on secularism and socialism that endeared her to Minorities. But after emergency, when she was isolated, she abandoned secularism in favour of soft Hindu communalism. For the first time in the history of free India, a prime minister while swearing by secularism acted contrary to it. It was like a beginning of demeaning secularism in India as said by Asghar Ali Engineer. So far it was the secularism which guided politics, now it is politics which determines the nature of our secularism.

1980's was quite catastrophic. Mrs. Indira Gandhi's soft Communalism further demeaned secularism on one hand and Hindu communal forces put question mark on Nehruvian concept of Secularism, on the other hand they described it

as "pseudo Secularism" and came out with a new concept of positive secularism. Here one can see a major shift and a new communal secular discourse which resulted in greater disaster and the 1980's saw major communal riots. As I mentioned earlier when Jabalpur riots broke down Nehru was severely shaken but today our new leaders are not shaken even by several riots.

BJP – The BJP began to call Nehruvian Secularism as pseudo secularism and ridiculed it as amounting to appeasement of Minorities. Throughout 1980's the BJP attacked Nehruvian Model of Secularism though while merging with Janata Party in 1977 they had accepted secularism and Gandhian Secularism and had taken pledge at Gandhiji's Samadhi to this effect. Since they wanted to come to power with the help of Janata Party they accepted secularism. But when they went out of power and separated from Janata Party they began attacking secularism. It was a sheer opportunism. It began to talk about Hindutva and Hindu majority as hegemonic and minorities at the mercy of the hegemonic majority. In fact this concept is totally undemocratic. It had also promised people that it would construct Ram Temple if it comes to power. Though it came to power with the support of many political parties still then it could not build the temple.

Before we take stock of various events pertaining to secularism, we must understand the philosophy of BJP and plural society. Here the main question is can a political party with purely partisan interest rule over a nation of pluralistic society? The Indian socio religious scene is extremely varied religious cultural traditions of Hindu themselves. Other religions too represent such pluralistic traditions if a political Party associates itself with any one religion, the question arises which sect or tradition of that religion, it will associate with? If BJP, associates itself with Hindu religion which tradition of Hinduism? Hinduism embraces hundreds of traditions within its fold. Thus in a democratic set up diversity always poses a problem. This problem of diversity can be tackled only if the state remains secular. Mahatma Gandhiji though he was intensely religious person, knew the dangers of religion getting associated with state and hence he advocated a secular state. While the nation faced with numerous communal disturbances during 1980's a fleet of new champions of secularism like V. P. Singh, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laalo Prasad Yadav, Kanshi Ram, Mayavati, Ram Vilas Paswan and other prominent leaders emerged to the situation. Minorities, Specially Muslims thought them as Political Messiahs and ran after them. Mulayam Singh Yadav caught the imaginations of Muslims and was thought to be very sincere in protecting the rights of minorities. But this opinion stayed for short when people realized that Mulayam Singh's secularism was not a lofty political ideal as stated in Indian constitution or like Nehruvian concept of secularism which was committed on philosophical basis rather than on reason of vote bank politics. The neo champions of secularism were more interested in gaining minority votes than really upholding secularism in philosophical sense like Nehru, Abdul Kalam Azad. For these party men secularism goes well as for as it delivers votes of minorities & something to be shunned if it does not. Today,

in democracy, politicians are more concerned about votes to come to power. But if power becomes the sole purpose & every thing else is secondary, serious problem emerge & the very foundation of our polity is shaken.

This is the main problem with these neo secularists who have linked secularism to vote bank politics & have no commitment of whatsoever to secularism as a political philosophy. The Dravidian parties like DMK & AIADMK have accepted secularism as a philosophy and they have championed it for long. But the recent AIADMK and BJP alliance during the last parliamentary elections and then to everybody's surprise, the DMK which was thought to be real inheritor of Dravidian philosophy voted BJP in favour of motion of confidence to save NDA Government. For both Dravidian parties secularism could be adhered to or dispensed with depending on the political situation or the stand of rival faction. If, AIADMK is on the BJP side DMK becomes the champion of secularism & if AIADMK goes with congress & the left, it finds itself in the camps of Hindutva. The condition in Andhra Pradesh is also not that different. Earlier N.T.R had championed the cause of secularism & allied himself with secular parties. But later, after his demise his son-in-law Chandrababu Naidu joined hands with NDA. Many others who attacked Hindu communalism and had endeared themselves to the minorities, but later found themselves in BJP camp to fulfill their aspirations for positions of power.

Yet another example can be cited of national Conference of J&K. Dr. Farooq Abdullah who is the son and successor of Sheikh Abdullah who along with Nehru was a great champion of secularism decided to go with NDA only to enjoy power. It is observed that the secularism has lost its philosophical

appeal and the neo secularists who have emerged on the political scenario of India during and after the Babri Masjid episode are more concerned about their vote banks rather than secularism of a lofty political philosophy. Their commitment is neither to secularism much less to minorities. They use secularism and champion the cause of minorities to seek their votes. A democracy can work successfully only if it remains secular and keeps away all sorts of communal or religious controversies. We declared India to be a secular democracy immediately after attaining freedom but even today we are unable to practice little of secularism. Our leaders never tried to disseminate secular values, much less practice secular politics. Power at any cost was the obsession of these leaders. The gap between secular democracy and communal politics is ever widening and we are heading towards a great disaster. In order to retain secularism the political parties must take initiative in preparing the Indian masses for value oriented secular democratic politics. We have entered globalization. Today no nation is mono religious or mono cultural. Due to economic aspects all nations are becoming pluralistic and hence pluralism is called postmodernism concept.

Whatever be the past history, the Hindu zealous must realize that it is not the sign of wisdom to open the wounds of past and take revenge for what are perceived as historical injustices. We have to live in the present and what is needed today is for all Indians to work together with mutual trust and cooperation as citizens of the Indian republic. All communities and all individuals have equal rights according to the constitution and according to constitutional theorists these rights do not accrue at the generosity of the constitution makers but they are inherent rights inherent in individuals as human beings.

REFERENCES

1. Abu Sayeed Ayyub –Secularism and Jawaharlal Nehru in Grover Veerendra Ed. Political Thinkers of Modern India : Jawaharlal Nehru Vol X Deep & Deep New Delhi 1990. | 2.M.G. Khan Secularism :A Nehruvian Perspective Karnatak Journal of Politics, KSPSTA. Shimoga. | 3.Jayapalan N.Indian Political Thought Atlantic Publishers New Delhi 2003. | 4. Partha Chatterji , A Possible India :Essays in Political Criticism Oxford University Delhi 1998. | 5.Anuradha D.N. The Crisis of Secularism in India Duke University Press 2007. | 6.Asgharali Engineer – Communalism in India Ajanta Publications 1985. |