



MODERN CHALLENGES TO INDIAN SECULARISM

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Abstract: India is a secular country where numerous religions have co-existed peacefully for more than seven decades. The concept of secularism has served as the bedrock for this co-existence. However, the concept of secularism was never left unchallenged. The primary objective of this article is to analyse the modern challenges to Indian secularism. The socio-political developments in modern India have resulted in both the growth and destruction of secularism in India. Despite the growth and developments in the social sphere of India, the concept of secularism still faces numerous challenges. Recent scenarios prove that these challenges are a major threat to the very existence of secularism in India. This article analyses the current condition of Indian secularism and discusses the methods to strengthen Indian secularism.

Keywords: Secularism, Communalism, Democracy, Human Rights

Religious life plays an important role in shaping the social atmosphere of individuals. Though the basic concept of all religions are similar, each religion tends to mould their followers' social life in different ways. Rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, ways of worship, lifestyle, rules of social order, etc... differ across religions. And these aspects plays a crucial role in shaping the lives of individuals who together form our nation. India is a country with a vast number of religions and subdivisions within itself. Each of these groups has their own unique ways of living and worshipping. It is no easy task for a country like India to balance its diversity and unity with its enormous population. Indian secularism is the key concept that served as the keystone for the success of India's unity despite its diversity. Secular means that religions will have no role to play in the Government or governance. The concepts of Human Rights and Secularism are the indispensable elements of Modern Democracy. Secularism is the principle, followed in all modern democratic systems by treating all religions in an equal manner.

However, despite all the developments that we have achieved towards forming a secular unified nation, the concept of Indian secularism was never left unchallenged. Ever since independence, religious tensions rose between different groups and individuals. The partition of India is a heart-touching example of how dangerous religious tensions can become. It could challenge the unity and even the very existence of a nation. Such religious tensions still exist among different groups in our country and it

poses a major challenge to the secular existence of our nation. This article is an attempt in that direction to analyse those modern challenges and discuss the importance of secularism in the modern scenario.

Objectives of the study

- To analyse the modern Challenges faced by secularism in India
- To analyse the condition of Secularism in modern India

Hypothesis

- The major challenges faced by secularism in modern India are communalism and corrupted politics.
- Secularism at a national level is exploited by religious and political leaders.

Methodology

In order to carry out the study, both primary and secondary data were used. The primary data is in the form of newspaper reports, online periodicals etc... and the secondary data is collected mainly from books, websites and online journals.

Modern challenges to Indian secularism

The concept of a secular state can be properly understood only after an appreciation of the true meaning of the word secularism. Secularism is a way of life and conduct guided by material considerations devoid of religion and spirituality. The basis of this ideology is that material means alone can advance the welfare of mankind and that religious beliefs retard the growth of human beings. What is called otherworldliness finds no place in this ideology, rather it is inconsistent with it. Materialism is another word for secularism. It means that matter is the ultimate reality. The concepts of Gods and spirituality, the ideas of heaven and hell, the ideas of moksha and nirvana are mere blind beliefs. Life in this world is the ultimate end. There is no life beyond or after this world. Happiness in this life is the supreme goal. (Avasthi, 2012)

However, in the Indian context, this concept of secularism seems a bit extreme. Therefore India adopted a form of secularism which is accommodative instead of the one that is exclusive. This accommodative concept of Indian secularism helped India achieve its goal of national unity despite its diversity. Indian secularism offers a method for every individual to stay religious and at the same time secular. This unique nature of secularism was always open to challenges both from within and outside the country. The accommodative and pro-religious nature of Indian secularism helped the concept to achieve a deep root in Indian society and at the same time strengthened religions. After Independence, secularism was welcomed as a necessary principle for the existence of our country. Even today, no individual, political party or religion have openly challenged Indian secularism. However, the nature of Indian secularism has evolved a lot in the past few decades. The nature of secularism that different groups or individuals

may want also varies. In this context, Indian secularism constantly faces different challenges and tensions.

Religious tensions may arise in different forms. But the most dangerous and common form it has taken is communalism. When religion and politics interferes beyond a boundary, tensions are bound to rise. Such tensions often end up challenging the existence of secularism in India. As individuals, our social lives are deeply bound to the religion that we follow. This means that any tension between two religions is also a challenge to peaceful co-existence in a society. Partition is a paining reminder of how important Indian secularism is for our country. Even after seven decades of Independence, such challenges continue to threaten our national unity.

Twenty first century has seen many developments in the Indian social scenario. A section of the society has grown beyond the boundaries of religion sharing a common sense of respect and humanitarian approach towards all human beings irrespective of their religion. However, there exists another section who are still bound deeply to religion and its sentiments. They are too blinded by their own beliefs to see the sentiments and beliefs of the people around them. Politics has made this much worse. Religion has always been a sensitive issue in India. Exploiting this weakness was done by all the major political parties in the past. However, recent events point out that this trend of involving religion in politics for political authority has taken a serious turn towards communalism by indulging politics in religion.

A newspaper report opined in the following way about the most recent Gyanvapi Masjid issue. “Almost every day, we hear of Hindu groups laying claims to mosques on the ground that they were built by razing temples to the ground by Muslim rulers. Today, it is the Gyanvapi Masjid, tomorrow it shall be Shahi Idgah Mosque in Mathura, and on another day it will be Jama Masjid, Bhopal. All such cases will be no different from Gyanvapi Masjid. They would be equally complex and sensitive. Nobody knows when this madness, which is threatening to rip apart the social fabric of our country, will come to an end.” (Sharma, 2022) Recently, after the settlement of the Ayodhya case in favour of the Hindu community, a similar case has arisen now in Varnasi regarding the Gyanvapi mosque. The matter had reached the SC on a petition filed by the Mosque Management Committee, which challenged the civil judge’s orders. The order permitted inspection, survey and videography of the mosque’s complex to collect evidence about the alleged existence of idols of Hindu deities inside the mosque, which is adjacent to the Kashi Viswanath Temple. After the survey, the lawyers representing the Hindu side claimed that a shivling was found at the mosque premises. (Sharma, 2022)

The demolition of Babri Masjid and the incidents that followed left a very lasting scar on Indian secularism. Not long after the case was finally settled by the Supreme Court in 2019, a new case very similar to that of Babri Masjid is being raised. This is a very concerning issue. These incidents prove how communalism could disorient the focus of secularism in our country. Such instances of communalism is not confined to any one religion or political party. All major religions and political parties play their fair share in the strengthening of communalism in India.

Very recently, another incident caught the attention of the media. The Kerala Police registered a case over allegedly provocative slogans being raised by a minor boy during a march in coastal Alappuzha. The case was registered on the grounds that the slogans chanted were against certain religious communities. (Wire, 2022) Such communal slogans and comments are now becoming increasingly popular in both social media and public spheres. Religious leaders and politicians are seen spreading such messages of communalism through online platforms. Sometimes such things happen without even the knowledge of the person spreading communalism. It may happen due to their ignorance. However, nothing qualifies to be a reason enough to justify the act of spreading communalism.

The concept of communalism is based on the belief that religious distinction is the most important and fundamental distinction and this distinction overrides all other distinctions. Since Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs are different religious entities, their social, economic, cultural and political interests are also dissimilar and divergent. As such, the loss of one religious group is the gain of another group and vice versa. If a particular community seeks to better its social and economic situation, it is doing at the expense of the other. (Chandra, 1987)

Communalism and communal riots are not new for India. What is more alerting is that, even though our society is developing giving importance to individuality and education, communalism still holds a strong grip over us. Every time a communal riot breaks out, the safety and integrity of the whole country will be at stake. Innocent lives are taken, children are orphaned and many families left homeless and hopeless. Most importantly such outbreaks and violence leaves an everlasting scar in the minds of the people that may undermine their faith in the working of our democracy. This needs to end. India have to fly above the boundaries of religion and join hands to live together in harmony. There is only too much the laws could do. In the end, the harmony of a nation lies with its people. The only way to overcome this nasty trend of communalism is if we learn to accept and live with the diversity of religions among us. As Gandhiji once said, "Religion is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it." (Gandhi, 1955) Only that realisation could bring religious harmony.

It is true that Politics and vote bank plays a very major role in the spread of communalism. Politics and government will be corrupted as long as the people holding power are corrupted. The only way to end this is for us to vote against those who uses religion as a vote bank. Strict laws should also be made to ban leaders and parties who spread religious hate and communalism from contesting in elections. Good governance will be delivered when the actual power holders realise their power and use it for the common good. Hence, it lies with us to decide the future of our country. For a harmonious future, we need to rise above the boundaries of religion and work together to build a secular country that thrives with unity in diversity.

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