Reviving Fairness: Critiquing Current Discourse on Religious Minorities in India through the Reconstruction of Normative Principles

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to draw attention to the flaws in current political and scholarly discourse about religious minorities in India. Christians as well as Muslims who live in underprivileged areas fight for fair and inclusive justice standards that might lead to the empowerment of these groups. In order to restructure the locations of socioeconomic problems and conflicts, it is necessary to revive the moralistic demands of the fairness principle. Here, a conscious effort is made to reconfigure fundamental normative principles via the reconstruction of the presupposed ideals of secularism and social justice. A variety of socio-political philosophy topics have been employed, but the focus stayed on a few key ideas, like, dignity, caste, injustice, identity, justice, citizenship, oppression, nationalism as well as secularism. This critique of the current socio-political philosophy is part of that effort.

Keywords: Secularism, Socio-political, Oppressed, Nationalism, Injustice, Empowerment, Constitution.

1   Introduction

1.1   Background

Indian democratic politics are focused on identity-related issues. At irregular times, all of the state's major institutions must struggle with identity-related challenges. The sociocultural landscape is a complicated mosaic of several identities, a number of which are in dispute with one another and can serve as a model of mixed cultures. A quick study at India's socio-political system will show that various ascriptive identities have had a significant impact on the development of a democratic polity and have both good and bad effects on how the executive as well as judicial systems operate. Communal identities as well as caste have taken up the most significant amount of room in the discourse of social wellbeing in India among the diversity of numerous identities. In this research, my primary goal is to examine the caste as well as religious issues through the lens of injustice. Social justice and secularism, two key institutional pillars of the contemporary state, are critically re-examined in order to assess the state's present capacity to provide equitable justice to the socially disadvantaged. The religious minority

groups who have gotten little attention in the popular dialogues on secularism and social equality are the topic of this article. These groups are impoverished, socially disadvantaged, and educationally backward.

Muslims or other religious minorities are seen as protected individuals in a liberal democratic society according to the secularist assumption. Overall, the idea of secularism symbolises the postcolonial Indian state's determination to uphold fairness for the numerous religious subgroups. Secularism, as a holistic design within the site of justice, demands that all religions get equal respect from the state and safeguards religious minorities in order to fight communalism.

1.2 Aim and Objectives

The primary goal is to expose the internal workings of religious groups, particularly of Christians as well as Muslims, in order to show how there are still unjustifiable human disparities in place. Every religious group has internal divisions that make it clear that its foundation is a system of persistent socioeconomic hierarchy and exploitation, and that a powerful and influential "minority within minority" is syphoning off the majority of state profits under the guise of improving the community as a whole. Under collectivist identities as private as well as internal to the community realm with limited outside involvement, the issues as well as worries of the majority of people in the minority sectors, notably women, economically and academically disadvantaged and culturally impoverished parts, are concealed.

1.2.1 Research Questions

The following research issues are addressed in this study in an effort to answer them:

•   Does social prejudice exist equally or only in certain religious groups in India?

•   Do Indian judicial systems treat its people fairly while dispensing justice?

•   Is it necessary to rebuild these ideas in light of the evolving social and religious landscape by making the severity of oppression the primary determinants of justice?

•   What are the fundamental problems that distinguish social justice and secularism as two distinct philosophies, making it difficult to reach a socio-political consensus?

•   Does the country's independence movement framework, upon which these two notions were built, ever have any bearing on our knowledge of the contemporary circumstances facing religious minorities?

2 Literature Review

Scholars disagree on the precise definition of religious tolerance in India and also have different goals while defining this concept. These justifications are divided into three groups. First, there is the secularism-related "Left-liberal Nationalist" viewpoint, which upholds this idea as a crucial weapon in the struggle against communism. The "secularism vs communalism" debates are the primary subject of research from this viewpoint. According to others, the democratic polity wants to create two contrasting images of the majority and minority, with the Hindu majority taking primacy while the religious minorities are terrorised.

Smith, for instance, takes a steadfast modernist stance and criticises the state's function as a responsible institution for enacting liberal reforms within the society. He contends that sociological or cultural reconstruction is not the province of the liberal state and that, as a result, the state should adhere strictly to the concept of separation of powers rather than giving in to demand for social changes.

A comparable argument that particularly criticises the modernist underpinnings of the idea of India as a secular state has been articulated by Nandy and Madan. Mutually they draw their theoretical inspiration from Gandhian thought and contend that Indian culture and traditions as well as religious conscience—mostly Hindu—are indisputable superior in fostering cooperation, spirituality and tolerance when compared to the callous and hegemonic ideology of the modern western world. Western secularism is condemned for demanding that religious identities retain some significance, separating religion from public life, and fostering new, foreign categories.

All political parties, even supposedly "secular forces," practise party-political secularism, a pernicious theory that was developed some 40 years ago. The essential idea has all principles removed by this secularism, which has opportunism in its stead. Its unspoken motto is opportunistic alliance with religious communities, mostly for the sake of short-term electoral gain. Opportunistic distance (engagement or disengagement) is also a part of this. It has removed the critical from the term "critical respect" and bizarrely interpreted "respect" to mean striking deals with aggressive or orthodox sections of religious groups, such as unlocking the Babri Masjid/Ram temple for puja and renouncing women's rights in the Shah Banu case. It is indifferent to freedom as well as equality-based religious reform. It has also assisted in sparking intergroup conflict.

The issue of caste and social stratification in Hindu culture are a major focus of literature that offers a comprehensive perspective on the development of social justice institutions in India. Caste, outcaste (Dalit), as well as indigenous or Adivasi people make up the three segments of Indian society (Adivasi). The caste system is divided into four hierarchically ranked castes: the Brahmins (priests), the Ksatriyas (rulers as well as warriors), the Vaisyas (businesspeople), as well as the Sudras (labourers). The 4th labor caste, which would be ritually suspicious and socioeconomically outscoring (known to as the once-born), as well as the 3 castes, that are socioeconomically dominant and ritualistically pure (alluded to as the twice-born), while clearly distinct, together make up the Hindu human society.

2.1 Research Gap

Most of the time, the research that is now accessible investigates the issue without examining the economically and socially marginalized segments of Christians as well as Muslims together. Due to its fairness and equality of goals, the independent study of both institutions lacks universalistic principles and moral concerns that may be accepted in the general public spaces. These are the drawbacks of the material that is currently accessible, particularly when it pertains to the Dalit difficulties within Islam and Christianity. The more recent demands for fair justice made by the sectors of these two groups that are socially and educationally disadvantaged are insufficiently addressed by the heightened and concrete conceptions of these two principles found in social science discourses.

The goal of this research is to critically examine the institutional arrangements of secularism as well as social equity standards with the claim that the roles played by both institutions do not fairly serve the economically and socially marginalized segments of Christians as well as Muslims.

2.1.1 Crisis of Secularism: Muslims as neo-untouchables

The Hindu nationalists' view on Muslims is very hostile for a number of reasons. First, with a population of over a hundred million, they are perhaps the most crucial voting bloc opposing Hindu nationalism. The proximity of two Muslim majority nations, Pakistan and Bangladesh, makes the relationship among the Hindu majority as well as the Muslim minority tense, undecided, and even complicated. Thirdly, Hindu nationalists blame Muslims for the vivisection of India, the Hindus' holy and historic homeland. Even though they are geographically divided, Indian Muslims have not completely renounced their claim to nationality despite the division. The aim to solidify Muslims as a nationality is followed by promoting Urdu as the only language of Muslims, although this is incorrect.

Oommen had made such observation about the status of the Muslim while analysing the rise and popularity of Hindu nationalism and its relationship with the Muslims in the democratic polity of India. Apart from such defined political marginalization in the last two decades the conditions of the Muslims have further deteriorated on multiple other indicators of better social, economic and cultural conditions. The Muslim community in the contemporary India is the victim of multiple prejudices and stereotypes. The current world order under the heightened leadership of the USA and specifically after the attack on Twin Towers has generated a fear psychosis among the population against the Muslim. In the Indian case, the general communal atmosphere has already maligned the Muslim religious identity as anti-national and orthodox. The secular state in most of the cases showed its incapacity to protect the rights and cultural values of the Muslims during the hour of crises.

3 Understanding Constitutional and Minority Rights

Organizations for social and economic justice or otherwise secularism are studied as the two primary foundations on which the structure of justice has now been built. In order to provide a cogent explanation, I have employed a variety of political philosophy topics, but the focus has stayed on a few key ideas, like, dignity, caste, injustice, identity, justice, citizenship, oppression, nationalism as well as secularism. As historical or social forces have reshaped to provide alternate interpretations of the writings, political texts and other literary works are seen in a new light. These answers help shed light on the time's apparent discrepancies and challenging sections.

India is undergoing a multidimensional reformation and reconstruction that is somewhat purposefully aimed at nation-building, modernisation, and forward-moving growth. The new vision for contemporary India aims to create a new society by eschewing many conventional ideals and ancient fixations and embracing the age of reason. However, these valued aspirations for determining India's destiny were met with criticism, challenges, and counterproposals. The three major ideologies that had a significant impact on shaping the political discourse around the concept of democratic republic in India were Gandhian conservative views, Marxian socialism, as well as Nehruvian National Unity.

The Indian Constitution was developed within a unique socio-political period that should not be discounted from history. The widespread sectarian violence between Muslims and Hindus over the Pakistani issue had been observed at the national level by the Constituent Assembly. The bigger constitutional and political issue was resolved when India and Pakistan were split apart, but a sizable population had to live with the fallout for a very long time. The Muslims felt powerless and abandoned under the new political system, because they encountered prejudice and hatred in several areas of public life. Therefore, it fell on the shoulders of the constitution's authors to defend the rights of India's minorities under the new system. Second, in order to complete the massive modernization effort in India, the ruling leaders must address the social issues brought up by the current campaigns against caste prejudice. Since the feudal and traditional Hindu caste structure regulated the social order, improving the socioeconomic standing of the underprivileged caste groups became a top priority for the Constituent Assembly.

A distinct paradigm from these ideological variations was put up by the Drafting Committee, which was led by B. R. Ambedkar, during the creation of the modern constitution. The Constitution envisioned the major driving forces of the contemporary state as being universal independence, national unity, as well as acknowledgement of socioeconomic disparities/differences for their effective removal. In order to provide meaning to the many rights that are a part of every citizen's contemporary identity, the state was granted the ethical right to use authority in the public realm. It was a significant ethical undertaking with a far-reaching goal of escaping the horrifying history of imperial assault, communal/regional discord, and socioeconomic injustices.

Minority faiths may become more marginalised in the lacking of secular legislation as well as specific protection of rights. The Indian Constitution's Articles 15 and 16 deal in great detail with secular equal rights, which safeguard each individual from prejudice based on factors such as place of birth, caste, religion, sex, race, descent, etc. The constitution also ensures equal opportunity in issues of public employment and states that nothing mentioned within this article shall prevent the state from appointing or filling posts for any underprivileged populace that, in the state's opinion, is not adequately addressed in essential services to the state. The specific educational and cultural rights of minorities are also covered under Articles 29 and 30. The liberal principle of person-to-person and human rights is supported by the constitutional provision that all citizens of the state have equal secular rights, including all members of religious groups. These rights guard an individual from unreasonable or unjustified interference with their property by another person or organisation.

The social justice agenda in India has shown necessary flexibility in addressing the concerns and problems of the deprived sections and has eventually extended its purview to newer communities and groups. However, there is an increasing number of democratic demands from various quarters of the population appealing for special recognition and status. The institution of social justice is struggling to provide justice to these numerous groups as there is no articulated policy framework available which can resolve these issues.

3.1   Current Developments

The Sachar Committee Report is probably the first systematic effort by the political elites in India to look at socio-economic problems of a religious community. In the recent debates on social justice, some scholars of political Sociology have raised questions concerning religious groups and their internal differences.

A mapping of social stratification among the Christians is presented by Rowena Robinson in her article "Fluid Boundaries: Christian Communities in India" in which she has empirically located the social, cultural and religious differences within the Christians in India. They argue that the positions of the Dalits within the Christians are identically similar to the Hindu Dalits and therefore the state must provide them equal safeguards.

The Constitutional state of India has created a complex arrangement of rights on various bases of identifications. The general nature of the state mostly remains committed to the utilitarian principles of universal good and common citizenship but, as seen earlier, under the valid protest from particularistic communities, the state has simultaneously provided communitarian rights to multiple minority groups.

4 Outcomes

In India, the intellectual scholarship on the issues of citizenship, nationalism, caste, minorities, secularism, justice, etc is confined mostly in the conventional framework of liberal democracy. In most of the cases, the politics based on ascriptive identities (caste, region, ethnicity and religion) is treated with contempt and as detrimental to the secular fabric of the polity. The general tendencies among the social scientists are to valorise the idea of citizenship and vibrant civil society in order to organize the diversities in pursuit of common good. The plural identities are at times given equal space in the democratic system, only under the condition that they uphold the cherished ideals of the constitution.

The analysis related to the question of religious minorities and protected social groups is paternalistic and is influenced by contemporary liberal analogy. There is a popular assumption, that the state support to these groups should be restrictive and temporary until these groups converge themselves into the collective identity, as equal citizens is one of the influential themes among the social scientists today. Any political measure which disturbs the abstract notion of equality is termed as narrow and restrictive. Castigating the socio-cultural and political aspirations of the minority groups under the hegemonic assertion of national consensus is reflective in both the ideology of Hindu and secular nationalists.

Even those who stood on behalf of the religious minorities also pay recourse to the liberal tradition and demand extensive rights for the groups in order to protect themselves from the onslaughts of the majority and construct a collectivist identity of the religious groups. This school of thought locates these identities as homogeneous units in the backdrop of secularism or protecting religious autonomy.

The discourses on religious minorities have openly adopted such collective notions of the identities and also promote secular understanding which legitimates the demands and their particular interests. Such bird view depictions of a community have political and ideological overtones which hardly reflect the social and economic disadvantages faced by the people. However, such secular-communal generalization is not adequate to solve the questions raised by deprived and depressed sections within the religious minorities. Certain groups and individuals within the religious minorities, especially among the Muslims and the Christians, have demanded special protections and safeguards to overcome their deprivation and exploitation and thus brought the issue of social justice within the discourse of religious minorities. The issue of social justice is new to the minorities in the sense that earlier their problems were judged by keeping the doctrine of secularism in mind.

4.1   Suggestions

I recommend two key actions to jump-start secularism's practise and conversation. First, the focus must shift from a politically motivated endeavour to a social justice movement. Second, the emphasis has shifted from interreligious to intrareligious matters. To illustrate my thesis, I use the names of two outstanding leaders: B.R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru. When two essentially equal communities see one other as enemies, they become stuck in a majority-minority syndrome, a vicious cycle of spiralling political strife and social alienation, astutely recognised by B.R. Ambedkar.

I don't mean to imply that we should now disregard interreligious matters. But since the current state created the discord, it is undoubtedly beyond its power to make things right. Yet, distance and the absence of shared preoccupation provide societies breathing room. Individuals can now look inside themselves for resources to build new communal living arrangements. Not just bringing back outdated, ineffective forms of religious tolerance is at stake here. Because religious toleration was ineffective, the political project of secularism was born. New forms of socio-religious reciprocity are required today, as they are essential for conducting daily affairs, as well as creative solutions to the problem of citizen political alienation, which is a democratic deficit with consequences that go beyond the purview of secularism.

To create an integrated approach to justice, the required methodology must be sensitive to the intuitions of both institutions. Limiting the majority community's hegemonic influence over political institutions and upholding the egalitarian communitarian principles of all religions are the ethical goals of secularism. Social justice policies are focused on empowering the socially and economically marginalized communities that experience bias, prejudice, including exclusion from society as from elite groups of all faiths.

5   Discussion

In India, secularism has always drawn both strong support from the intellectual community and harsh condemnation. Secularism is seen as essential for establishing a tolerant democratic system since it protects plural society's beauty from communalism and absolutism. Therefore, secularism in this context is viewed as an ideal under which state will have an interventionist role in the domain of religion to reform it in a way that it can supplement the liberal and modern values enshrined in the modern constitution. This is because secularism in this context is seen as an ideal to achieve the ideals of modern polity. Given that the state's actions are shaped by religious principles, many academics contend that this interventionist strategy is incompatible with the secularism worldview. Indian secularism is criticised for being a byproduct of western modernism and for being a foreign concept that has no application to India's deeply ingrained tolerant traditions.

Modern constitutional ideas are formed as great compromises after traversing the heightened terrain of contestations and claims within the rhetoric of nation-building and social transformation. It is widely acknowledged that the socioeconomic circumstances of current society, the functional social interactions, and the overlapping method of production are exploitative of the majority of the people and overtly more repressive of Dalits, women, and religious minorities. Confronted with a society rife with many oppressions, nation builders have shown a commitment to the enlightened goal of constructing a decent society by overcoming casteism,

communalism, feudalism, and capitalist exploitation. Therefore, the conceptions of justice formed during such a complicated era are not abstract in a naive political sense, but rather are based in the dynamics of social structure and the contestations that it spawned.

The Constitution validates the necessity of fundamental rights for all citizens, a welfare state sensitive to socialism, the promotion and protection of minority interests through its secularism doctrine, and the recommendation of structural changes for the socially deprived sections through various affirmative action measures. Cumulatively, these principles demonstrate the Indian government's dedication to delivering justice to its diverse inhabitants. However, these diverse strategic institutional rules do not provide justice for a particular set of oppressed groups. These promote the interests of social elites by preserving the present socioeconomic institutions. A relatively small group of educated, middle-class males with renowned social prestige and economic power will gain from this system, whereas enormous numbers of individuals from other groups will almost certainly not.

Supporters and opponents of secularism physically create a homogenised picture of religious groups in relation to one another inside secularist discussions, adding to the discourse of right-wing collectivism. Irrespective of socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, or geographical affiliation, identities are established, comprehended, and articulated in most political texts using just textual language. The researchers have placed a strong emphasis on the solidarity of religious minorities and their cultural differentiation from the prevailing majoritarian culture, but they have largely disregarded the issue of internal diversity within the group.

6   Conclusion

There is no doubt that secularism as an ideal to establish religious harmony in the society has been very important in the history of modern civilization. However, under the current juncture, when the aspirations of the oppressed people against the exclusion and denigration are influencing the public debates, any attempt to contemplate them as equal on the basis of non-material issues of common religious or cultural identity will be seen as hegemonic and insensitive to the issues raised by the oppressed sections. The above-mentioned discourses in demonstrated that the religious minorities in India are not monolithic but heterogeneous in social arenas and also subject to relatively same kind of discrimination and disadvantages, which persists within the Hindu social system; however, these persisting gross social inequalities are not recognized by the state.

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