

## **SECULARISM: BLESSING OR BURDEN?**

Secularism is an integral part of our constitution but till date it remains a much confused, misunderstood and politically misused term. Scholars, political leaders and practitioners have failed to provide a clear cut understanding of secularism. The issue becomes all the more serious, as under the garb of secularism, some political parties are in fact playing the minority card to garner political leverage.

Despite the adoption of secularism, communalization of our society and polity has not been contained. Secularism in fact has not been able to cleanse our society of parochial feelings resulting in socially unfortunate consequences. Much have to do with the undesirability of secularism and the uncertainties associated with the meaning of secularism. In this context it is significant to understand the origin of secularism and its literary understandings. Though secularism is a doctrine closely affiliated with religion but the word 'secularism' in fact has come from the Latin word 'SAECULUM' which means 'this time' or 'this world' as opposed to the other world, which is linked to divinity. Reference to 'this world' in itself symbolizes an inferior quality or an earthly or worldly quality. In this context under secularism religion is perpetually relegated to the background, pushed to the backstage and the modern state exercises complete hold over the society from the cradle to the grave. With such materialistic meanings attributed to secularism this doctrine under any circumstances is a 'misfit' for the Indian society where religious sentiments pre-dominate our social and psychological frame of mind.

The secular design created by our constitution and secularism as practiced in our country contradicts the socio-cultural milieu of this great country of ours which though is moving fast towards modernization but our people are zealously religious in thought and mind. Such inconsistencies have much to do with the origin of secularism. Secularism is a concept purely western in origin and nature. Its implantation on the Indian conditions since the 42<sup>nd</sup> amendment, (when it was incorporated in the constitution) has proved to be undesirable and inappropriate to keep fundamental forces at bay.

Secularism as a political conception having western roots makes it misfit for Indian conditions where religious affiliations and values of individuals play a crucial role. Secularism which is hesitant to bring religion openly into the public domain is fit

for the western societies which are noteworthy for their arrogance, exploitative behaviour, individualistic blend of mind and moral bankruptcy. Practice of secularism in our country has created a situation where moral prescriptions are being downsized by the government and religion is pushed out from the public sphere, leading to the impoverishment and degradation of public lives of individuals. Secularism in other words by relegating religion to the background has forced the common people to refrain from religious interactions and deliberations in the public sphere. This has in fact made people of our country to forcefully separate their public and private lives and this has spelt doom for our religiously sensitive people. The crux of the problem with secularism is that every individual being whole in himself, his religiously determined private life and his public presentations cannot be logically separated. But our so called political leaders and masters by seeking to separate the two in an attempt to give a push to secularism (to gain political mileage) has thus encouraged the release of anti-social forces in the form of hatred and ill feelings of one religious group against the other. This happens because when religion is pushed out of public lives, as a prerequisite of secularism, every religious group becomes hesitant to publicly (and ultimately privately intermingle) appreciate and discuss each other's religious values and practices. In a multi religions country like India the state should encourage open discussions between people of all religions and ensure that people of one religious group come closer to the other and moderate each other religious beliefs and values. What is thus required for our country to ensure social peace is moderation by all religious preachers and leaders-----moderation of one's attitude and outlook towards other religious groups. This can happen only in an open atmosphere where the state deliberately brings religion into public sphere and mobilize religious groups. Secularism should not be used to deliberately suppress religion to create a democratically equal political society. It should be realized that religion plays a dominant role in the lives of our people. We tend to cling to religion and rely on it to deal with fear and uncertainty. Religion gives meaning to our lives and its purposes and also regulates our individual and collective behavior. But secularism in India has been denying this ingrained disposition to be actualized, as the state seeks to close its doors to religious applications and understandings in public sphere. Our public lives and the public domain as such seems to be exhausted of humane and moral values.

As religion is not used to enrich our public lives, people of different religious faiths remain ignorant about the value of other religious variants resulting in a choked atmosphere. Under such circumstances religious fanaticism gets encouraged. Thus secularism as adopted by our constitution and practiced by the government has played a marginal role in defusing communalization of our society.

Under the garb of secularism religion, is pushed to the background but religion cannot remain subdued for long considering the religious sensibilities of the Indians. As religious sentiments have been denied entry into the public domain a situation has emerged where religion has found a forced entry into the public sphere in the process doing more harm to religion by releasing the force of fanaticism and fundamentalism.

The framers of our constitution were men of foresight and immense caliber. Inculcated with pragmatic view points in the context of our deep-seated religious values and temperament, they realized the importance of religion in our lives. As such the original constitution under articles 25-29 were provided for the freedom of religion. These articles seek to make religion an important component of our public life. Secularism was imposed on our society and as an alien concept it has remained so because it has not filled the vacuum created by our political manipulators in the social arena. What is called for is an enlargement of the provisions of articles 25-29 further so that there is open serious and meaningful interaction, discussion and collaboration between people of all faiths in the public sector under the aegis of the government. The state / government should not shy away from adding moral doses to its process of governance. This would help to create a situation where the strong and meaningful points of every religion would be applied for the cleansing of our mind, society and ultimately our polity.

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