MEASUREMENTS OF SECULARISM IN INDIAN POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS

Rajkumar Singh

Department of Political Science, B. N. Mandal University, West Campus, P.G. Centre, Saharsa, India.
rajkumarsinghpg@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Singh, Rajkumar. 2018. Measurements of Secularism in Indian Politics: An Analysis. Lebanese Science Journal, 19(2): 285-296.

The theme of secularism has been adopted as one of the essential elements in the basic structure of Indian constitution which lays down that (i) the state has no religion; (ii) all citizens however have the fundamental right to follow and propagate their own religion; and (iii) it is the duty of the state to protect life, liberty and property of all citizens, provide security to them and enable them to exercise their fundamental rights. The state will not discriminate between the citizens on the grounds of religion and language. But while our constitution has been based on secularism or dharma nirapekshita, our society is steeped in religion. Observance of religious festivals and rituals is part of our day-to-day life. Religious feelings govern our mode of thinking. Thus, there is a clear contradiction between the basic tenets of the constitution and the character of our society. These get reflected in our politics and public administration, which often work in a manner contrary to what is envisaged in the constitution. The caste and communal character of our politics inevitably enter in the conduct of public administration. While the constitution envisages secularism in the sense of dharma nirapekshita, our politicians have conveniently interpreted it as sarva dharma samabhava. This has given free licence to our politicians holding high positions to freely participate in all religious functions with the official paraphernalia in attendance. With time, the religious elements have sharpened their edge and became over conscious in relation to their identity. It has badly affected the existing society and, if it continues, it would harm the social fabric in multiple forms. At the juncture it appeared pertinent to analyse the whole Indian context keeping in view the larger interest of humanity and world peace.

Keywords: religion, secularism, society, Indian politics, social harmony.

INTRODUCTION

Initially for centuries in India the people of different religious ideas and cultural values have lived together. During this period attitudes of tolerance for each other's religious faith did developed and a process of symbiosis and cultural pluralism resulted. But this was primarily due to two factors. First, sultans and rajas realized the need for accommodation, and along with military and aristocratic forces evolved ways of living together and common style of life. The Rajput- Mughal symbiosis is one example of this, second, at the mass level there were innumerable Sufis and saints who fought, against Mullah Islam and priestly Brahmanism pioneering equalitarian and universalistic values and practices, which established ties among communities rather than dividing them along caste and sectarian lines as part of a critique of existing religious political powers *(Rizvi, 2005)*. In the Post Independence scenario the social dynamics was very complex. The process of secularization/ industrialization was going on at a slow pace. Even at this stage, though constitution was secular, the state apparatus: the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the army and the police were infiltrated by communal elements. The Congress government, though predominantly secular, had many leaders in important positions who were influenced by a Hindu communal ideology. This resulted in a social development that was mixed; on the one hand secularism thrived and on the other though communalism remained dormant, was never dead. The political use of Hindu religion begins under the impulse of colonial modernity in which proposals were advanced for a 'semiticised unitary Hinduism *(Singh, 2008)*. Originally it was first proposed by nationalists who thought that Hinduism suffered in comparison with Christianity because of its lack of effective ecclesiastical organization. The idea of Hinduism itself is quasi-political in origin, in the sense that people did not wish to be Hindus in this abstract sense until they felt political need to do so. It is therefore easy to exploit it for overtly political purposes *(Kaviraj, 1995)*. The reality in India is much more complex than western societies, which have been totally secularized.

Use of religion for political purposes or for gaining victory in elections was almost unknown for political parties at the time of independence. It is curious to note that communal politics gained strength after around forty years of national government. If it was entirely due to the forces of traditionalism it should have appeared at the time when forces of modernity had gained enormously in Indian society and economy. Since the sixties of the twentieth century, Indian politics has been a massive alteration in style, language, modes of behavior, reflecting far more the actual cultural understanding of rural Indian society rather

than the western culture of the elite which inherited power in the Nehru years. It was more compounded by the forgetfulness and negligence of Nehruvian state who not merely failed to create conditions for common sense in Indian politics, through which liberal secular political ideas could be communicated dialogically to them, rather, its neglect of cultural institutions such as primary education which contributed to a further division in society. As a result the benefits of development were so unequally and unjustly distributed that it prepared ground for two types of political dissent - an economic critique of class and an indigenist critique of modernist cultural privilege. The second kind of resentment, naturally, has predominantly found cultural expression through regionalist and communal politics, through the politics of Hindu and Hinduism.

The objectives of this study is about the contradiction of the theory and practice prevailing in Indian constitutional provisions regarding religion and its large scale effects on public, which in democracy, is supreme and elect its government by giving majority to a particular political party or a coalition made before or after the election results. It is a test case study of the hypothesis that the different interpretations of religion by the political parties in power or in opposition have opened and allowed the religious faiths and traditions to dominate the public sentiments on political issues. It made the inherent problem more complicated when misuse of religion became an effective tool to influence vote-bank substantially. In this respect, the study dealt with the following:

- India is a democratic country where the government is formed by the people, for the people and of the people.
- People belonging to a particular religion closely identify themselves with the religions group.
- Religion acts as an effective tool of social control by imbibing certain ethical values.
- The narrow focus and vote banks of most parties, sideline national issues such as economic welfare and national security.
- Over a period of time religious customs and traditions gain the force of law.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology in this study aims to explain the contexts of Indian politics in reference to various provisions of country's constitution and increasing dimensions of important religions existing in India. As the available material on aspects of

study such as constitution, religion and Indian society are mostly descriptive, analytical and theoretically ambiguous, the research used secondary source-books, journals, and newspapers, at times quantitatively to explain and analyze events leading to the mixture of religion and society in Indian politics. At large, the study relies on collected facts/materials because it would help to test the hypothesis.

In the course of the study, main focus remained on different dimensions of related aspects and therefore, the work has excluded otherwise very useful narrations of other contexts to concentrate solely on study themes.

Elements of the Study

Mixing up of Religion and Politics

There are two consequences of this mixing up of religion, politics and public administration. First, it has given prominence in public life to religious leaders like 'Sants' and 'Mahants', 'Imams' and 'Priests'. They have started playing an active role in government's decision-making. The interference of religious leaders in administrative matters can prove dangerous to our secular democracy. Secondly, practices and festivals have started making serious inroads into the safety and convenience of our public life *(Dubhashi, 2002)*. As a result, significant change occurred both in Hindu religious community and in its relations to others. In the changed circumstances, the Hindu community was called into action, not as one of the various Indian communities, but as the Indian community. It was not only the religious revivalist, but the modernizing reformists as well who identified the Hindu community with Indianism and patriotism. Steps were taken deliberately to create a Sanskrit-based, Hindu language, Hindi, as against the earlier composite language. Furthermore, there are two variants of this expression of Indianness. One is the overt religious concept of Hindutva, and the other is the 'secular' expression of Indianness as based on ancient Indian culture. The first is a religious, the second is cultural concept, but both together relate Indianness to the tradition of what is now identified as Hindu civilization *(Nathan, 1996)*. On the lines drawn above the political parties of India may be grouped as religion-leaned and secularism-leaned.

India, despite partition on the basis of religion, resolved to be a secular state and promulgated its constitution in 1950 accepting equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their caste, creed or race. It was undoubtedly a great step forward. But it was not easy to translate the constitutional ideals into practice in a society as complex as India. Indian state

was characterized as 'Soft state' by Gunner Myrdal in his *Asian Drama*. The Indian state remained not only soft towards communalism but it also encouraged it, if it paid political dividends. 1970 onwards Central and different State Governments have started the practice of giving 'Iftar' parties to our Muslim brethren during 'Ramzan'. Now political leaders vie with each other to throw such lavish parties at national and state capitals, and the practice continued even in the regime of a BJP Prime Minister. Wide publicity is given in the media as to who attended these parties and what was served. It is forgotten that such politicization of 'Iftar' is a sacrilege to sacred religious practice much to the disgust of truly religious people. Even the representation of the people act provides that appeals made on the grounds of religion to gather votes would be deemed a corrupt practice and would disqualify a candidate, but this happen as a rule in all our elections.

Louis Dumont, one of the most influential writer on Indian religion and society viewed sadhus as the agent of the development in Indian religion and speculation, 'the creator of values' responsible for 'founding of sects and their maintenance', and for the major ideas and social innovations. In the changed circumstance, this consensus on the role of religious figures began to change during the time of Mrs. Indira Gandhi who relied on populist measures and appeal to specific categories of voters. She drew Hindu religious figures into the lime light through her patronage of religious institution and played the 'Hindu Card' against the minorities *(Dyke, 2002)*. The case of Sikh religious leader Bhindarwala is a burning example of her creation. She was systematically encroaching on the traditional vote bank of Jana Sangh. Mrs. Gandhi also co-opted Muslim religious figure in her attempt to hold on to the Muslim vote, pursuing her strategy of what was then called Fatwa Politics. It was seen on certain occasions that persons holding purely religious office play a decisive role to the job of political recruitment. Religious saints and sages are in great demand on the eve of and during election for influencing the voters in favour of or against a particular candidate or party. Political leaders run from one religious leader to another to seek their blessings for their success in elections. The net result is not the secularisation of the socio-economic and political processes but the communalisation of these processes *(Singh, 1999)*. Thus, the ideology and practice of secularism in actual fact, however, is confronted with multi-faceted and multi-dimensional challenges.

Rise of Religion-based Parties

Indian secularism began to face a rough weather with the revival and strengthening of religion-leaned political parties in the country. The pro-Hindu strategies of the ruling Congress reminded the BJP, RSS and VHP its actual role for which they had been

struggling in previous decades. Earlier, in in the seventies of the past century, several proposals were made for a judicious deradicalisation of the BJP's slogans from groups inside the party itself. The decade also witnessed communal propaganda seemed to bring in few dividends and the destiny of the Jana Sangh irreversibly on the decline. At the juncture it was felt inside the Party that it should subtly shift its appeal to the middle class. Instead of the traditional appeal to Hindu Chauvinism, it should try to project itself as a substitute for the Congress, asking for support not because of its ideological differences with the Congress, but its similarity - offering a cleaner, more efficient, less corrupt government. After the dramatic success of the rathyatras, its own agenda was rewritten in a retrograde direction, but it is remarkable how clearly the party has not rejected its other, more secular constituency. From the early nineteen eighties, Hindu communal organizations increased the scale, range aggressiveness and violence of their operations under the general direction of the militant Hindu ring-wing party Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and its mass fronts: the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which coordinates religious bodies, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its electoral wing. Again in mid- 1980s (1984), elections were held to Lok Sabha in 1984 after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, the BJP under the presidency of Atal Bihari Vajpayee got only two seats. Now Vajpayee resigned and L.K. Advani, considered a hawk in the party, took over and gave BJP a new hope and a decision was taken by the leadership of BJP to promote Hindu militancy to snatch away the Hindu vote bank from the Congress.

There was a mad race among the national political parties to use religion for strengthening and expanding their political base. This had led to the growth of fundamentalism in India. The growth of strong communalism has made government more and more susceptible to communal pressures exerted by them, thereby finally accommodating and conceding the demands of these organizations. The decision of the Rajiv Gandhi Government to undo the impact of the judgement of Supreme Court in Shah Bano case and the withdrawal of Presidential ordinance (1990) acquiring the disputed land at Ayodhya on the pressure of Babri Masjid Action Committee can be quoted in this context. In the famous Shah Bano case the power elite among Muslims used Indian Secularism for their own power game and resolutely opposed any change or progressive measures in the name of right to practice their own religion and whenever it politically suited them they aroused Muslim sentiment. The Muslim leaders mounted pressure on the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to change the law in favour of Muslims. The ruling party could hardly resist such pressure and buckled under and changed the law and passed the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill 1986. This had very adverse effect on an average Hindu mind. It convinced them that Muslim leaders are a fanatic lot and

secondly, that the Congress indulges in appeasement of Muslim and treats them as its vote bank. In addition, it adversely affected our secular polity in two ways: (i) the politicisation of religious entity, and (ii) the legitimization of communal organization as the bonafide representatives of the interest of different religious groups *(Amrutkar, 2010).* It is true for most of the Indian political parties.

As the political role of Congress in early 1980s was nothing but exploitation of religious sentiments to win over certain sections of Indian society, the BJP which is not only a rightist but also a Hindu communal party chose to use the religious controversial issues to capture power at the Centre and some states mainly in Hindi heart land. In its view, the way the secular state has functioned in India has paved way for the growth of fanaticism and fundamentalism, emergence of the anti-national forces posing threat to our unity and integrity and a strong opposition to progressive social legislation. The Bharatiya Janata Party maintains that our present secularism is pseudo secularism as it amounts to "appeasement of the minorities, particularly Muslims. According to their understanding, Muslims constitute the biggest vote banks as they generally vote as a community while the Hindu consciousness at political level gets fragmented along caste, linguistic and regional lines. In turn, BJP and its groups has come out with a concept of positive secularism of true secularism meaning that the minority should not enjoy any special protection and all such provisions in the Constitution should be done away with. It usually puts it as "justice for all appeasement of none" *(Ghosh, 1999).* The RSS and organizations of Parivar have been constantly criticizing the Congress rulers for their appeasement of the minority, especially Muslims. They are saying that though Hindus are in majority they are being discriminated. They want the creation of "Hindu Rashtra". They argue that their definition of Hindu is very wide. Whoever, irrespective of the religion to which he belongs, considers India as his janmbhumi, karmbhumi and pitrubhoomi is a Hindu.

The political parties of today, especially the national ones, are exploiting religious/communal sentiments for electoral gains. Cynical building up of Sant Bhindranwala to marginalise the Akalis or Akalidal, for instance, proved catastrophic not only for the Congress Party but also for the entire country *(Ghosh, 1997).* It is a sorry state of affairs that the polity too has fallen prey to the lobbying of communal organizations and groups as illustrated by the enactment of the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act 1986, banning of *Satanic Verses*, and opening of the locks on the Babri Masjid. Similarly, the wooing of Shahi Imam by the Janata Dal - led National Front resulted into fall of its government at the centre as the after effect of secularism. If mullahs and sadhus, and mahants come to wield political clout, as it happens today, communal

forces are bound to get string themed. It is amusing to note that we never hear them speaking against old traditions such as 'pardah' or the 'caste - system,' polygamy or extravagant feasting etc., but they talk of religious identity. In the same context, if the BJP is blamed to have been practicing majority communalism, the Congress and non-Congress parties should equally be held responsible for pampering minority communalism in our society for their political gains, forgetting the fact that the indefinite variety of the land can only be preserved and enriched through a policy or substantive decentralization and that a genuine federal set up is the only solution of our problems.

Proliferation of Socio-religious Base

With social changes of the late 1970s and the early 1980s, communalism got a strong boost and it started attacking secularism in a big way. Among political parties, the BJP was quick to take up the mantle of "the" communal party, riding on the wave of the post-mandal upper class/caste backlash. Supporting the BJP was the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a relatively new outfit with branches all over the world and drawing on support, both moral and financial, from the Hindu diaspora in the West. This took an aggressive form when the Babri Masjid/Ramjanambhoomi controversy erupted. This period also saw the rise of other militant Hindu organizations such as the Bajrang Dal and the Shivsena. These groups quickly mushroomed and poisoned the social space with communal rhetoric and the agenda of Hindu Rashtra, and launched an ideological, social and political onslaught on secular ethos, syncretic culture and composite nationalism. The attack on the Mosque at Ayodhya led to a rash of violence across the country. The events leading to the demolition of Babri Masjid and their aftermath of communal carnage marked a watershed in the history of free India. The calculated rise of the BJP took place on a fundamentalist Hindu platform to gain dividends in states in principally North India and Maharashtra as well as at national level. India was portrayed as a Hindu India. The BJP and the Sangh Parivar use Ayodhya and other Hindu images continually. The BJP which had got only two seats and 7 per cent votes in 1984 got 88 seats and 11.4 per cent votes in 1989 in alliance with Janata Dal. In 1991 election, BJP won 120 seats with 20 percent votes. Something never had happened in the electoral history of the right wing Hindu party. The party in its manifesto for the 1996 elections had proposed that Article 30 of the Constitution giving the right to the minorities to establish their own cultural and educational institutions, be removed. In the same election the number of seats went up to 161 though the vote share remained stagnant. Finally, in 1999 it formed government with the help of some so called secular parties on mixed bag of promises.

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed violent secessionist movements in Punjab and Kashmir and an upsurge in the use of religious symbols and terminology in politics *(Mohanty, 1989).* Since then, secularism has been challenged by the ascendance of the forces of communalism, fundamentalism and religious revivalism, accompanied by violence. Communal riots continued unabated. Meerut, Bombay, Bhiwandi, Ahmedabad, Surat and Hyderabad, and most recently Gujrat, are just a few cases in point. The ostensible reason for this fury was the burning of a train coach that was carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya. Fifty nine people including women and children died in the fire. But the post-Godhra incidents in 2002 communal riots accompanied by events of arson, loot, and murder in urban as well as rural Gujrat and rural areas of Haryana and Maharashtra have tarnished the image of Indian secularism and the reputation of Hinduism as a tolerant faith. The social climate is thoroughly vitiated and the atmosphere is surcharged with suspicion and hatred reminding of the pre-partition days. This marked the first time when the state has emerged as a major player and actor in violence by mobs, a qualitative change from previous such situations in India. As a climax in May 2002, conference at Bangalore the RSS passed a resolution that the security of the minority community depends on the goodwill of the majority *(Ashok, 2007).* The resolution was seen as an open threat to the minority, though the spokesman of the RSS tried to explain that it was not meant to be so.

DISCUSSION

Religion in India is characterized by a diversity of religious beliefs and practices. The secularism in India means treatment of all religions equally by the State. It is a secular country by the 42nd amendment act of Constitution in 1976. The Indian subcontinent is the birthplace of the world's four major religions; namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Throughout India's history, religion has been an important part of country's culture. Religious diversity and religious tolerance are both established in the country by the law and custom; the Constitution of India has declared the right to freedom of religion to be a fundamental right (Basu, 2013). Since 1947, the parties have oscillated between a sectarian strategy of religious mobilization and a more moderate one of abiding by democratic processes and liberal norms. While the former has led to radicalization, the latter has facilitated democratic coalition building. Whether the Hindu nationalist parties opted for the path of radicalization or that of moderation has chiefly depended on their relation with their mother organization, the perceptions of Muslims that prevails at a given time in India, and the electoral strategies of the other parties. In addition, the population trends for major religious groups in India has also marked a fluctuating percentage in

independent India.

Data in Table 1 indicate that since independence, the rate of increase of the Muslim population is higher than that of the Hindu population as a result of higher Muslim fertility, higher child morality among Hindus and a greater life expectancy among Muslims. The latest census of India held in 2011 also shows that between 2001 and 2011, Hindu population grew by 16.76 percent, while that of Muslims by 24.6 percent (The Hindu, 25 August 2015). According to the 2011 census, 79.8% of the population of India practices Hinduism and 14.2% adheres to Islam, while the remaining 6% adheres to other religions (Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and various indigenous ethnically bound faiths). However, this is completely along expected line, and has been an ongoing process. With rising education and changing family expectations, declining fertility is an expected demographic phenomenon.

Table 1. Population Trends of Major Religious Groups in India (1951-2017) (Source: India census).

Religious group	Population % 1951	Population % 1961	Population % 1971	Population % 1981	Population % 1991	Population % 2001	Population % 2011	Population % 2017
Hinduism	84.1	83.45	82.73	82.30	81.53	80.46	79.80	74.33
Islam	9.8	10.69	11.21	11.75	12.61	13.43	14.23	14.20
Christianity	2.3	2.44	2.60	2.44	2.32	2.34	2.30	5.84
Sikhism	1.79	1.79	1.89	1.92	1.94	1.87	1.72	1.86
Buddhism	0.74	0.74	0.70	0.70	0.77	0.77	0.70	0.82
Jainism	0.46	0.46	0.48	0.47	0.40	0.41	0.37	1.1
Zoroastrianism	0.13	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.8	0.6	n/a	n/a
Other religions	0.43	0.43	0.41	0.42	0.44	0.72	0.9	0.47

Religion has long been an influential factor in the life of every country. People have been treated and persecuted in accordance to their religious views. It is no surprise that religion influences the political future of the developing countries. Elections in these countries are also heavily influenced by the religious views, which can ultimately project the outcome of vote. In India, religion and politics have never been separated completely. Despite contributions of modern trends, it has remained so, and hence it is necessary to strive hard to separate them as secularism appears to be more feasible in the pluralistic society. Since religion's influence on politics has proved to be immense and difficult to be prevented completely, there is an urgent need to ensure that all negative religious influences that are leading to war and loss of life in struggle for any kind of power are eliminated.

In fact, still the political culture of India is unstable and underdeveloped. Political culture depends on the people's attitudes, emotions and beliefs towards the political system of the country, whether it is homogeneous or heterogeneous. Besides, political culture is not static, it is dynamic and therefore, it envisages essentials or needs of the political system within or outside. A pragmatic orientation in this direction is known as the secularisation of political culture. The secularization of political culture is the process whereby men become increasingly rational, analytical and empirical in their political actions. It is the process of increasing the political awareness of the masses enabling them to have growing information about their political system and their role as political actors in it *(Khobragade, 2007)*. The secularization of political culture has two attributes, first, the pragmatic and empirical orientation, and second, movement from diffuseness to specificity. Times change and so do the beliefs and values of the people. Political socialization through its agencies like family, schools and educational institutes, peer groups, working and informal relations, mass media, government and political parties and leaderships play very major and significant role in the strengthening of secularization of political culture. In the political systems of the different states of the world, developed or developing, political culture promotes political stability and social change.

REFERENCES

Amrutkar, Prashant. 2010. Indian secularism: is it a way out to communalism? *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 121(3): 747.

Ashok, Naidu. 2007. "Secularism Re-examined". Indian Journal of Political Science, 118(3): 607.

Basu, Durga Das. 2013. Introduction to the Constitution of India (21st edition), LexisNexis, p. 124.

Census of India 2015. Population of religious community. Census of India (2011). Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner.

Dubhashi, P.R. 2002. Meaning of Secularism. The Hindu, June 11.

Dyke, Virginia Van. 2002. Religious Mobilization and Sadhus in Politics: The Idealized Versus Real Politik. p. 144. *In*: Paul R. Brass and Achin Vanaik (eds.), Competing Nationalism in South Asia. New Delhi, Orient Longman.

Ghosh, Partha. 1999. BJP and the Evolution of Hindu Nationalism: From Periphery to Center. New Delhi, Manohar Publications. Pp. 108-113.

Ghosh, P.S. 1997. Hindu Nationalism: The Politics of Nation Building and Implications for the Legitimacy of the State. Pp. 68-76. *In*: S.K. Mitra and D. Rothermud (eds.), Legitimacy and Conflicts in South Asia. New Delhi, Manohar Publications.

Kaviraj, Sudipta. 1995. Religion, Politics and Modernity. Pp. 312-315 *In*: Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (eds.), Crisis and Change in Contemporary India. New Delhi, Sage publications.

Khobragade, Vinod F. 2007. The Secularization of Political Culture. South Asia Politics, 6(6): 38.

Mohanty, Manoranjan. 1989. Secularism: Hegemonic and Democratic. Economic and Political Weekly, 24(22): 1219.

Nathan, Dev. 1996. India: From Civilization to Nations. p. 24. *In*: Kumar Rupesinghe and Khawar Mumtaz (eds.), Internal Conflicts in South Asia (Oslo).

Rizvi, Md. Mahtab Alam. 2005. Secularism in India: Retrospect and Prospect. *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 116(4): 903.

Singh, A.K. 1999. The Concept and Practice of Secularism in Indian Context.

Singh, Rajkumar. 2008. Past, Present and Future of Kashmir. New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House.