

# Secularism

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## Essay No. 01

Synopsis: India has never been a communal and theocratic country. Unity in cultural and religious has been the essence of Indianness. Followers of different and alien faiths came to India and became an integral part of it. India has been a meeting point and melting pot of various faiths and cultures. India is one of the largest Muslim countries. Communal tensions and conflicts are relatively of recent origin and can be attributed to the British who practiced the policy of “divide and rule”. They caused the partition of the country on communal basis. Jinnah’s over-ambition and egoism overpowered his better nature and judgement and got him his ‘mouth-eaten’ Pakistan. Indian Constitution guarantees religious freedom and equality to all its citizens. There cannot be any discrimination on the basis of religion, caste or creed. India is fundamentally and generally secular which means equal respect for all faiths and religions. There are clashes and conflicts between communities but every clash is not communal. Many of the tensions and conflicts between communities have their source in economic and cultural backwardness or they are foreign-sponsored. We should always be guided by such leading lights as Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and Atal Bihari Vajpayee whose commitment to secularism has been well known, firm and practical.

India, as a country and nation, has always been secular. It has never been a theocratic, sectarian and communal state. In spite of fact that Indian masses have ever been deeply religious, religious-intolerance, hatred, fundamentalism etc. have never been part of their ethos. Respect for one another’s faith, religious practice and peaceful preaching have been the hallmark of Indian culture and civilization. Unity in cultural and religious diversity is one of the unique features accommodations etc. have always been the essence of Indian religious preaching and practice. It is inhabited by the followers of many different religions, faiths, sects, way of living and thinking. There are the Hindus, the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Parsis, the Jains, the Buddhists, the Christians, the Zoroastrians and many others. The Hindus have always been a majority community but their religious outlook and practice have never been narrow, sectarian, obscurantist and fundamentalist. They never believed in conversion, coercion, intolerance, jihad or religious persecution. India is the only country where civilization and culture has been like a ceaseless and continuous flow since times immemorial only because of its deep-rooted faith in religious

tolerance co-existence and non-interference in one another's personal and religious affairs.

Followers of different and alien faiths came to India as invaders, refugees seeking shelters from religious persecution in their own countries or as preachers of their faith and became an integral part of its unique unity in staggering diversity. The Christian church in India is much older than coming of Islam. St. Thomas was one of the 12 Disciples of Christ and contemporary of St. Peter in Rome. He was the first preacher of Christianity in India. The Parsis came in the 8th century seeking refuge from religious persecution in Iran and brought Zoroastrianism. The Jews came quite early about 2000 years ago and settled down chiefly in Bombay, Pune, Cochin and Delhi. Islam came to India with Muslim invasions and conquests. Today India is one of the largest Islamic nations. According to 1991 census there are 627.5 million Hindus, 95.2 million Muslims, 18.8 million Christians, 16.2 millions Sikhs, 6.3 million Buddhist and 3.3 million Jains in the country. The decadal rate of increase of the Hindus has been 22.78 per cent and that of Muslims 32.76 per cent and 16.89 percent that of the cultural currents and cross currents. Besides these major religions, there are about 183 other religious sects and persuasions. In Hinduism rites, rituals and ways of worship and prayer. All these sects and religions, and atheists as well, represent a complete and wonderful pattern of unity, integrity and wholeness.

Communal tensions, conflicts and frictions have been relatively of recent origin and can be traced back to the British rule. They always followed the policy of "Divide and rule". The partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan was clearly a legacy of the British rule. They had divided the people of communal lines; introduced separate electorates to serve their own narrow interests. They were successful to a large extent in sowing the seeds of communal disharmony, tension and conflict. This resulted in the partition and Mahatma Gandhi's association. In spite of all these tragic events of epic dimensions, India's commitment to secularism has never been political leader. But gradually he felt sidelined on the pre-independence ambition. Ultimately the portion was agreed and Jinnah had his "moth eaten" Pakistan, a product of his vicious communalism.

Time and again, and in no uncertain terms in the Parliament and outside, it, the Indian leader like Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and other have declared that India is fundamentally a secular country. All are first and last and Indians in the political and national sense, their different religions and faiths notwithstanding. India is a sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic. The Indian constitution guarantees its citizens full freedom

in matters of religion, faith and its practice. One of the fundamental rights and freedoms granted to all citizens individually and collectively is the “right to freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion”. Moreover, each and every section of citizens has “right to conserve its culture, language or script and right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.”

This freedom of culture, conscience, faith, following the way of living has been one of the corner stone's of Indian social fabric and democracy. There is no discrimination on the basis of religion and caste, among other things. There is no favour to any particular religion and its followers. All religions, sects and their followers are equal before the law. There is complete religious freedom unless it does interfere in the freedom of other religions. Here in India religion and its practice has been recognized as a personal and private affair. It means that there is no mixing up of religion with politics.

Secularism is often defined as neutrality and detachment or indifference to religion without being antireligious or discriminating among citizens on grounds of religion, caste, creed etc. Now, this is a negative and narrow definition of secularism and does not suit the Indian context. This gives the detractors of secularism an opportunity to call it anti-religious approach to the policy. They call the whole concept as borrowed, alien, atheist and godless. Therefore, secularism needs to be redefined to suit Indian psyche. Some thinkers suggest that secularism means “Sarvadharmā sambhava”, that is, equal respect for all religions. This is certainly better and positive interpretation of secularism and should be preached and propagated. Really this is the essence of secularism and Gandhi's secular vision was very much close to it. Pt. Nehru and other great leaders were also inspired and guided by this same vision.

India is a very big and great country populated by many communities. It is a second largest country in the world after China in population. There are conflicts, tensions and frictions among the pressures and clash of interests. Therefore, every clash cannot be termed as communal. There have been communal clashes, conflicts, religious riots, conflagrations and massacres during the last 50 years of our independence. But most of them have been either political in nature or sponsored by our hostile neighbour Pakistan. There are certain vested interests who under the influence of foreign powers across our borders, want to weaken the country. They are always trying to disturb India's social fabric and communal harmony. They often succeed in engineering communal conflicts and clashes here and there. We should be vigilant and guard ourselves against such various elements. Then there are certain political leaders

and parties who to serve their own narrow interest indulge in communal lines. The politics of vote banks originates from lack of genuine commitment to the cause of secularism and social harmony. They now and then practice appeasement of minority community and thus give opportunity to the detractors of secularism in mudslinging.

Many of the clashes and conflicts between communities are because of economic and educational backwardness. They are not actually communal in nature and origin but are construed as such. The economic and cultural backwardness of their sections and communities should be removed. They should be removed. They should be enlightened and brought into the national mainstream so as to eliminate their self-inspired isolation, alienation and educational backwardness. It is not unnatural that the economically weak and vulnerable communities should succumb to name of religion against those who are better off and belonging to other community and faith. Removal of unemployment, backwardness, more economical development of various communities only can ensure real and lasting secularism. In poverty, economic slavery, backwardness and widespread unemployment, secularism can never survive, let alone its prosperity. The poor and the weak become an easy prey to priest, mullahs, fundamentalist and reactionary forces having their roots overseas.

The communal and obscurantist forces should not be allowed at all to undermine our secular spirit, religious tolerance, peace, harmony and co-existence. No political leader or party should be allowed to raise the bogey of religion or community. In our public and social life we should be guided only by our national interests and such giants as Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru or Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Essay No. 02

## Secularism

Secularism implies equal respect for all religions in the same measure as we have for our own. In our country, the liberty of “belief, faith and worship”, as enshrined in the Constitution, has been implemented by incorporating the Fundamental Rights of all citizens to “freedom of religion” vide Articles 25-29. Secularism, as any theologian would tell us, lies at the very root of all religions and faiths in this world.

It is true that the earliest force of civilisation was religion. In the West, it was religion, whether pagan or Christian, that consolidated the idea of political sovereignty. In the East, it was religion again that provided the foundation of the

State. The glorious structure of the ideal Hindu State or 'Ram Rajya' was religious to the backbone. The idea of Islamic State in the imperialistic history of Islam, as distinguished from the domestic history of a few ideal Muslim rulers, is nothing but the conquering sword of Islam dripping with the blood of the victims of the religion of Islam. For time, religion was a necessity and a boon to keep peoples together within the organisation of a State. It was an advance in the thought of humanity to regard a fellow being as a brother by virtue of the fact that he was the son of the same Father, inhabiting the same land over which the Father ruled. The idea of political sovereignty and of geographical unity was given to the world in an emphatic form by religion. Even the idea of One World Government under the Supreme Lord is religious in its origin. But as fanaticism increased, the force of reason declined in religion. Faith became corrupt, and religion became a source of discord and bloodshed. Some of the greatest wars of the world and the bloodiest massacres have been perpetrated in the name of religion. The history of the Middle Ages in Europe is a record of the havoc which religion created in the national and the international fields. It was, therefore, found necessary that the States should tear themselves away from the world—devouring force of religion. The dawn of the modern era is characterised by this change in Europe. The doctrine of the two swords, and the councilor theory led to the development of the secular State.

Revolution followed revolution in Europe until the principles of secular sovereignty were fully established in France, America, England, Germany and Russia. A band of distinguished writers gave the world a very complete theory of the sovereignty of the secular State. Rousseau is one of the most eminent leaders of this group. Karl Marx is another. And there are many more who have not had the luck of becoming world-famous.

From the point of view of history, the modern age is characterised by a change in the fundamental attitude of humanity. People of the middle Ages were led by the theocratic States. They had visions of absolute happiness here and hereafter; they had promises of all knowledge and God communions; they lived in the hope of developing hidden powers and the third eye through faith, and they hoped for a peaceful and ascetic order of society. But in the long run they found that all their hopes and expectations were blasted by the theocratic State. Instead of the happiness there was misery arising from fanaticism, crusades and religious wars. Instead of human brotherhood all over the world, the entire humanity was torn up into religious factions. Instead of knowledge there was all-round darkness, not only about religion and God but also about nature and man. Instead of developing institution or the third eye even the intellect was not developed. Instead of a high moral order prevailing in society there was nothing but

corruption, hypocrisy, immorality and selfishness in the Church and the monasteries.

The forces of Renaissance and Reformation were at work. Reason assumed the supremacy over faith and States became non-theocratic or non-religious, i.e., secular. They set about removing the deficiencies of the theocratic State. Instead of abstract happiness they undertook to provide man with his physical, economic and social needs and wants. They sought to introduce an intelligent social morality against ritualistic custom. They understood to develop the intellect and promote scientific knowledge of man and nature. But this did not mean that the secular State was to annihilate religion. On the contrary, the secular State set about developing religion as an institution of civilisation and as a cultural value. In regard to religion, the goal of the secular State is to evolve something universal which should be capable of satisfying the religious thrust of humanity without any of the dangers that history records in connection with religion in the theocratic States.

The present world is increasingly in the grip of religious fundamentalism. Politicians and religious leaders of all hues inflame communal passions at the slightest provocation. The cases of Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen are well-known. In India, ever since Independence, communal violence has almost become a way of life for the people. Whether it is Bhiwandi or Hubli or Ayodhya after the demolition of the Babri Masjid structure, religion has always been misused to exploit personal as well as political ends. We have lost all patience and tolerance for believers in other religions and faiths. Fundamentalism is the biggest threat to secularism today. It does not give us any chance for understanding the others' point of view. The question of loving other religions equally as we love our does not, therefore, arise. Consequently, secularism remains a tenet on paper only.

The vast religious literature available to us also lends itself to diverse interpretations. Value systems in different faiths are represented different by different theologians. Reason is often blurred. A broad, cosmopolitan outlook, which is so essential to practise healthy secularism, is what is required today. One need not be an atheist, but what one must realise, like Jawaharlal Nehru, that secularism does not mean conflict with religions other than one's own. Any person, who understands the true import of religion, will automatically become secular; he would tolerate, understand and love other religions in addition to his own.

To the Father of Nation, religion meant love, non-violence and above all, tolerance of different creeds. "I know of no great sin", Gandhiji said, "than to

oppress the innocent in the name of God". People must be made to understand that promoting a climate of intolerance precipitates an acid rain of intimidation and violence, which ultimately scalds everyone. India had a long history of tolerant secularism since the days of Ashoka. We only have to nurture it by rising above the bitter memories of the past by propagating love and tolerance. Intellectuals must take the lead in this respect. That is the only glimmer of hope in the present scenario. Otherwise, we shall not be able to blame anyone else but ourselves.