Tradition and Trends of Secularism in India

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INTRODUCTION :

In contrast to the West, the term 'Secularism is commonly used in present day India to describe the relationship that exists, or which ought to exist, between the state and religion *(Gupta, 1991).* Technically, the secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion deals with individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion. In India the concept has been used not as state's indifference meaning towards religions but as treatment of all religions in an equal fashion and ruling out discrimination of any Indian on the ground of his religion. In its political terminology 'secularism' governing the term 'state,' that is the expression 'Secular state', implies a contradiction to 'theocratic state' or a 'state with an established church', or to imply a polity that has no any 'state religion' or which is not a 'religio-ideological state'. With the independence of India in 1947 the secular group held that the system of the country's governance should be run along purely secular lines, independently of religion, whereas the thinking of the religious group was quite the contrary. They insisted that the political system of the country should be governed in accordance with the dictates of religion. The analysis and debates of the Constituent Assembly reveals a rejection of the Western concept of secularism, that is, absolute separation of state and religion, and acceptance of the Indian concept of 'Sarva Dharma Sambhava' or equal regard for all religions *(Rajarajan, 2007).* At the time although secularism failed to become one of the fundamental tenets of the Constitution, yet the declaration of India as a secular state came only with the enactment of the 42 nd Amendment to the Constitution (1976) and now the Preamble proclaims India as a secular state.

KEY WORDS: Secularism, Tradition, Modern Trends, Secular State and Prospect.

SECULARISM IN PRE-BRITISH INDIA

The Indian concept of secularism has always been different from its western counterparts. It grew out of its past history of a wide and general movement in thoughts and feelings, which emerges gradually from the intermingling of different groups and communities in consequence of the impetus given to it by changes in social economic and political life. Religions of India are known to have co-existed and evolved together for many centuries. India is a country where religion is very central to the life of many people. India's age-old philosophy as expounded in Hindu scriptures called Upanishads is Sarva Dharma Sambhava, which means respect for all belief system. This basic trait of Sanatan Dharma is what keeps India together despite the fact that India has not been a mono-religious country for over two millennium. In its whole history the ancient Indian polity never needed confrontational experience with the philosophies of secularism and liberty for fostering religious freedom. But in the context opposite was the experience of the west where the bitter atmosphere divided loyalties between the Caesar and God. It made clear distinction between spirituals and temporals, a theory quite in accord with the teachings of Saint Augustine was of the essence of the Christian point of view, and for this reason the relation between religious and political institutions presented to the Christian a new problem - the problem of Church and State. The concern for separation between Church and State in Europe was mainly voiced by the clergy to first maintain the superiority of the ecclesiastical order and subsequently to contain the advance of the lay monarchy *(Bharatiya, 1987)*. Thus, for the Western thinkers, 'religion' signified 'sect' rather than universal philosophy or universal science of God. Even the divinity of King in the divine origin of State theory was essentially his conformity to Christianity. The whole Western approach towards religion - secularism interrelationship was fight oriented and basically antagonistic.

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In ancient India Dharma was the true sovereign of the State; the Rule of the Law. The King was the executive called the Danda to uphold and enforce the decrees of the dharma as the spiritual sovereign. Dharma in wider sense comprised rules and principles of conduct relating to men and extended to entire range of Hindu society, all classes and castes within its fold. It conceived rules for celestial to civil subjects. Of this sacred law the sources were, tells Manu, four - fold; Veda, tradition, customs and happiness *(Saltore, 1963).* Further the theocratic foundation of the State did not pose the problem the West experienced, because, for one, there was no duality of religion for a long stretch of centuries; Secondly, even after the advent of Buddhism and Jainism these sects were never pitted in confrontation with the ancient religion, and thirdly, the king was duty bound under Rajdharma to treat equally all his citizens and patronise their sects and religions and apply equal laws to all *(Altekar, 1958).* Originally Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were reformist movements which had absolutely no quarrel with the general principles of the 'Sanatan Religion' nor any ambition to establish a separate religion. They were partly protestant reactions against thoughtless overplay of self-importance by the Brahmanical order and partly genuine efforts to simplify and reform the overdone ritualism *(Hasting, 1959).* The perfect harmony between the three schools of ecclesiastical thoughts was symbolic of the liberal outlook in matters academic entertained by the leading thinkers of the time. In subsequent periods the rules of Kanishkas, Guptas, Harshavardhana and several other kings accorded equal treatment to Hindus, Buddhists and Jains - the only three religions co-existing at that time in India *(Gokhale, 1961)* People were exhorted to lead religious, pious and moral life without any compulsion about faith, belief or worship. At least up to the invasious by Mughals, difference on account of religion, race and language never posed any problem before the governments.

Freedom of religion of the individual which is one of the basic feature of a secular state had for centuries been rooted in the Asian countries. It has made Indian culture a "composite" one, which, means blending of separate elements into a single whole. However, the Muslim invasions shook the Hindu and for the first time drew him out of the deep inner sanctrum of his temple. The Muslim theocracy in India under the Sultanate was based on distinction between the Hindu and the Muslim subjects. But in the period the Sufi and Bhakti movements gave a tremendous impetus to bring the people of various communities closer. The leading lights of the movement were Khawaja Moinuddin Chisti, Baba Farid, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Dadu, Tukaram and Mira Bai who contributed to the development of composite culture in such measures that was not really possible only through a political or administrative system. In the context Guru Nanak remarked, 'There is no Hindu, no Mussalman" as he saw no distinction between man and man. The spirit to tolerance has been hallmark of secular attitude and outlook *(Rizvi, 2005).* In the Mughal dynasty Akbar was the single liberal ruler who was alive to the dangers of religious strife and tried to promote national solidarity by his catholic eclecticism and secular policies. His propagation of 'Din - e - Illahi (Divine Faith) Sulh - I - Kul (peace with all) were all imbued with the spirit of secularism. The medieval period was radically different from the modern Indian understanding of the concept of secularism.

THE BRITISH ERA

The British Raj in India witnessed main contradiction not between religious and secular but it was between secular and communal. In the Western world main struggle was between Church and state and Church and civil society but in India neither Hinduism nor Islam had any church - like structure and hence there never was any such struggle between secular and religious power structure. Although the British period in India was not a theocracy; nevertheless one characteristic, viz., state involvement in

religious institutions was conspicuously present and new dimension were given to the use of religion in politics. It was a blessing in disguise as its nature helped the Indians in abondoning the ostritch pose it had stuck to during the Mughal period. With the coming of the new ruler came the realisation of modern type of liberty, meaning thereby an artificial condition achieved and maintained by the process of fight with the state of opposed to the natural condition of society in the ancient India. Unlike the rough Moslem invaders of Yore and some begotted sultans, the British were sophisticated, liberalist rulers in matters of social, cultural and religious. Persuasion, impartiality and benevolence were the rudiments of the governmental policy in dealings with other religions. They kept nostalgically falling back on their home - land for cultural inspiration; neutrality towards heathen way of life and worship was, therefore, more akin to their nature. The British never denied freedom of conscience or worship; nor disturbed it. As the patrons and indeed throughout their stay as benevolent despols' the British were concerned with many things in the Indian way of life quite closely, never excluding religion.

In India the British practised a double policy towards religion. In the spiritual, personal and ritual aspect of religion of the natives they refrained from interference and so also in the social aspect to a large extent. They were aware that religious faith continuously provide the passion to preserve in the way of life and if it declines, obedience degenerates into habit and habit slowly withersaway. The laws, customs, conventions and fashions are not the only means of social control but the religion and morality also formulate and shape the human behaviour. Religion and morality are the most influential forces of social control as well as the most effective guides of the human behaviour. The social life of a man in addition of its economic, political, philosophical, scientific and other aspects, has also religious aspects. However, on the other hand they sagaciously cultivated a new facet

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of religion - the political. In this role the policy of equanimity and neutrality was discarded after the 1857 Revolt in favour of the policy of counterpoise. This policy was followed by the British despite the fact that Queen Victoria had put in the Charter that her government would be neutral in matters of religion.

Earlier with the grant of Diwani in Bengal in 1765 the British rooted themselves as India's new administrators and in this capacity assumed the role of patrons of religions. In line they abolished certain cruder customs like Sati and other forms of corporal punishments sanctioned by distorted versions of scriptural rules. In addition, as a shrewed merchant the East India Company was aware of the fact that for a prosperous trade with the natives it was wise not to disturb the religious sentiments of the local inhabitants and therefore, in the whole process the method employed was of persuasion with no compulsory conversion and no interference. Emboldened by their hold over the situation and sway over native powers and helped by native reformers the British undertook a few reforms in such native practices as were repellant to the humanitarian values cherished by them. They took benefit of the favourable situation and in a special treatment, the Christianity was officially acknowledged, the British government had directed the company to meet the expenses for managing the affairs of the Church of England from the Company's Indian revenues. In this period religion was always an expressly enumerated item of powers of the Central/State governments under the Indian Council Act and the Government of India Acts from 1858 to 1935. Such favours apart, other religions also received varying attention by way of grants for temples, expences on festivals, affording of civic facilities to religious places and fairs, encourage to study of scriptures and their translations, efforts to understand and implement the ancient laws, are the details of the Company's relations with religion *(Derrett, 1968)*. Thus, the British, in their own way, continued religious

involvement and all along patronised the counterpoise policy initiated especially in post -1857 period.

The British policy of counterpoise was founded on the political use of religion in the wake of the traumatic experience they had of the great Revolt of 1857. In the context communal disharmony was the remedy suggested by Governor - General Lord Lawrence (1864-69) to thwart the recurrence of 1857 type revolt against the British, 'Among the defects of the premutiny army… was the brotherhood and the homogeneity of the Bengal army, and for this purpose, the remedy is counterpoise; first the great counterpoise of the Europeans, and secondly the native races' *(Munshi, 1967).* Such subtle of communalism was never known to India before; so far it was either swords or songs, never was religion a disguised medium of power politics. Brick by brick the British built a wall of separation between the religious communities of India, particularly the two numerically largest, most vocal and influential ones - Hindus and Muslims. The new policy of counterpoise became a tool and exihibited carefully by the Morley - Minto Reforms of 1909 and nurtured into a giant by the subsequent Government of India Acts. Starting with the Muslims in 1909, the separate electorate was extended further to the Sikhs in 1919 and Indian Christians, Anglo - Indians, Europeans, Harijans, Marathas and non-Brahmins in 1935. The misuse of religion as a counterpoise was further confirmed when Lord Dufferin in his farewell address at Calcutta said on 23 March 1888, 'God forbid that the British government should ever seek to maintain its rule by fomenting race hatred among its subjects' *(Gwyer, 1967).* Thus, from Morley - Minto Reforms (1909) to the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946) the British kept on harping the strain. 'The Indian Mohommadans are much more than a religious body. They form in fact an absolutely separate community'*(Rao, 1968).* The persistent British hints created the sense of insecurity in Muslim mind that they had to work hard only to succeed, to salvage 'their territory,

Muslim majority areas from Hindu usurpation'. It led to the partition of the country in August 1947.

INDIAN INDEPENDENCE AND SECULARISM

On the eve of independence we decided to establish a secular state with its own characteristics of religious tolerance, liberty and equality. Religious tolerance is a key element in the concept of Indian secularism because it has been a significant element of our historical tradition *(Subhash, 1988).* Sociologically too, secularism in India is a way of life. In a country where there are at least 12 religions, over 300 castes, nearly 4,000 sub castes, over 20 languages, over 300 dialects, mixed traditions, the only way to reduce internal tension is to inculcate tolerance and co-existence *(Gupta, 2002).* The idea of secularism in a country like India with its pluralist tradition lasting over thousands of years cannot succeed without respecting pluralist ethos. The West has discovered pluralism recently - after the Second World War and hence calls it post - modernist phenomenon. But India has known it even during medieval ages. Modernisation brought new problems and we began to imitate the West without understanding our own social realities. These problems are getting intractable as our society is not changing especially when it comes to the mass of people *(Asghar, 2003).* In modern political sense the Hindu who in the past performed religious worship as his religious duty, now began demanding a right to freedom of worship; and the fellow citizen Muslim, who had till only a recent past enjoyed the reassuring privilege of state protection and promotion of his religious interests, began realising the necessity of a 'secular' state that would grant him, and not withhold, his right to religious freedom. Religion had always exercised a great influence on the people in their social ways and habits. The epochs in which religion stood for deeper philosophies in quest of the Absolute, were the epochs when society represented vitality, and tolerance, vigour and elasticity *(Singh, 2008).* Religion is part of society. It

is a universal, permanent, pervasive and perennial institution and it has a vital function in maintaining the social system as a whole.

Around the period when India was to be freed from the British rule there were many great men who have come and left their imprint on the sand of time as men of thought and action, vision and dynamism, conviction and commitment. They passed the test of being called a very great man. About the test, to quote Isaiah Berlin, 'To call someone a great man is to claim that he has intentionally taken a large step, one far beyond the normal capacities of men, in satisfying or materially affecting central human interests. Similarly, in the realm of action, the great man seems able almost alone and single handed to transform one form of his life into another… permanently and radically alters the outlook and values of a significant body of human beings *(Singh, 2003).* In pre and post - independence periods the concepts of secularism and religious freedom remained significant in the minds of public as well as leaders. Among leaders there are many who belonged to the Indian National Congress (INC), such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, B.R. Ambedkar, staunch supporters of "Hindu Rashtra"- M.S Golwalkar, Veer Savarkar and a host of others. Earlier in the Nehru Report of 1928 the right to freedom of conscience, profession and practice of religion was included explicitly to prevent one community domineering over another. In its original conception secularism meant anti - theism, but not atheism; it was philosophically a movement intentionally ethical, negatively religious. It introduces science, technology and rationalism in the society and forms the basis of a modern secular state. In the process it has to oppose and struggle against the clergy and vested forces in the society. And as such, the fundamentalist communal onslaughts are the 'other' of secularism and secularization. The Indian leaders during the freedom struggle and thereafter made secularism the mantra of the Indian nation, though each expressed their concerned views in different manners,

representing the aspirations of the different sections of society. Especially Gandhi and Nehru with others preferred to keep India secular in the sense that Indian state will have no religion though people of India will be free both in individual and corporate sense to follow any religion of their birth or adoption. Secularism in India meant equal respect for all religions and cultures and non-interference of religion in government affairs. Thus, India remained politically secular but otherwise its people continued to be deeply religious. It is perhaps due to the influence of ancient Vedic doctrine that truth is one but is manifested in different forms. The real spirit of secularism in India is all inclusiveness, religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence.

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