

WHOSE SECULARISM IS HURT?

The happenings at Ayodhya have posed a challenge to the process of secularization in India. Whose secularism has been challenged? Is it a challenge to that “secular politics” which has been practiced by various political parties since 1947? The main thrust of this politics has been on the use of the slogan of secularism during political strife between discredited parties, which generally practice communal politics. During the past 45 years since Independence the concern and sensibilities of politics and society did not appropriate the secular discourse in society. In other words, the areas governed by caste or religious distortions and politics pursued by the dominant political parties have increasingly become consistent.

In the initial years after independence India’s democratic polity could not find the will to fight communism. The Hindu Code of 1956 was an admission of defeat to communal thought. The fact that the issue of the Urdu language, the AMU Bill and the establishment of Banaras Hindu University were used as political ploys indicates the level of operation of communal ideology.

During this period electoral politics was else riddled with mobilizations along caste and religious group lines with the India Union Muslim League, the Jana Sangh, the Shiv Sena and the Shiromani Akali Dal as the most obvious examples. However, even the known non-communal and secular parties have aligned themselves with communal parties and organizations to form governments or fight elections. This was mainly confined to the electoral arithmetic.

After the eighties communal politics not only appropriated localized communalism on an all-India scale but also initiated a process of communal redefinition of boundaries between the various religious and caste groups. For example, the caste bias of the Mandal Commission report and use by politics by multiplying caste cleavages have

provided a continuity to the caste system. Further, the collective response of the upper caste to the Mandal Commission report was equally casteist. This result in the formation of new caste alliances.

Similarly, the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue and its appropriation at the national level by mainstream politics strengthened communalism and resulted in communal polarization. For example, the use of the notion of Ram Rajya by Gandhiji was against colonial domination. The use of Ram Rajya was also as a reference to the country's civilization, and it transcended the boundaries of caste and religion. It was not to reinforce religious monoliths. In no way did it propagate and project Ram Rajya as synonymous with the Hindu identity. On the contrary, the recent use of the notion of Ram Rajya was antithetical to the Gandhian use of it. The meaning of the term Indian civilisation is distorted the mean "Hindu" civilization, Ram Rajya is used to mean Hindu Rajya and Muslims are projected as enemies and are threatened for their non-compliance with this world-view. The central thrust of this politics is to bring to the foreground the need for establishing a monolithic Hindu identity. Once the identity gets recognized and established – as propagated by the VHP – it will make a crucial difference in determining the personal, social and institutional relationship to the benefit of the so-called Hindu Samaj. This distorted cultural stream has become part of the dominant culture of politics.

These distortions have been present in society in the past also. But the political space it occupied was limited. The constant reinforcement and sharpening of these discourses in society and its appropriation in politics has made it functional.

Have the incidents that occurred at Ayodhya hurt the kind of "secular politics"?

Have the Ayodhya happenings posed a challenge to that kind of secularism which has been offering apologies on behalf of one kind of communalism or the other?

Such assertions have categorized communalism in terms of minority and majority and assumed that majority communalism is more dangerous than minority communalism. Therefore, they end up in protecting minority communalism from ‘majoritarianism’ and, on the other hand, the proponents of majority communalism consider their assertions as a backlash of the appeasement of the minorities. This conceptual error has been part of our policy since independence. To quote S. Gopal: “Nehru and Gandhi _____ the line that it was for the Hindus as the majority community to make concessions while the communal problem lasted. This, in itself, despite the call to magnanimity, assumes a communal approach, however, subconscious. The argument is based on the belief that the majority community is a privileged one and the minority community has a reason to be communal.”

The Gandhi-Nehru approach takes religion as synonymous with communalism. Antagonism constitutes a crucial element of communalism and is given the moral garb of religion to justify human acts like looting, rioting, arson, killing and plundering or demolishing religious places. As W.C. Smith has rightly pointed out: “History has shown many a times that religion is ready to excuse atrocities which decent men would hesitate to commit under any other name. Moreover, once a conflict has started for economic or other reasons, and then, when it assumes a communalism guise, it tends to expand to include innocent co-religionists of the real enemies. Also it tends to colour the thinking of the persons involved for all the other issues.” Therefore, to expect communalism to be humane and generous is wrong.

Granting special privilege to the communalism of the minorities or the majority is counter-productive because communalism revolves around fear, insecurity and suspicion, not generosity. Therefore, any policy of appeasing communalism and giving concessions to a religious group is doomed to failure. Concessions sought or

demands raised on communal lines will not eliminate, rather strengthen communalism.

Have the happenings at Ayodhya outraged the secularism of Hinduism? Such oft-repeated assertions present Hinduism and its followers as tolerant and secular. The inference drawn is that other religions and their followers are not tolerant and secular. Not only this, the believers of other religions are projected as culturally inferior and politically and socially alien. The assumption that Hinduism is by nature plural and democratic has provided justification to the assertions that Muslims continue to live in India even after Pakistan has been granted to them, whereas in Pakistan "Hindus" have been virtually eliminated. Have the Ayodhya incidents hurt this kind of secularism? The answer is all this is a resounding No.

The happenings at Ayodhya have exposed the shallowness of the above mentioned understanding and practice in the name of secularism. It an accumulated response to the opportunist and deadlier politics, and the paucity of theory and practice of secular democratic politics.

It has posed a challenge to secular and democratic pretensions of the practitioners of Indian politics, propagators of communalism under the garb of secularism and pseudo-Hindus presenting themselves as protectors of the secular traditions of Hindus.

The operative reality of communalism and increasing intolerance within Indian society of diverse religious and cultural streams have necessitated the need for the renewal of India, rather revival of India. The questioning of the very basis of some of the realities like communalism will make the civilisation survive.

We are only a step away from fascism, "Anti-sentitism, which began as a racial prejudice, exploited as a demagogic trick, ended in the most abominable genocide of

all times.” Fascism in Germany first chose Jews as its target of attack and promised socialism after exterminating them for being usurers. Communalism has also chosen its targets.