

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO SECULARISM AND DEMOCRACY - A RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

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India is a secular democracy constitutionally though there are several problems in practice. On the whole India has given not so bad account of itself. Despite onslaught from communalist and fundamentalist forces India has not swerved from its secular democratic course in terms of its legal and political structure. Though India has been witnessing communal violence ever since early sixties communal situation far more worsened when the BJP launched Rammandir drive and polarised the country along communal lines as on the eve of partition, even worse.

Towards the end of last century demolition of Babri Masjid was a major blow to Indian secularism. Babri Masjid became, as if, the symbol and taste of Indian secularism. Secularism in India is nothing if not pluralism. India has been religiously, culturally and linguistically pluralist for several thousands of years. This religious and cultural pluralism survived thanks to tolerance of our people. It is remarkable that we do not have communal conflict throughout medieval period. Communalism and communal violence is a modern phenomenon, which is product of colonial period. Feudal polity was basically - non-competitive and communal phenomenon is product of modern competitive politics.

The colonial period saw competition for power between the elites of two communities and they invoked religion for mobilising masses from respective communities. Religious identity thus became a powerful tool for political elites of the two communities to exploit and exploit they did with maximum intensity possible. Thus though communal strife is not religious strife, it does appear to be one.

The leaders of Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League in pre-independence India used religious rhetoric and created sharp perceptions of 'religious strife' among people of their respective communities. Jinnah was modern liberal constitutionalist but when he failed to arrive at a 'satisfactory' political arrangement with the Indian National Congress he began to use religious rhetoric to mobilise Indian Muslims behind him.

After independence The Jansangh (formed in 1951), which as later on renamed as the BJP in 1980 used Hindu religious rhetoric to grab Hindu votes in state and parliamentary elections. When ordinary religious rhetoric did not help much it discovered the utility of Ram Mandir for sharper political appeal to Hindus of all castes. Mr. L.K. Advani led the Ramjanmabhoomi movement with great verve and intensity in late eighties of last century. It paid rich political dividends and he rode to power in the Toyota-built Ramrath.

Ramjanmabhoomi movement resulted in sharp polarisation of Hindus and Muslims in late twentieth century, which continues until today. It was basically the communal rhetoric of the BJP which resulted in Gujrat carnage of 2002 in which more than 2000 innocent citizens lost their lives and hundreds of women were raped and killed most barbarically. The Hindutva in Gujrat was transformed into 'Moditva' as Narendra Modi was mainly responsible for the carnage.

Here in this article we are not mainly concerned with politics of BJP, which is well known to any student of Indian politics. We are more concerned here with response or otherwise by the religious people in India in general, and in Gujarat, in particular. It is because of dubious role played by religious leaders that religion appears to be main culprit in the eyes of many people. These politicians deliberately provoke religious fanaticism to make political gains.

This impression easily gains ground because either many religious leaders actively cooperate with communalists or keep silent about the gross misuse of religion for political ends. Thus in the eyes of people religion, not politicians, come to be blamed. Religion per se, cannot be responsible for the communal malaise. It is like a tool which can be used either way.

Basically religion is for spiritual guidance of the people and hence can be a major resource for peace and social justice. It can become, as liberation theology indicates, a powerful option for the weaker sections of society. Instead religion has more often been used by powerful vested interests of which religious functionaries become a part. Worse, religious functionaries and priests themselves create powerful establishments and join hands with politicians to protect their establishments.

A truly religious person should always be anti-establishment. Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, Gurunanak, Kabir and others all fought against establishments in their own times and transcended their period. Their followers, on the other hand, created huge establishments in their names and became cause of conflict rather than resource for peace. To create true religious spirit one has to shed all vested interests. One should shun all temptations of power and pelf.

It was very painful to note that during most of the communal riots those belonging to various religious traditions became either active collaborators or kept silent. During the Gujarat carnage too it was nothing different. With a few honourable exceptions all other religious leaders kept quiet and politicians like Narendra Modi and his henchmen cynically exploited Hindu religious sentiments for their political ends. In fact Narendra Modi came back to power by getting thousands massacred.

India, as pointed out, is a multi-religious and multi-cultural country and modern secular democratic polity can survive only if religious people are determined to promote religious and spiritual values. This globalised world cannot escape being religiously plural, secular and democratic. Globalisation is creating pressures of its own which disrupt our religious values and culture. In this period of globalisation we have to be firmly rooted in our religious values.

Indian plurality alone can be our valuable asset and religious response has to be based on tolerance, respect and compassion for others. Religious leaders of India must come together and resolve to promote common religious values. If we reflect

sincerely there are many values, which are common to our respective religious traditions. One can easily identify eight values which are central to all religious traditions. These values are as under: 1) justice; 2) peace; 3) equality; 4) love; 5) compassion; 6) non-violence, 7) truth and 8) human dignity.

Also, we have had glorious tradition of living together and made rich contribution to Indian culture and hence Indian culture is essentially a composite culture. We have to further strengthen and enrich this composite culture and our religious traditions, seen in the light of values mentioned above, do not come in our way in doing so. We have shared much in common for centuries and people of religion should not allow few politicians to undo all our shared values and traditions and promote intolerance and hatred.

The people of religion should make it clear to their followers that those who promote hatred and intolerance cannot champion the cause of religious community but their own. All religious people, particularly religious leaders who do not have narrow sectarian interests at heart should come forward and boldly take stand against violence and untruth being promoted in the name of religion by politicians and their cohorts who might pretend to be religious leaders.

There is inspiring example of religious leaders of Albania who recently came together and issued a statement of what they called "Shared moral commitment". The statement issued says among other things: "We, the traditional religious communities in Albania: the Muslim community, the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania (Orthodox Church), the Catholic Church, and the Bektash Community, feel called upon to point the way to the future and we recognise and accept that our religious communities differ from each other, and that each of us feels called to observe their own faith." "At the same time", the statement says, "we recognise that our religious and spiritual traditions hold many values in common, and that these shared values can serve as an authentic basis for mutual esteem, cooperation, and free common living throughout the territory of Albania."

The statement also further proceeds: "We, the Muslim Community, the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and the Bektash Community are proud of our history of multi-religious co-existence.. We proclaim that the dignity of the human person and human value is a gift of God. Our faiths, each in their own way, call us to respect each person's fundamental human rights. Discrimination and violence against persons or the violation of their basic rights, for us, breaks not only man-made laws, but also God's law."

I have quoted only a few excerpts from this statement, which was issued by religious leaders of the communities mentioned therein on 18th March, 2005 from Tirana, the capital of Albania. This statement greatly applies to our Indian situation too and it is high time our Indian religious leaders too should come forward and take similar bold step. India, in fact, is more pluralistic than Albania and our plurality and shared values can be traced to much longer period. Also, we are facing acute crisis today on communal front. It is therefore, high time that our religious leaders should morally intervene in this strife-torn situation and see to it that Gujrat-like situation does not repeat and our multi-religiosity remains our asset and does not become a liability. We can meet challenges to secularism and democracy and steer clear of fascistic politics only if our religious leaders intervene firmly to cut unscrupulous politicians to size.