



The Lost History of Secularism

By Saptarshi Bhakat

We are dwelling in a society where the rate of polarization is worsening. Hate and discrimination among people based on their religious identity are intensifying and the emergence of a certain political dogma is aiding to raise this already increasing dichotomy. In this time of turmoil, it would be reasonable enough to look back at our country's long forfeited secular past.

The preamble declares India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic. The term secular was incorporated in the Preamble by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976. The term signifies that all the religions in India should get proportional respect, protection and support from the state. But this idea of a secular India has now evolved into much of a sceptical idea where every day it confronts some kind of criticism from a certain section of people. My aim towards writing this is not to start a fracas against the non-secular people but to tell about our nation's history to the completely oblivious society to let them reanalyse the subject.

India has always been a heterodoxical nation and as Noble Laureate Amartya Sen has mentioned in his book *Argumentative Indian*, heterodoxy has also contributed to the emergence of secularism. Hindustan (Persian: "Land of the Indus") has shared its soil with myriad faiths. Its compassionate past towards religious diversity is what modern India should understand. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs, Bahas and several others have arrived and behaved toward it as their home. The word 'Hindu' simply meant the people beyond the River Sindhu or Indus. The word Hindu did not belong to any of the Indian languages, it was given to us by Persians and Arabs. The Vedas, meaning 'knowledge' are the oldest text of Hinduism which are 3500 years old (debatable), paved its way to form the religion it is known to us today. Buddhism and Jainism emerged by the sixth century BCE. The practice of Buddhism now may have become limited but it was previously a dominant religion in India for nearly a thousand years. Jainism too endured as a powerful Indian religion for two and a half millennia. Shortly after the collapse of Jerusalem, the Jews began to come, the Christians began to come in large communities in the fourth century and began to settle in what is now known as Kerala. In the seventh century, Parsees started arriving after the persecution of Zoroastrianism started in Persia. Muslim Arab traders started to settle down on the western coast of India during the eighth century. All kinds of religious communities successfully managed to inscribe their identity among numerous others.

Indian has been ruled by numerous monarchs, pertaining to different religions. Be it Hindu Raja Ashoka (Ashoka the Great) of the Maurya Dynasty or Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar of the Mughal Emperor. Their way of administering the rules of secularism are as unique as it could be. In the words of Professor Sen 'Ashoka supplemented this general moral and political principle by a dialectical argument based on enlightened self-

interest'. Akbar maintained a pluralistic structure while governing the state. His way of maintaining a secular state was one of a kind. Although he was a follower of Islam, he had a profound interest in other faiths. He even tried to commence a new religion Din-ilahi(God's religion) where he wanted to take up good messages from all the religions. He used to organize meetings involving members from diverse faiths including atheists. Akbar's court was full of non-Muslim scholars and artists. From Tansen(the extraordinary Hindu musician) to Raja Man Singh (the general commander of his armed forces). Tulsi Das the Hindu poet wrote Ramcharitmanas, one of the most important Hindu text during Akbar's reign. Akbar had Ramayana and Mahabharata translated in Persian. Of course, there were brutal leaders like Aurangzeb but at the same time there were secular leaders like Shivaji, Dara Shikoh, Krishna Dev Rai and others mentioned above who continued to create the history of secularism. During the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjahan, the festival of Holi was also celebrated along with Eid, they referred to Holi as 'Eid-e-Gulabi'. The value of secularism was also promoted through the magic of poetry by poets like Hazrat Amir Khusraw and Kabir. Even the Indians belonging to different faiths lived intertwined. As Sashi Tharoor mentions in his book An era of darkness ' Muslim musicians played and sang Hindu devotional songs, Hindus thronged Sufi shrines and worshipped Muslim saints there, and Muslim artisans in Benaras made the traditional masks for Hindu Ram-Leela performances.' Some sceptics argue that the upheaval during the pre-colonial India between the Hindu and Muslim emperors was completely based on religious motives. Some of the facts are of course irrefutable, the Islamic invaders like Mahmud of Ghazni, Mohammad Ghori and Bakhtiyar Khilji performed ethnic cleansing and carried cruel intentions but exceptional names should not be used to interpret the whole situation. Most of the wars were fought for the extreme greed for power and there is enough evidence supporting it. The First Battle of Panipat which was fought between two Islamic Rulers Ibrahim Lodi and Babur and the Battle of Patan in 1790 which was fought between Hindu Rulers Marathas and Rajputs are few examples that show us that religion scarcely played any substantial role which the communal sceptics aim to delude us with.

The British used Religion as a crucial tool to play the game of divide and rule especially after the revolt of 1857 where the Hindu and the Muslim brothers fought side by side against them. Scholars like Gyanendra Pandey infers that the seed of communalism was sowed by the colonial rulers to create a dichotomy and break the unity and brotherhood which was nothing but a nightmare for the British Rulers. The ruthless Churchill was so baffled by the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography, climate and the diversity of religions that he said "It is no more a single country than the Equator". After the bloody aftermath of the partition, India unlike Pakistan chose to remain a secular state staying devoted to its secular history and its people. Indeed, there were contradictions after the partition between the seculars and the sceptics of secularism but ultimately logic triumphed over faith. Mahatma Gandhi who was deeply religious in practice got assassinated by a Hindu extremist whose grievance was that he was not adequately concerned about Hindu rights and also too soft on Muslims. These are the evidence of how heinous can a person become to attain the fulfilment of his objective.

India as a nation has always been an example of pluralism to the world. It is entirely apparent by now that religion can be used and has been used by a large section of people to distort and manipulate unity and keep us away from the real problems and topics that impact the lives of ordinary people. People from diverse religions have the liberty to be a part of this country, at least that is what our history enlightens us. It is now in the hands of the people of India, how they want to view our nation in the forthcoming future.