

OPINION

The Future of Secularism

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It is frequently said that the future of secularism in India is bleak. This is indeed a debatable point. But the argument presented in its favour, namely, that differences in religions are an obstacle to building a secular society in India is patently unsound. It would be truer to say that it is the corrupt politics adopted in India after Independence, which is the greatest obstacle to building a secular society.

In his book, *Anti-Memoirs*, the well-known French thinker, Andre Malraux, writes that he once put this question to Pandit Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India: "What is the most difficult problem facing you as Prime Minister?" Nehru replied: "To build a secular state in a religious society."

Perhaps the reason behind this reply was that, in his judgment, the successful functioning of secularism in the West was dependent upon religion not being as powerful a force in their societies as it was in India. This amounts to saying that, religion having lost its domination in their societies, secularism could be implemented successfully. But this was not the truth of the matter. In actual fact, secularism is successful in western countries for the simple reason that politics of such an inimical nature was not adopted there as was done in India. Had religion in India been an obstacle in this matter, it would have been so even before Partition. But, as events have shown, that was not the case.

Now in my seventies, I have seen India both before and after partition. There are many like me in the country who have seen both these periods. They know that religion was a far more powerful force in India prior to Independence. Even then we had, to a large extent, a society imbued with communal harmony- the harmony, which we are still attempting to secure through secularism today. Today when religion's influence has relatively diminished, secular values have still not taken root in society. By going deeper, we find that the actual reason for social corruption is traceable to the presence of an evil, which crept into our society after independence: divisiveness. This is at the root of corruption in politics.

In western countries, political parties are formed on the basis of national issues, in accordance with which they formulate their national programmes. When the voters subscribe to the national programmes of a party, they vote it to power, and in case of their disapproval, they withhold their support. On the contrary, the politics that emerged in India after Independence was based on the petty policy of building up a vote bank. The success of this type of politics entirely depends on instilling hatred in one political or cultural group for another group, in order to create a fear

psychosis. Then, the politicians project themselves as saviours. This is all aimed at creating vote banks in different cultural or religious groups.

Such politics necessarily results in dissension, instead of harmony in society. It escalates hatred, instead of love. It widens the division between different communities. Obviously, wherever such a state of affairs prevails, the roots of secularism will continue to weaken.

India opted for a secular constitution after Independence. This meant assigning religious or cultural differences to private spheres, attempting to unite them on a wider scale, and taking into consideration the social, economic or political demands of the people in general. Secularism is concerned with building social relations between the people on grounds of common interest. That is to say, secularism demanded such a common ground, but politics, on the contrary, was based on the gambit of division. This is the principal reason for the dismal results of the secular Constitution.

It is true that the biggest movement of the immediate past, which caused greatest damage to the secular structure of the country, was raised in the name of religion. This was no other than the Ayodhya's Mandir-Masjid movement. However, as events tell us, it was temporary in nature. It went on for some years, and then it died down after having reached its limit on December 6, 1992. Furthermore, this movement had nothing to do with religion. It was indeed a form of the same divisive politics mentioned before, which exploited religion to serve political ends.

The only goal of this movement was to instill hatred in one group for another towards building a vote bank in order to ensure success in the elections.

Let us face the hard reality and concede that the permanent obstacle in the path of a secular society in India is the same corrupt politics which has found its way into the social life of our country, as it is based on the divisions of caste, culture and religion. This is what is known as 'vote bank' politics.

Politics by its very nature is something, which brings the entire country under its influence. As such it would be true to say that the future of secularism in India is linked with the question of what type of politics is adopted in the country. If fair politics comes into vogue and if the political parties in all earnestness take up national issues then secularism has undoubtedly a bright future in the country. But if the political parties continue to follow the politics of hatred and division, they may secure their vote banks in this manner, but the future of secularism as well as of the country will continue to remain bleak.

Now the final hours has comes to adopt constructive politics in which the people's support is secured on the basis of the genuine interest of the country. Destructive politics, which seeks to secure the vote of one group by awakening hatred for another must be totally abandoned. How we deal with this issue will determine whether our country enters the 21st century as a developed or as a ruined country.

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