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Communal Challenge and Secular Response

by

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The amazing diversity of group life defines India and symbolises what it has stood for through the ages. However, despite secular nature of Indian society, India is faced with massive problem of communalism. The conflict between majority and minority community is increasing. The most serious minority problem in India is that of Muslims, and their main problem is occasional explosion of hatred against them which leads to riot, arson and death in large numbers. The Indian state/states are not effective in controlling violence against minorities.

The recurrence of communal riots is perhaps a unique phenomenon in a democratic polity like India. Secularism was chosen by the founding fathers of Indian republic to ensure equal treatment to all. The Indian constitution balances well the commitment of a democratic liberal state and accords equal status for all. It was hoped that with deepening of democracy, the spirit of secularism will soar high. But what one witnesses is quite different. Secularism in India has failed to keep pace with democracy.

While India maintains its secular dispensation in terms of its constitution, in terms of behaviour secularism has certainly taken a considerable toll. Of late many of the secular features of the Indian state, in terms of the treatment of minorities, particularly Muslim minority, leaves much to be desired and one finds it hard to argue that India is genuinely a secular state beyond its constitution. Anti-secular forces have successfully poisoned the social environment. More importantly, the very concept of secularism is being openly questioned and is being denounced as an alien concept. At the moment secularism in India is under siege and its future is at best dubious.

Asghar Ali Engineer is among the best-known champions of Indian concept of secularism as envisaged in the Indian constitution. He has written extensively on secularism. He has personally investigated major communal riots in the post-independence India. The book under review is a collection of Engineer's articles written from time to time to comment on communalism, secularism, minority rights, terrorism and so on. The most distinguishing feature of his essays is his balanced and dispassionate approach to communal problem.

According to the author India's pluralism is the sheet anchor of secularism. One cannot think of secular democracy without pluralism. The fundamental unity of India is predicated on its

capacity to coalesce its many diversities in a pattern of autonomy and harmony. After independence, communal riots began to take place in the 1960s and flared up especially in the late 70s. The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a new wave of communal mobilisation. The recent carnage in Gujarat is the culmination of years of unabated communal violence. It has come as the biggest jolt to the secular and pluralistic nature of Indian society.

The author rightly points out that real conflict is not between religions, but between various interests, particularly political and economic. Religions and religious identities tend to generate emotional appeal and help mobilise people with ease and hence vested interests resort to it. He argues that secularism is firstly a political and not a religious philosophy. In this connection it is recalled that secularism was accepted even by quite orthodox Muslim Ulema during freedom struggle. These Ulema vehemently opposed two-nation theory and firmly stood by composite and secular nationalism.

Significantly, the movement for Pakistan was headed by a highly westernised liberal person like Jinnah who neither believed in nor practised Islam. Thus, it is not the question of nature of religion but political outlook and political commitments to accept or reject secularism.

Regarding secular response to communal challenge, Engineer regrets that unfortunately secular forces are deeply divided and severely weakened. The response of the so-called secular politicians to communal threat is piecemeal rather than comprehensive, much less confrontational.

Secularism appears to have lost its philosophical appeal and secular leaders are more concerned about their vote banks rather than secularism of a lofty political philosophy. Their commitment is not to secularism and much less to minorities. They only use secularism and champion the cause of minorities to seek their votes. The opportunist policies of various ruling cliques brought secularism to such a mess. It is suggested that only a vibrant civil society can check communal violence but when the civil society itself as happened in Gujarat is so highly communalised how can it check communal violence.

At a time when the monster of communalism is seriously threatening to destroy the very fabric of communal harmony and spirit of secularism, writings of an uncompromising champion of secularism like Engineer assume great relevance on the subject and should be of interest to scholars, researches and those interested in the problem.

It is a welcome addition to the ever-increasing literature on the theme.