The irrelevance of secularism

The formula that the state must remain equidistant from all religions is proving to be unworkable

Mohammed Ayoob

A debate has flared up, especially after the Supreme Court’s Sabarimala judgment, on whether the state should leave religion alone. I believe in the Indian context, it is more pertinent to ask whether religion can leave the state alone. The relevance of this question is underscored by the unique definition of secularism espoused by the founding fathers of the Constitution, namely that the Indian state must be equidistant from all religions while allowing religions equal space in the public sphere.

Question of definition

For several reasons this definition of secularism has created a lot of confusion as to what the term stands for. First, the formulation was impractical, given the huge numerical disparity in the religious composition of the Indian nation. This demographic inequality paved the way for the intrusion, and now proliferation, of majoritarian religious symbols, idioms and practices in the state’s domain.

Second, given the congenitally religious nature of Indian society and the consequent political import of identity based on religion, political parties, almost without exception, found it convenient to use religious sectarianism to advance their fortunes. The success of the Muslim League in hiving off Muslim majority areas from the rest of the country in 1947 on the basis of a religio-sectarian agenda gave a major fillip to Hindu nationalist organisations, such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). These parties were already active in the pre-Partition political arena but were of marginal importance during the freedom movement. The demographic transformation of independent India, as a consequence of Partition, into a Hindu majority of around 80% paved the way for the emergence of Hindu nationalist parties spawned by the RSS – first the Jan Sangh and then the BJP – as major political players in the country.

The Congress itself had a Hindu nationalist component that had been overshadowed by the ideology of composite nationalism because of the towering personality of its leading exponent, Jawaharlal Nehru. This ideology began to decline from the early 1960s with the deterioration in Nehru’s health. The decline was temporarily halted in the late 1960s during the first few years of Indira Gandhi’s tenure as Prime Minister by the influence on her of her mentor, P.N. Haksar, an uncompromising secularist. But it became clear that she was not above playing the religio-sectarian card. She did so successfully in order to return to power in 1980.

Rajiv Gandhi continued in his mother’s footsteps in the aftermath of her assassination by giving a free hand to marauding mobs that massacred thousands of Sikhs in Delhi. He subsequently followed a policy of dual appeasement: first getting Parliament to overturn the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Shah Bano case and then by opening the Babri Masjid, which had remained closed since 1949, to allow Hindu religious rites to be conducted in its premises.

Nonetheless, despite the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Atal Bihari Vajpayee interregnum that saw the Gujarat massacre of 2002 (in picture), the fiction of the secular state was maintained as long as the Congress remained in power in New Delhi. The accession to power on its own steam of the BJP in 2014 removed the secular veneer almost totally. The intrusion of religion into the state’s arena in the form of donning of religious garb by state functionaries while carrying out state duties and participation in religious rites while acting in their official capacity has now become common. The proliferation of cow vigilantism and the anti-Muslim rhetoric of some of the BJP’s leading lights provide further evidence of this trend.

Blatant appeals now

The appeal to religious identity, always a part of India’s political landscape, has now become much more blatant. The Congress, impressed by the electoral success of the BJP apparently based on its Hindu nationalist agenda, has become the B-team of the latter by embracing soft Hindutva as compared to the BJP’s hard Hindutva. Congress president Rahul Gandhi’s flaunting of his caste and religious affiliation while visiting dozens of temples in States where elections were held recently are indications of how far the Congress has changed from its heyday under his grandfather.

One cannot blame politicians of either the BJP or the Congress for taking recourse to majoritarian nationalism for this is what currently sells in the electoral market. Politicians are, above all, interested in attaining power and the route to power today seems to lie through Hindu nationalism, whether hard or soft. If one needs someone or something to blame, it is the definition of secularism, or lack of it, adopted at the time of Independence.

The framers of the Constitution, Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar included, failed to erect an unbreachable firewall between state and religion that would clearly prevent the intrusion of religious idioms, practices and agendas into the political arena and insulate the state from the religious sphere. One can understand why they failed to do so. The innate religious nature of Indian society and the after-effects of Partition on religious grounds precluded this option. However, in this context, to call the ideological foundation of the Constitution secularism, although the term was not explicitly included in the document until 1976, has done great harm to the concept. It has done even greater disservice to the country by thoroughly confusing the public as to what the term denotes.

The formula that the state must remain equidistant from all religions, the unique Indian definition of secularism, is clearly unworkable. The sooner we realise this reality the easier it will be for all concerned to come to terms with the current trajectory of Indian politics. It is time to jettison the use of the term rather than confound the Indian public even further as to what ‘secularism’ really means.

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