

PRACTICES OF SECULARISM IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: FISSURES AND DISCREPANCIES

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Abstract

The paper is about the way secularism is practiced in contemporary India and how certain practices supports a set of hegemonic frameworks of socio-political life and the way they eventually tend to suppress marginal voices. While discussing some of the popular trends of practices of secularism, concerns of severe gravity have been raised by evaluating the apparent discrepancies and fissures, which the so-called secular way of thinking intelligibly mask and also looks at how far secularistic the creation of modern spaces could be.

Keywords:- secularism,socio-political life,hegemonic, discrepancies and fissures.

A lightly taken and not-much-questioned statement by the Union Minister and National Conference president Farooq Abdullah saying that “India can’t be communal ... If India becomes communal, Kashmir will not remain with India. It will not remain” minimally exposes the current situation of India and its stand in relation to the practice of secularism. The statement meanwhile brings to light a granted conceptualization in the minds of the people about India on the whole. However, the statement comes as the result of the campaign for the general elections of 2014 along with the intention of attacking the controversial figure and prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi and a comment by BJP Bihar leader Giriraj Singh and VHP leader Pravin Togadia who are of the belief that “those who don’t vote for (Narendra) Modi should go to Pakistan”. Introducing another recent news into the framework that I am trying to formulate is the news regarding the T20 world cup wherein, a Pakistani, called Bashir who is settled in Chicago became the talk of Indian media for him being a fan of Dhoni and supporting team India in the finals of T20 world cup. In his own words, talking to media personals about his choice of supporting India, he said that, “I am a Pakistan fan but for today, I am a Dhoni fan.”

What do these news scripts convey or imply and hence why are they important in the current discussion on practices of secularism in India? Taking up the statements from politicians to a lay man’s positions, we see that according to Farooq, India has always remained secular, as the constitution pronounces, (that came as the result of the colonial modernity and which was indeed a strong aspiration of the makers of the Indian Constitution) whereas, the comment reflects that, the secularism so far embraced by India will be under threat if Modi wins and

becomes the Prime Minister of India. It is given that India ‘becoming’ communal is attached to Modi ‘becoming’ the Prime Minister and the facts can also go reverse wherein, if Modi does not become the Prime Minister, the country can still remain secular. Farooq’s statement is based on the assumption that India is secular and is going to become communal if Modi’s party reins majority votes. However, has India been secular so far? Can any society or space be secular at all?

Coming to another significant statement by the leaders of BJP and VHP, are also of the strong belief that India is a Hindu nation, for which, as of now, Modi stands as the epitome of Hinduism and thus representing Hindustan. The comment sort of brings into the political arena the need to divide the population between religious lines, wherein, those who do not vote for Modi must go to Pakistan, imply that be it Hindus or Muslims, the exhibition of their loyalty to Modi decides their characteristic of being and belonging to the nation of India or Hindustan. On the other hand, those who do not vote, are seen as betrayers, as Pakistani’s and mainly as belonging to the Muslim community on the whole and those who do not support the Hindu ideology of Modi’s party are not fit to be Indians and thus must go to Pakistan. How rational is the statement and its supposed assumptions does not come under criticism as for the Hindu ideology, what matters is the belief and not its factual material existence, which has been the case since the demolition of Babri Masjid simply based on the belief of Hindus.

In this context, in a slightly different manner, the political condition of India reflects a much disastrous situation in the history of India, i.e., the partition of India and Pakistan. During the period of partition, politically charged statements like this, mainly from those politicians who self-proclaimed an unquestionable right to belong to the country, forced the ‘others’, primarily the Muslim community people to move to Pakistan if they share a sympathy that nation and thus, those who choose to stay back in India, must show their loyalty to India, if necessary, by shedding blood and sacrificing their lives, be it against Pakistan itself. It is evident, since the time of partition that, non-Hindus, especially Muslims have the need to publicly exhibit their loyalty to India in order to legitimize their existence in the society. Such an exhibition of one’s loyalty is not demanded from a Hindu, it is by default assumed that a Hindu always has his/her loyalty to the nation because as for the Hindus, it is not to the ‘others’ that they have to prove their favour, while for Muslims, since the nation itself goes with the religion that is not their own, needs to showcase where they stand. The Hindu oriented society is always eager to know whether a Muslim supports his ‘other’ i.e., the Hindus or their own ‘self’, the Muslims.

When statements like the one already quoted, by the leaders of BJP and VHP, a similar situation is brought into the political arena, but with no violence on either side. However, the fact that, even after six decades after partition, a stereotypical mindset about the nation and who should be the rightful citizens of the nation are still grounded on religious lines. Meanwhile, the statement deeply damages the notion of Muslims and misuses the religion on both ways, wherein, on the one hand, Muslims are still seen as betrayers to the country and if they are not so, they have to cast their vote in favour of Modi, while on the other hand, it devalues any other means of understanding or considering a Muslim except the Muslimness which he/she unavoidably is made to stand for.

Moving on a similar line of argumentation, we can also place Bashir’s case as another exemplar of exhibiting one’s support to India, not only through politics but through cricket. In a country like India, supporting and cheering a team against another also becomes a political act, sometimes applauded and sometimes seen as blasphemy. Taking the case of Bashir, who is just a cricket fan and goes to watch live matches mostly played by Pakistan, could have been invisible

like many others in the crowd of thousands of cricket fans. However his “hyper-visibility” is entirely the result of his open support to Dhoni in the finals of T20 world cup this 2014 and the he became the headlines for the fact that him being a Pakistani, supported Dhoni who belongs to India. The news so exemplifies few notions that Pakistani’s always support that which is Pakistani, i.e., of or about Muslim. As such, Bashir’s support to Dhoni of the Indian team is something unusual, a matter of attention to the Indian’s who are of the opinion that all Pakistani’s support team Pakistan, and that all Muslims, be it in India or outside, support only Muslims. The exposition of Bashir’s case as a major report in the Indian media goes with the intention of showcasing that since a person belonging to Pakistan chooses to support India, consequently puts the Muslims of India in a position of threat and compulsion, wherein, the proposition deriving from this case suggests that when a person from Pakistan supports the Indian team, the Muslims from India must undoubtedly support India and not Pakistan, goes without saying.

However, another way of looking at Bashir’s case is that the traditional notion about Muslims as being the betrayers of the nation, due to their demand for the partition of India, it runs in their blood that they have a natural proclivity to betray the land which they belong, and thus, Bashir being a Pakistani betrays his nation, be it for a day, and supports India. As such, Muslims, be in India or in Pakistan, have a natural inclination to betray and show their loyalty to that group which stands as the enemy of their nation.

Fortunately, Bashir is not seen as a betrayer of Pakistan, that reading has not be done so far, but the fact remains that, be it Bashir or any other Muslim from India in the place of Bashir for that matter, would have created the same impact on the media and in turn on the society. There is a general misconception that all Muslims in India support Pakistan during the India-Pakistan cricket match wherein, the assumption is popularised without even a proper knowledge of what Muslims feel about India and about themselves placed in India and in return, how are these misconceptions making them feel about their position is never asked. When a sport like cricket can be rarely secular, and the space of a cricket field during live matches with its characteristic of physical exhibition of one’s support is not seen on secular lines, how far can other spaces in the same country is constructed on secular thought?

The three discussed cases bring about few interesting notions about India and Indians wherein the first case conspicuously assumes that India has been staunchly practicing secularism in all its forms. While in the second case, entirely contradictory to the first one, attempts to divide the voting population on religious terms, which directly reflect the 1947 partition of India-Pakistan, wherein, India stands for a Hindu nation and Pakistan for Muslim nation. Finally, the third case configures around where Muslims’ stand in relation to India. From these propositions, what is dominantly brought out, though from different contexts, that even today, Muslims are never seen as the rightful inhabitants of India and that Muslims always have to openly exhibit their loyalty and support to India for the purpose of proving their citizenship.

The matter of such pronouncements and loyalty check is expected only from the Muslims due to historical reasons and the memory factor, the Hindus are the ones’ who form the essence of the nation and thus their loyalty is never questioned. The bias hugely owes to the popular narratives of India, in which, the Muslims are interpreted as invaders and looters who disturbed the inherent Hindu society of India. However scholars have widely exposed the fact that the a constituent called Hindu and Muslim is only a recent construction as part of the British construction of its own colonial history and that the previous generations did not themselves as a Hindu or a Muslim. In that sense, what Devji suggests in one of his essays that pre-colonial

Indian society functioned on secular terms appears to be true. The post-independence society of India has gone through major communal tug-of-war between Hindus and Muslims, be it for silly, irrational causes or serious atrocities.

Scholars like Barbara D. Metcalf suggest rewriting of history and narratives of India, while other scholars like Ranjit Guha and Faisal Fatehali Devji are of the opinion that ‘erasure’ of memory and thus the erasure of history can contribute in the construction of a secular society. However, the process of ‘erasure’ or even ‘rewriting’ is rather utopian for it is too late to bring in any grass-root changes as the history and the memory of historical events only favour the dominant groups of the society, i.e., the Hindu community in India, which constructs memories in its favour and thus, the hegemonic practices, majorly of stereotyping and being sceptical about the identity of a Muslim gets circulated and in the due course, becomes naturalized.

Apart from the historical concoction of the essence of Muslim identity, what baffles is the fact that, in a self-proclaimed secular country like India, the society has a problem if a Muslim does not look/appear like a Muslim. The stereotypical notions constructed with popular agreement about a Muslim’s attire require a Muslim to always appear in agreement with the popular construction. We have come across comments like “You don’t look like a Muslim!” wherein, a Muslim is forced to confirm to the stereotypical notion of a Muslim. It is as if, the essence of a Muslim is simply his/her ‘Muslimness’ and any other characteristic relating to his religious stand, political ideology, personal likes and dislikes are pushed aside as unimportant. The ‘Muslimness’ becomes the only matter in the configuration of the identity of a Muslim.

Going back to the case of Modi and Farooq’s comments on Modi’s ideology, the case of attributing communalism either always to Muslims or to other minority communities in India has taken a reverse direction, wherein, a prototypical Hindu figure like Modi is seen as a communal. So far in the history of India, a Hindu figure is never accused for being communal and for propagating one’s political ideology on communal lines. Which does not imply that only with the prominence of Modi is India going to be communal, whereas, all throughout, the fact remains that India has never been secular but only a pseudo-secular country.

When being secular and communal falls under the argument of categorising something or someone as modern and traditional, the pressure of associating oneself with the modern ideology is high for the people belonging to the minority community. Being modern is only a fashion statement that promises to offer a higher status and higher degree of acceptance in a society like India becomes a threat to those people who cannot impose modernity, rather a dominant construction of modernity upon their entire community.

In the hegemonic construction of Indian modernity, what is modern to the Hindu upper-class individuals might not be the modernity, which the lower-class or the other minority group approve of. For instance, as Aditya Nigam exclusively discusses in one of his essays, being modern to the Hindu community is to be communally ‘invisible’ wherein caste particularities are provisionally erased or rather not pronounced in the public arena. Since caste is also one of the major issues in the Indian situation, the downtrodden people of the Hindu community itself, i.e., the dalits and the adivasis, are also expected to be modern, in the sense that dalits are forced to not to ascribe to their caste for the purpose of political and societal empowerment. If, for instance, a Dalit uses his caste identity to voice his concerns, the upper-caste people disband his concerns for being communal and not being modern like how they are, which can never be the case. It is easy for an upper-caste Hindu to be modern, to be ‘invisible’ in the face of all the inequalities that the lower-caste Hindus suffer from, but for a lower-caste Hindu, the only anchor

that he/she has, to move forward in an unequal society is through the effective employment of his caste identity.

Further, the issue of reservation, for the minorities like Dalits and Muslims is also brought under the discourse of modernity and the Indian constitution also plays an important role in favour of modern Hindu argument. The accusation so follows that in a democratic and secular country like India, as goes the preamble of the Constitution, aspects like reservation and categorization based on religious and caste lines are seen as undemocratic and non-secular, in other words, communal.

Satish Deshpande, in one of his lectures, talks about the issue of reservation wherein the general category people consider themselves as “casteless” wherein it is not necessary, at any stage of their lives or in any space of the society, to openly assert their caste identity either for political or cultural intentions. While at the same time, the Dalits, Muslims or other minorities, always have a necessity to stand as a representative of their caste and thus, they fall under the category of not-being-casteless. As such, the so-called “casteless” people fill up the so called “general” category which does not have to be defined on caste lines and meanwhile, the “caste” people attain a degree of “hyper-visibility” which is the result of the supposed “invisibility” of the ‘general’ category people. There is no proper understanding of the issue of reservation so far and that the one’s who make use of the policy of reservation as seen as rather privileged which is not the case in reality. For all the societal, cultural and political inequalities along with the stereotyping of the minority identity and many other injustices against the minority community, reservation policy only serves as a showcase of compensation which the Constitution and the government offers. Such compensation reveals the incapacity of the society to effectively eradicate the inequalities and to make it an egalitarian society.

There is no guarantee that a Dalit or a Muslim who avails the facility of reservation will never have to face discrimination, be it in public or educational institutions or in work places. There is no guarantee that reservation effectively empowers the backward community since reservation stops at providing someone a job or a seat in educational institutions, but does not promise to offer respect or equality for the sole reason that he/she made use of the reservation policy to be placed somewhere. Respect, in the sense that those who avail the facility as looked at as having attained any qualification, not through hard work, but through the use of their caste or religious identity. As such, the problem lies with the fact that the government intends to reduce the existing level of disparity between the privileged class of the society and the underprivileged, but on the other hand, the same reservation policy is further used as a tool of discrimination against the underprivileged sections, who are not in a position to denounce the use of reservation saying that they prefer to be “casteless”, while at the same time, availing the facility will also eventually lead to another kind of discrimination, blaming them of being rather explicitly communal.

However, who is communal and who is secular is something that needs to be questioned at this stage of the paper because some believe in the notion that India is secular, while some blame Modi for standing as a communal figure who is going to make, in turn, India communal. On the one hand, the assertion of one’s caste identity, especially in relation to dalit and muslim minorities, becomes an extremely communal stand, and any organization or a political party which comprises of its own community members once again downgraded as fostering communal representation. On the other hand, there are n-number of organizations that exclusively cater to its own community and its own religion and which is blatantly exclusive to the minority community claim themselves to be secular and modern. The double standard of Indian politics

brings up such ambiguous positions to be taken, wherein, it is necessary that your own community concerns are made heard while at the same time, you do not want to be branded as communal. While those who are in the position of branding someone or something as communal themselves propagate communal ideologies under the masking term of secularism.

For instance, when we take up the case of the Congress party in India, which most Indians believe to be functioning on secular ideology not because it caters to the concerns of the minority community, but simply because there are one or two representatives who belong to the minority community. Popularly, we find an ambiguous way of political association, where in, the minority, for example the Muslim issue in the congress party, and a Muslim candidate endorsing the so called secular prospects of the congress political party, on the one hand is able to give a muslim or any minority, his representation on behalf of his community, while on the other hand, his representation solely depends on to what extent he claims affiliation to the expressed ideology of the dominant party.

Restraining from any sort of association to a dominant party like the Congress might devoid oneself from getting exposed to the dominant political arena, while such an association comes only with a kind of compromise as a shift from being communal to endorse secular ideology. It is rather a subsumption of the minority into the hegemonic practices of secularism, where in, the formation of the minority groups become subject to the dominant political formations. In the due course, communal concerns, which is very much a necessity in a country like India gets largely suppressed for the sole reason of being communal, while the fact remains that if a representative or an individual of a minority community does not stand for the empowerment of his own community, then who else will?

Going back to the beginning of this argument, the kind of secularism that is practiced in India is rather ambiguous, wherein, any space or any place, can attain the quality of being secular or communal, which entirely rests on the dominant's branding of something or someone as secular or communal and not entirely on the kind of words and actions contained in it. As such, secularism, as a term, is largely used as a tool to suppress the voices of the minority community, who cannot be secular, but are forced to be, while any number of poojas, yagas, temple visiting, and donations to matts along with public exhibition of one's religious affiliations are never judged on communal lines since it is undertaken by the so called, "general", "casteless", "modern", "secular" "Hindus", who take the position of designing the modern spaces of the society, wherein, the construction of a dominant modernity is itself a hegemonic project.

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