

# *Communal Harmony And A Positive Role For Religion*

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## **Is Religion Nonsense?**

Some time ago the official journal of our Planning Commission, Yojana brought out a special number with the theme 'Stop this Nonsense Now'.

The contributors were our distinguished intellectuals mostly from the academic community and also people like P. N. Haskar and M. G. K. Menon. The articles were sensible, though debatable, about combating communalism, and generally pointed out the negative role of religious fanaticism in spreading the communal views. But the theme and the editorial had a more simple approach. The argument seemed to go like this: Religion is nonsense; stop this nonsense now; ban religion from public life and confine it to the private domain and everything will be all right.

Unfortunately matters are not that simple. The privatization of religion cannot solve the problems of inter-religious conflict and communal riots. Technically, we privatized religion when we opted for a "secular state" as distinct from a Hindu or Islamic state such as our neighbour and twin brother, Pakistan, chose. But, in fact, we could not privatize religion.

## **Justice and Religious communities**

We recognized, in framing our constitution soon after independence, that justice demand special state support for those communities which were socially and economically under-developed—the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, as well as religious minorities. This was based on the principle that in a democracy, minority groups needed some protection against the will of the majority which can be imposed upon the minorities by sheer majority vote.

Where we failed to privatize religion was in grouping these minority communities by religious labels or religious adherences. It was possible to get special protection for minority institutions only if these institutions had minority label. One gets certain fee concessions only if one is a Hindu Harijan, not if one is a Christian Harijan or a Muslim Harijan. One gets reservations for jobs and electoral representation only if one has a religious label. Now, this clearly means that we have not privatized religion, nor have we separated religion and the state. Constitutionally we are not, strictly speaking, a secular state, though the preamble to the Constitution says so.

## **New Criteria for Backwardness**

Let me make it clear that I am not arguing either for full privatisation of religion or a fuller separation of state and religion. Those who believe in a secular state (I do not), if they are consistent, will have to amend the Constitution substantially in order to make backwardness measured by socio-economic rather than religious criteria. There are many in both Harijan and Girijan communities who are socially or economically backward. There are many others in both Harijan and Girijan communities who are socially and economically way ahead of the masses of India.

I do not want to enter into the controversy about reservations since this can have, as we have

seen, rather unpleasant consequences. It is a fact that special concessions to certain groups are often at the expense of other groups. A competent Brahmin today finds himself or herself handicapped because of the community to which he/she belongs was regarded once as over-represented in the echelons of power. Is there not an injustice here? Is it not also true that to withdraw special privileges from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and minority religious communities would also be unjust, since the vast majority of the members of these groups are underprivileged and unable to compete as equal partners in the struggle for scarce economic opportunities?

It is a solution to this problem that is urgently needed -- to deal with our problem of communal conflict. We probably made a mistake in framing our Constitution. It is the principle of justice (as distinct from equality) that the weak and the underprivileged should get special consideration and have some special privileges until they overcome their inherited weakness. But they are not underprivileged because they belong to a particular religion. In fact, we know that the late Babu Jagjivan Ram was exceptionally powerful at one time, in part at least, precisely because he was a Harijan and partly because of his own capacities, endowment and good luck.

Religious adherence does not make a person underprivileged. There is no justification, at least in a secular state, to measure backwardness by religious adherence. Recognized backwardness, as a basis for special privileges, should not be determined by religious adherence, but by socio-cultural and economic parameters.

I know some of the practical difficulties in implementing this principle. Nevertheless it will be good to recognize the principle and prepare the nation to work out a just solution when people are ready to face the issue rationally and not emotionally.

## **Secular vs. Pluralistic State**

I said earlier that I am not for the idea of a secular state, though the Preamble lays it down as a qualifying adjective for our state in India. I should explain myself.

First of all, I do not believe that secularism is scientific. Neither do I believe that a religious view of life is scientific. I believe that it is beyond the purview of science to decide whether a secular view of reality is more true than a religious view of reality. I believe that religious views of reality can be questioned by rational arguments. It is quite legitimate to do so, since reason is a noble instrument at the disposal of human beings by which they can relate to reality and relate to other human beings. But the argument between a secular view of reality and a religious view of reality cannot be settled on the plane of formal logic. It is the same when it comes to a debate between the various religions. Ultimately there is no rational ground for choosing the Christian scriptures as more authoritative than Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or other scriptures.

We should recognize the freedom of human beings to adhere to one religion or another or to none and be a secularist. But neither religion nor secularism should claim scientific sanctions. A government has no right to promote secularism as an ideology. The separation of state and religion must apply also to secularism, since it functions as a religion and is not based on any consensus in the scientific community.

The implication of this point is that the state has no right to demand from me a commitment to a so-called 'secular' state. Whether one holds a secular view or a religious view of reality is not for the state to decide.

In place of the so-called Secular State, I prefer to speak of a Pluralistic State, if we want to avoid the idea of a Hindu State, Islamic State, etc. A Pluralistic State is one in which people of religions and of no religion (secularists) can be commonly committed to a single nation and its

national goals and purposes, as adumbrated in the Constitution and in democratic parliamentary decisions and enactments.

Communal harmony, respect for other religions or no religion and the willingness of all regional, linguistic or communal groups to subordinate their interests to the larger just interests of the nation, would form part of the commitment of every citizen in a Pluralistic State.

### **Common Personal Law**

I would also like to see a common personal law for all citizens, irrespective of caste or religion or sex or race. This entails two principles:

- a) It is not the responsibility of the state to control or implement religious law. They can lay only broad guidelines for national law, within which each religious group will have its own machinery to enforce its discipline, so long as it does not infringe upon the personal liberty of the citizen except by his consent.
  
- b) The personal laws of the state should be so flexible as to cause as little conflict as possible with the known and approved laws of the eight religions of India. This means, for example, that if Catholic Christians want to enforce a more strict divorce law or monogamous law and Muslims wish to enforce a more flexible divorce and marriage law, the state should adopt a more flexible personal law. This would mean that if Christians or Hindus want to enforce stricter divorce and marriage laws, they cannot depend on the state to enforce it for them. They will have to find their own ecclesiastical disciplinary measures. But in formulating such flexible personal laws, the state will also have to make sure, for example, that women's rights to life and economic security are preserved, and that justice is not denied to human beings.

These are, of course, long-term perspectives within which the problems of communal disharmony are to be tackled. We should begin work on this now.

### **A Positive Role For Religion**

The second part of my reflection on this subject relates to the positive role religious elements can play in promoting communal harmony. I am convinced that communal harmony will not come by fighting religion and calling it nonsense. Without the cooperation of the religious leadership of the eight recognized Indian religions (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism as major religions and Jainism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism as minor religions), we cannot really advance towards communal harmony and national integration.

The first thing to note is that every religion has an exclusivist-polemic dimension and an inclusivist-humanitarian dimension. Religious fundamentalism is usually exclusivistic and polemic in its temper. It believes that God is specially interested only in the adherents of that particular religion, or religious school, and would exclude others from the inner circle of the privileged. This means that religious fundamentalism is politically and economically conservative or reactionary, anti-progress, anti-rational, anti-socialist. This is so in Christian, Islamic or Hindu fundamentalism. This fundamentalism then gets monetary and moral support from the privileged classes within that religion, but is opposed by the fundamentalists of other religions. Communal conflict is thus a strange amalgam of the conflict of fundamentalisms, and the conflict of vested interests within each religion.

Even this aspect of religion will not go away by calling it nonsense. The religious instinct becomes the buttress for economic interest. The religious instinct in human beings is just as powerful as, or sometimes even more powerful than, the instincts of sex or self-preservation. We cannot deal lightly with these instincts. The politicians also know the great power of this

religious instinct and seek to recruit it in their own personal or group interests.

But there is another side to religion. This more compassionate, humanitarian aspect is expressed more by lay persons than by religious leaders. Only outstanding religious leaders, like the founders of religions and the great gurus in each religion (Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore etc.) manifest this openness and compassion to humanity as a whole and champion the cause of the poor and the weak, of the oppressed and the exploited.

It is this aspect in each religion, present in a limited number of religious leaders and in a large number of cultured believers that we need to promote, organize and mobilize in the service of communal harmony, as well as of national integration and international justice. Secular-minded people can join forces with such people, instead of condemning all religious forces as reactionary. Let our marches, demonstrations, seminars, Public meetings, etc. for communal harmony have a visible religious leadership component, and a large background support by lay people from all religions.

That would be a positive role for religion. It may even convert some of the fundamentalists.