Religion as a divisive factor and secularism as a solution to the problem

Shayesta Nazir

Research Scholar at School of Legal Studies, Central University of Kashmir, J&K.
Shaiinazir321@gmail.com

Abstract

Secularism – lately a much debated issue has different connotations and diverse perspectives to its name. Be it Indian model of "secularism" or comparatively, uniformity is a big time issue as far as secularism is concerned. Secularism literally means "the belief that religion should not play a role in government, education, or other public parts of society." When we talk of "secularism" and even wish to keep "religion" out of it, concept of religion creeps in as naturally and antithetically as concept of "day" with "night" – and light with darkness. Whether we argue secularism as a solution to the "divisiveness" of religion or its "antonym", fact of the matter is that it is alone existence of concept of religion which makes existence of concept of secularism possible. No religion means no argument and no need of secularism. And in more literary sense, if "religion refers to 'sacred', secular refers to 'not-sacred'." Thus from this much averment, we can deduct that Secularism has basis in Religion rather it springs out of it.

If we will give "Secularism" a strict connotation of being just antithetic to concept of "religion", then we may say it need not be, necessarily, solution to "divisiveness" of it. But a big question considering the present facets of Secularism is, could we say it is just restricted to being an opposite of religion? Or there is more to the concept of Secularism? Answer is to be seen and sought in "secularism" as a concept comparatively.

Since we have to approach question at hand strictly in Indian context, we will try to find answer itself in Indian system and explore model of secularism in the light of Indian constitution. But at the same time, to understand "divisiveness" of religion and if at all it has this attribute and its solution in secularism, it is necessary to approach the problem comparatively. In this paper I have addressed key questions of "secularism" in light of "divisiveness" of religion and addressed the key question "whether religion is a divisive concept and secularism solution to it" and have also given suggestions and conclusion in this regard.

Key words:

Secularism; religion; divisiveness; solution; belief; connotations; sacred; not-sacred

"No state can be civilized except a secular state."[1](Emphasis added)
~ Jawaharlal Nehru~

I. INTRODUCTION

SECULARISM – a multifaceted and relative concept – literally means "the belief that religion should not play a role in government, education, or other public parts of society."[2] It is different to different countries, societies, communities and even individuals. Reasons to this may be manifold but what seems to me more material is the "relativity" of the concept of "belief" itself.

When *belief* is relative, we can say *secularism* is bound to be so. For we know that had their been no concept of religion, there would have been no concept of secularism. To put it in simple way – alone the "existence" of a thing lends "existence" to what may be antithetic, opposite or solution to it. For example, existence of day makes existence of night obvious, existence of light makes existence of dark possible and examples will go on…

Whether we argue secularism as a solution to the "divisiveness" of religion or its "antonym", fact of the matter is that it is alone existence of concept of religion which makes existence of concept of secularism possible. No religion means no argument and no need of secularism. And in more literary sense, if "religion refers to 'sacred', secular refers to 'not-sacred'." Thus from this much averment, we can deduct that Secularism has basis in Religion rather it springs out of it.

Now to answer the key question cum focus of present article that is "whether religion is a divisive factor and whether secularism is a solution to it", I would like to approach the question at hand by asking a question itself which is "Can antonym of a thing or concept be solution to it? For example, if there is problem in "day", can "night" resolve it? What I simply ask is "can opposite of a concept be solution to its problem or it is just its opposite and not, necessarily, solution"? And sometimes what is projected as a solution to cure a problem assumes the shape of problem itself without being a cure or remedy as planned or projected.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF SECULARISM

If we will give "Secularism" a strict connotation of being just antithetic to concept of "religion", then we may say it need not be, necessarily, solution to "divisiveness" of it. But a big question considering the present facets of Secularism is, could we say it is just restricted to being an opposite of religion? Or there is more to the concept of Secularism? Answer is to be seen and sought in "secularism" as a concept comparatively.

Since we have to approach question at hand strictly in Indian context, we will try to find answer itself in Indian system and explore model of secularism in the light of Indian constitution. But at the same time, to understand "divisiveness" of religion and if at all it has this attribute and its solution in secularism, it is necessary to approach the problem comparatively.

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[1] . Cited in Chandra 1994, 75.
[2] . Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

India unlike other countries like USA, Turkey, France, Russia or China has got 'model of secularism' – moulded to its peculiar system. Different countries have different models of secularism in place and as such it is difficult to strait-jacket concept of secularism. As such we can divide concept of "secularism", for convenience, into two types – one is "political secularism" and other is "philosophical secularism".

McClay draws a distinction between what he calls "political secularism," which recognizes the legitimacy and even moral necessity of religious faith, while preventing any one faith from being established, and "philosophical secularism," which attempts to establish a common unbelief as a basis for government.[3]

Though, we can bring USA and Turkey in above two categories, India's model of secularism can't strictly come within either.

Turkey's model of secularism would come in "philosophical secularism."

Turkey [is] a country that is 95% Muslim, where other religions have no particular political profile or public profile at all. The imams are paid by the state. Religious garb, as you know,(sic) is forbidden in public institutions or by public officials because of

the rigid secularism of the Turkish state. The Turks have a certain understanding of the separation of religion and public life.[4]

Similarly, American model fits into "political secularism."

In the American experience, the separation of church and state, which by and large we acknowledge as a rough-and-ready principle, does not necessarily mean the separation of religion from public life. Another way of saying this is that America has a strong commitment to secularism, but it is secularism of a particular kind, understood in a particular way.

The United States has achieved in practice what seemed impossible in theory: a reconciliation of religion with modernity, in contrast, as I say, to the Western European pattern. In the United States religious belief has proven amazingly persistent even as the culture has been more and more willing to embrace enthusiastically all or most of the scientific and technological agenda of modernity. Sometimes the two reinforce one another. Sometimes they clash with one

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[3] . Wilfred McClay, distinguished professor of intellectual history, Pew Forum's biannual conference on religion, politics and public life, in Key West, Fla. (December 2007).

[4] . Wilfred McClay, Pew Forum's biannual conference on religion, politics and public life in Key West, Fla.(December 2007).

another, but the American culture has found room for both to be present[5].

Thus, we can say Indian model of secularism is typical of its type courtesy India being a pluralistic society – multireligious, multilingual and multiethnic.

III. Secularism – Indian perspective

As to "theocratic state", India enunciated unambiguously about its non-adherence to theocratic ideal of making State subservient to divine or religious ideals and not separating religion and politics like Pakistan, Iran and Bangladesh. And thus clearly opted idea of "secular state". But to start with, Indian "Secularism" is typical of its type to understand. Neither India adhered strictly to "philosophical secularism" like in Turkey or "Marxist communism" nor to "political secularism" like in USA but else adopted a 'unique blend' typical of its type. To understand "Indian Secularism" and also to address the question at hand, it's important to understand origin and concept of Secularism in India and also its connection with religion.

Secularism – nature and ethos

The term 'secular' with its Latin word *saecularis* literally means worldly rather than spiritual, not relating to religion or bound by monastic restrictions. It means the spheres of secularism and religion are distinct, independent, exclusive and separate without penumbral zones. It also means that secularism derives its *raison d'etre* from state unfettered by theology whereas religion derives its validity and justification from God or some divine authority; the former stands on human values and reason whereas the latter on blind faith and sectarian values. Ideologically, secularism claims to be based on scientific knowledge of things, political neutrality and human conscience and morality; and religion being, being anti-reason, averse to modernization and change, breeds social and religious antagonism and obscurantism against adversaries and unfaithfuls. With such barriers between the two led Christ to remark, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars", and unto God the things that are Gods". This wise and sagacious principle gave a serious jolt to ecclesiastic Christian Church and its absolutism, paving the way of secular democracy in the West.[6]

India later on drew inspiration from it and on similar lines adopted its model not strictly the same, though.

Secularism – origin in India

Although in India, prior to 1947, the term 'secular' was not in much vogue, instead the word 'nationalist' was in common use to differentiate from communal or religious elements like Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha which propagated Muslim or Hindu religious ethos and separatism respectively. It was after the adoption of the Constitution in 1950 that V.K.Krisna Menon suggested the word 'secular' to Nehru as a substitute for 'nationalist' to imply that India

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[5]. Wilfred McClay.

[6] . Secularism: Indian Conspectus 22.

was a secular state wherein religion was isolated from government.[7]

This was intended to tell the world that the new India, born as a result of partition, did not hold the rule of Muslims prior to independence against them and that the Muslims had nothing to fear from Hindu reactionaries. Thus, we can say that originally in India, there were no secularists as there were only nationalists.

So, secularism was not a word always evident in Indian writings and history but a post-Constitution insertion and even within India it meant different to different personalities.

Secularism – most 'relative' and 'misunderstood' word in India

The expression 'secularism' is derived from the word 'secular' which means worldly or material [and] not religious or spiritual, the State contrasted with Church or the view that [is] concerned with the affairs of the world, not spiritual or sacred…lay, not concerned with religion.[8] Secularism, therefore, is defined "as a view of life or any particular matter based on the premise that religion and religious considerations should be ignored or properly excluded in order to evolve a system of social ethics based upon a doctrine".[9] Etymologically, the term 'religion' is derived from *religare* which means "to bind". The term 'religion' has also been defined in the **Words[10] and Phrases** as follows:

"Religion is morality with a sanction drawn from future state of rewards and punishments."

If we go by pedagogical view, as already pointed out, in India, the words 'secular' and 'secularism' gained currency only in the post-Constitution era. However, the term 'secularism' was first coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1850 who advocated secularism accommodative of religion.[11]But it was Joseph Bradlaugh who on the other hand believed in secularism which rejected religion and made science its deity. Therefore, this conceptual difference between Holyoake and Bradlaugh on the form and content of secularism constituted the intellectual basis of contemporary secular jurisprudence. The whole theme centers around whether there should be coexistence between secularism and religion or should it be devoid of religion or transcendental mysticism is untenable empirically.[12]

Though intentions to declare India as a "Secular country" would have been to allay many apprehensions and to keep naysayers at bay but the way politicians in India distorted the concept and philosophy of secularism, it would not be wrong to make statement that "secularism which could have been intended to cure 'religious divisiveness' itself became an 'opiate religion' – an incurable disease.

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[7] . Kamath, M.V, "The myth of secularism", *Indian Express Magazine*, July 10, 1983.
[8]. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, the Concise Oxford Dictionary and the Chambers 20th Century Dictionary.
[9] . Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

[10] . Words and Phrases (Permanent Edn. 461).
[11] . Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence, Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Oxford Unity Press, Delhi, 1992).
[12] . Secularism: Indian Conspectus 25.

India categorically said a big NO to concept of "theocratic state" and at the same time did not adhere to strict literal connotation of secularism or to communist view of it which is "a total no to religion", irreligious state. Though, influenced by Western democracy and idea of Secularism, it advocated the idea of Secularism as to 'separation of state and religion' but like Turkish model of secularism it did not assert 'unbelief' but laid down the concept of Secularism moulded to satisfy its multireligious and multilingual aspirations. It declared India a secular nation and expressly used word 'secularism' by inserting it into 'Preamble' by (Forty Second Amendment) Act, 1976 (to undo the susceptibilities of different groups) which was already implicit in the Constitution and expounded in *Keshvananda Bharti case.*[13] Indian secularism, however, preached the ideals of "equal respect for all religions" and at the same time non-identification of State with any particular religion which means State is not 'irreligious' but shows neutrality as to religion, doesn't let 'religion' to interfere in affairs of State. India came up with slogan of *Sarva dharma samabhava* – equal respect for all religions – to define Secularism peculiar to its circumstances and typical of its type. This novel idea of Secularism was adopted in the backdrop of and on the heels of number of events which prevailed and followed Independence of India chief amongst which could be to do away with insecurities of minorities in India. But the way concept of 'Secularism' was manipulated with time squeezed of from it all the underlying good intentional philosophy and left it hollow and devoid of riches. What was preached as an idea of Secularism in India was never followed in practice.

Though idea of Secularism would have been intended to aim at 'unity of all religions within India' **but intended remedy of secularism itself became the nemesis of unity and source of divisiveness;** so much so that it would not be wrong to conclude that Secularism itself became a religion for people to practice, claim, profess and argue about. It got reduced to farce and a mere tool in the hands of communalists to 'sow the seeds of rift and division'. Secularism intended as a 'colorful fabric' by drafters with strands of every religion together got reduced to an empty 'worn out fabric' bragged and boasted about. It remained a mere lip service – a mere rhetoric fed to minorities for vote bank.

In present day times 'Secularism' has become a "fashionable phrase" - everybody from elites, politicians, liberals, communalists to 'Aam Aadmis' identify with. It's now so relative and misused word that it has got 'individual connotations' for individual persons – different meanings to different persons which has taken it away from its being solution to 'religious divisiveness' within Indian context or for that matter its literal connotation of being 'antithetic' to religion.

For elites, Secularism is giving precedence to rationality, scientific knowledge and reasoning over blind faith and religious ideals and also Secularism is "a refuge for their agnosticism". Though it would not be wrong to conclude that Secularism "has become itself religion for

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[13] . *Keshvananda Bharti v. State of Kerala* (AIR 1973 SC 2461).

them". For an "Aam Aadmi", Secularism is "no discrimination on grounds of religion", "protection of minorities", "freedom to profess and practice religion" etc., Liberals identify themselves with secularism and feel pride in calling themselves as secularists in the context of philosophy of "radicalism" and "nationalism".

Politicians have worn out the expression of "Secularism" like anything for their petty political gains. They trade "religion" for their vote banks under the Purdah (Veil) of Secularism. Under the garb of Secularism, they feed Communalism. They misused the slogan *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* to woo voters. Result is that Secularism got politicized and reduced to "political vendetta". It lost all credibility that it'd got when it was accepted by Indian nation after independence. The vision with which it was adopted by Indian Republic shrank to mere political rhetoric. It was trampled like anything by political stooges who know no low for their mere political gains. Glaring examples of which are Sikh riots of 1984, Gujarat riots of 2002 and Muzaffarnagar riots, lately.

Reasons for "Secular mess" in India

Though idea of Secularism was implicit in the Indian Constitution much before its   express usage in Indian Constitution courtesy 42nd Amendment Act of 1976 but Indian Constitution did not enunciate clearly the relation of "religion" and "State" and did not lay down "defined relationship" between the two and left it to the courts. Courts tried to elucidate the term 'secular' and the secular character of the Indian Constitution, and observed:

"There is no mysticism in the secular character of the state. Secularism is neither anti-God nor pro-God. It treats alike the devout, the agnostic and the atheist. It eliminates God from matters of the state and ensures that no one shall be discriminated on the ground of religion."[14][Emphasis supplied]

And in St. Stephen's College case[15] apex court tried to harmonize linguistic aspirations of minority communities by asserting that India is a multireligious and multicultural society where respect for and tolerance of the culture and beliefs of others is *sine qua non* of secular democracy.

Though Courts tried their best to do justice to the philosophy underlying concept of Secularism but this was altogether a very sensitive issue to be left to the mercy of Courts. Indian Constitution itself should have been clear on matters of "religion" and "secularism". Somewhere Courts did find themselves in fetters and couldn't do justice with every community within India and also couldn't consider many susceptibilities attached to it while interpreting the term "Secularism" and at times Courts had no option but to appease or woo certain elements of society.

Indian Constitution by not laying down clear relation between State and Religion and by

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[14] . *St. Xavier's College v. State of Gujarat* (AIR 1974 SC 1389).
[15] . *St. Stephen's College v. University of Delhi* (AIR 1992 SC 1630).

leaving even definition of Religion to courts itself became responsible for "secular mess" within India. On the one hand Indian secularism, unlike the United States secularism, is not irreligious and under Indian Constitution is laid down that "Constitution of India, religion and state are not completely separated"[16] and it respects all faiths and religions but on the other hand it does not want religion to be mixed with politics and doesn't identify itself with any religion and both ends couldn't be achieved together.

India adopted a unique version of Secularism but Constitution laid down no modalities to implement the novel concept of secular version. With the result **"what was preached was not practiced"**.

On the one hand it preached "equality of all religions" and did not completely divorce State from religion but on the other hand it yearned for the goal under Article 44 of Indian Constitution i.e., Common Civil Code thereby trying to bring its secular model in lines with that of USA and retained fears of minorities with susceptibilities attached to it. It kept "inharmonious" provisions like Article 44 and Articles 25 to 28 in the Constitution with former provision aiming at "irreligious" model of secularism and latter guaranteeing and promoting religious freedoms thereby creating a contradictory situation within itself.

This contradictory and confused situation created a "secular mess" within India and slogan of *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* is now used by politicians as a tool to satisfy their vote conscience and the real philosophy

underlying idea of "Indian Secularism" as a solution and remedy to "religious divisiveness" withered away and "Secularism" itself became a "dividing agenda". It got abused like anything and instead of being a *panacea* became an "incurable disease" itself.

The present version of Indian Secularism is a complete mess. It neither reflects "Gandhian notion of secularism" nor "Nehruvian idea of Secularism". For Gandhiji Religion was *dharma* which means "that which holds" and by religion he declared, *"I do not mean formal religion or customary religion but the religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our maker."*[17] *[Emphasis supplied]*

And Nehru while elucidating the meaning of secularism remarked:

"We call our state secular one. The word 'secular' perhaps is not very happy one. And yet for want of a better, we have used it. It does not mean a state where religion as such is discouraged. It means freedom of religion and conscience, including freedom for those who may have no religion…The word 'secular' conveys something much more to me although that might not be its dictionary meaning. It conveys the idea of social and political equality. Thus, a caste ridden society is not properly secular."[18] *[Emphasis supplied]*

But today "Indian secularism" has no reflection of this "intended" secular

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[16] . Article 290 (A) of Indian Constitution.

[17] . Shukla and Chandrashankar, *Gandhi's View of Life* 133.
[18] . Parthasathy G., *Remembering Jawaharlal Nehru Today*, (Mainstream, May 30, 1992).

philosophy and result is that question at hand "that whether Secularism is solution for divisiveness of religion?" warrants a clear answer – a big NO and present version of "Indian Secularism" is in no way a solution to divisiveness of religion.

IV. SUGGESTIONS

A wise saying goes, "When you wake up, dawn is that time". So there is no point in being cynical about worn philosophy of Secularism in India as *"it is never too late"* and resilience back to actual vision of Secularism dreamed of by founders of Constitution is always possible. I would like to put forth few suggestions here to facilitate the vision of "true secularism":-

a) My first point suggestion would be an endeavour "to clearly define the relation between "religion" and "state" and clearly enunciate the agenda of secularism so that there will be no room left for manipulation of any sort.

b) Secondly, the model of "Secularism" which preaches the slogan of *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* should not be just reduced to lip service or rhetoric fed by politicians but should be given full effect in practice.

c) However, best than second suggestion would be a more cosmopolitan approach that is by adoption of such model of "Secularism" which will be of cosmic outlook and will carry all along and hold all together. It should be based on basic ideals of "respect for all" and "tolerance". And that tolerance should be out of respect and acceptance of others and not

out of force or satisfaction of any political agenda.

V. CONCLUSION

"What is in name?"

Teach and preach love

Whatever the religion:

Message of all is same"

As is clear from above deliberation, the present version of "Indian Secularism" is in no way cure for "divisiveness of religion" but has itself taken shape of an "incurable disease". Religion isn't we can say that much a "divisive factor" as "Secularism" itself has become. If the present trend of Secularism continues in India, I'm afraid it would totally ruin the concept of "unity in diversity" attached with Indian soil. It would be reduced to an "empty boasting" by politicians for their political pasturing. India should yearn for concept of "inclusive secularism" – which will carry all along and not aim at divide in the guise of secularism – it should be like a "rich pie" in every bit of which one could devour riches of mixed tastes - else it would be better for India to switch over to concept of "theocratic state" – where at least minorities would be treated as minorities for whom special provisions will be kept and there would be no denial of their right**.**