

Policies & Perspectives



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

With the presidential election round the corner, opposition parties now scattered like straws in the wind, are seeking to come together and propose a joint candidate for the post. Nearly every major non-National Democratic Alliance (NDA) constituent, with the exception so far of the Biju Janata Dal, the All India Anna DMK (AIADMK) and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, has been engaged in consultations to have a new President of their choice. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led NDA is yet to announce its candidate, but the rivals are not waiting. The parleys point to two presumptions they have made. The first is that the choice the BJP has to be opposed. The second is that the BJP/NDA's candidate will be non-secular in character. The two beliefs are inter-linked and are products of a deep-rooted and traditional prejudice that continues to be clung on to despite been shown the mirror.

Topping the list of votaries of secularism in India are the Marxists. Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Sitaram Yechury said his party wants "a person to be the President who believes in secular supervision and not a communal supervision". Since he is convinced that the BJP is both incapable and unwilling to name a secular candidate, he and like-minded parties have to get together. Samajwadi Party leader and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav expressed his readiness to support any "secular alliance" for the presidential poll — though he has a problem with the new secular front his uncle Shivpal Yadav has floated! Other leaders have chipped in as well. Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee is prepared to join hands even with her Communist rivals, while Sharad Yadav of the Janata Dal (United) wants to "save" the country and the Constitution by ensuring the election of a 'secular President'.

Secularism is a strong adhesive except that its holding power wanes quickly enough. All the same, it has performed admirably well since Independence, with the Marxists, Centrists and Socialists exploiting it to the fullest. This they have managed to do for two primary reasons. The first is that they faced no meaningful political opponent and thus had a free run. The second is that they effectively distorted the term 'secularism' to suit their political/electoral agenda and present it as a cultural ethos of the nation. But it has never been an ideological issue for these parties, though they will protest against such insinuation. The Socialists and the Centrists had come together during the Janata Party experiment of 1977 along with the 'communal 'Right' to oppose Indira Gandhi. Twelve years down the line, the Marxists and the Right joined hands to back VP Singh and his Janata Dal Government. There are other instances too. The National Conference which today considers the BJP as non-secular, was part of a BJP-led Government at the Centre. So was Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United), which also ran a coalition regime with the party in Bihar. Thus, it's laughable when these parties pit the coming presidential election as an 'ideological contest'.

Secularism is an overarching need that has in this country assumed the powers to subordinate every other ill. When the Aam Aadmi Party aligned with the Congress for its first term in office, it explained away the decision by claiming that communalism (which the BJP represented) was a bigger evil than corruption (which the Congress symbolised). For Nitish Kumar too, a deal with the corrupt (and convicted) Lalu Prasad was more acceptable than doing business with a 'communal BJP'. Marxist violence can be set aside by Mamata Banerjee as a lesser problem than the BJP's non-secular scheming. And for the Congress, even supping with the devil is honourable so long as it keeps the 'communal' BJP at bay.



If the charm of secularism as these parties have defined is so strong and rooted in the national ethos, what explains the repeated electoral defeat of secularists and the BJP's wins? Has the larger mass of people turned communal, that too all at once? The 'secularists' have been lamenting the BJP's success at polarising elections along communal lines, but they have been unable to explain why their counter to it has collapsed. If they indeed believe in this absurd theory that people are getting communalised, they ought to publicly admit it. In any case, it's amusing to note that voters can be secular and five years down the line become communal — and yet again secular later on. The physicality of the act is astounding. In a similar vein, when parties are aligned with the BJP, they are communal; when they part ways they suddenly acquire secular colours. You don't need the intellect of Aristotle to see through the mask of ideology that secular opportunists wear.

The decline of 'secularists' in India is not the decline of secularism. People celebrate their religious festivals with as much gusto as before; they participate in each other's events; they wish each other with the same sincerity as before; inter-religious love affairs and marriages are existent — though not common enough; people from one faith readily extend a helping hand to the needy from another faith. By and large, therefore, secularism is alive and kicking. The bond of humanity exists even in the most traumatic and testing circumstances — as during the anti-Sikh violence in Delhi especially, and the communal flare-up post-Babri mosque demolition in Mumbai when riots erupted. If members of the Sikh community were targeted by unruly sections of the Hindu community, they were also sheltered by people of the very same community. The same is true in the case of Hindu-Muslim violence. In the larger precincts of the Gorakhnath temple, of which Uttar Pradesh Minister Yogi Adityanath has been the head, Muslim shopkeepers conduct business without any hindrance. There were reports recently of Muslim women offering obeisance to Lord Hanuman to gain success in their fight against triple divorce! The Naushad-Shakeel-Rafi trio has given the country many a memorable bhajan songs. Singers of the Hindu faith have rendered songs praising Allah. The instances are innumerable. India has had a robust Sufi tradition, with "Allah tero naan, Ishwar tero naam" remaining among the most popular renditions — one which Mahatma Gandhi especially liked.

If the secularists are failing today, it's because their fake version of secularism has been finally exposed. People are no longer willing to buy it. What was peddled in the garb of secularism was appeasement, and appeasement created divides in society. In the softest form it led to simmering resentment; in the harshest, it manifested in communal bloodshed. As people were made to collide, they galvanised that their heads were being bashed against their wishes. In such an environment, there were unscrupulous elements from all sides who exploited the situation to keep the pot boiling — self-appointed religious leaders who spewed venom against other religious faiths. They were — and still are — in some cases directly or covered backed by political leaders who see them as vote-banks. But the game is up, or nearly so.

The decision to galvanise and force secularism in a country which has a deep-rooted history of religious tolerance, should be considered as among the silliest ones. The framers of the Constitution — men and women of brilliance and sincerity of purpose, and with some of them afflicted with the secular version that is today going out of fashion — had found it unnecessary to include 'secular' in the Constitution for the simple reason that they believed it was needless to do so for a nation which is intrinsically secular. Yet, Indira Gandhi added the term in the Preamble to the Constitution in 1976. The Constitution already had a secular character when it was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949. The inclusion, instead of raising the country's secular credentials, created a fresh set of problems. The first had to do with the definition of 'secularism'; there is no definition in the Constitution. The second was the unexplained relationship between state and religion in the Indian context.



If the idea of this addition to the Preamble was to truly make India secular in terms of equality of law — every law — to all citizens of India regardless of their religious beliefs, it has miserably failed. It was bound to, because the clash between majoritarian and minority-driven politics not just remained but intensified. The appeasement club argued that Muslim personal laws, as opposed to general laws of the country, were needed to keep majoritarian-ism in check and protect the special rights of the minorities. The majority community (they are today called the Hindutva camp) stressed that a secular India cannot have different laws for different citizens based on religion. Here they have a point. The Hindu personal laws were drastically revamped post-Independence to give them a secular character, into what came to known as the Hindu Code Bill. Yet, the same need for a secular touch was not felt by a majority of law-makers to be extended to Muslim personal laws — not then in 1949, and not now too. Secularism provided the shield for the continuation of the Muslim personal laws and everything that clerics claimed came with it, including practices of triple divorce and polygamy. We witness today that the fight against these social evils has strongly erupted from within the Muslim community, especially women, who are as religious as the obstinate clerics but believe the practices are not sanctioned by Islam.

Understanding why the concept of secularism promoted by our Left-Liberal-Socialist-Centrist brigade has come into disrepute becomes easier when one accepts this fundamental truth: When an alien object is injected into a body, the biological system instantly takes over and creates mechanisms to reject or combat the alien. Secularists in India, ignoring the country's intrinsic secular nature, sought to introduce a Western model of secularism over the people. Reaction was bound to follow. The Western definition of secularism as the separation of church and state made no sense in India. But historical context was set aside and a product that was both unpalatable and undesirable, was thrust on the people. It began during Jawaharlal Nehru's time and given constitutional respectability by Indira Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi didn't even bother to maintain the façade; he negated a progressive ruling of the Supreme Court on granting alimony to a Muslim divorcee, and brought in a constitutional amendment to cheer up the fundamentalists in Muslim society. Like his illustrious predecessors, he had no compulsion to pander to parochial secularism and could have, if he wanted, upheld the spirit of genuine secularism.

A secular state is one that is opposed to religious hegemony, religious oppression and religion-based exclusion. Such a state is in contrast to one that is theocratic or that which formally establishes one or more religions. For centuries, Germany and England had established the Protestant faith, while Italy and Spain promoted the Catholic faith. There are many Muslim nations today where Islam is the official religion. The only Hindu nation was Nepal; today it too is officially secular, though it respects the Hindu sensitivities. India, with a vast majority of its population belonging to the Hindu faith, remained secular to the core since ancient times, when Buddhism and Jainism held their ground. Had the Hindu religion sought to be a dominant force, there would not have been a proliferation of other faiths in the country and the consequent inter-faith harmony would never have been struck. Even before 'secular' was added to the Preamble, Articles 25, 27 and 28 guaranteed religious liberty; while equality of citizens regardless of faith or otherwise was available under Articles 14, 15 and 29. Unlike in the West before Renaissance, when the Church held sovereign powers through monarchs that owed allegiance to it, there was never a religious institution or head in India that controlled the affairs of the state. Post-Renaissance saw the emerge of secular states in Europe, and that form of secularism was promptly imported into India, and found favour with the likes of Nehru who was deeply influenced by Western thoughts, and by Indira Gandhi.

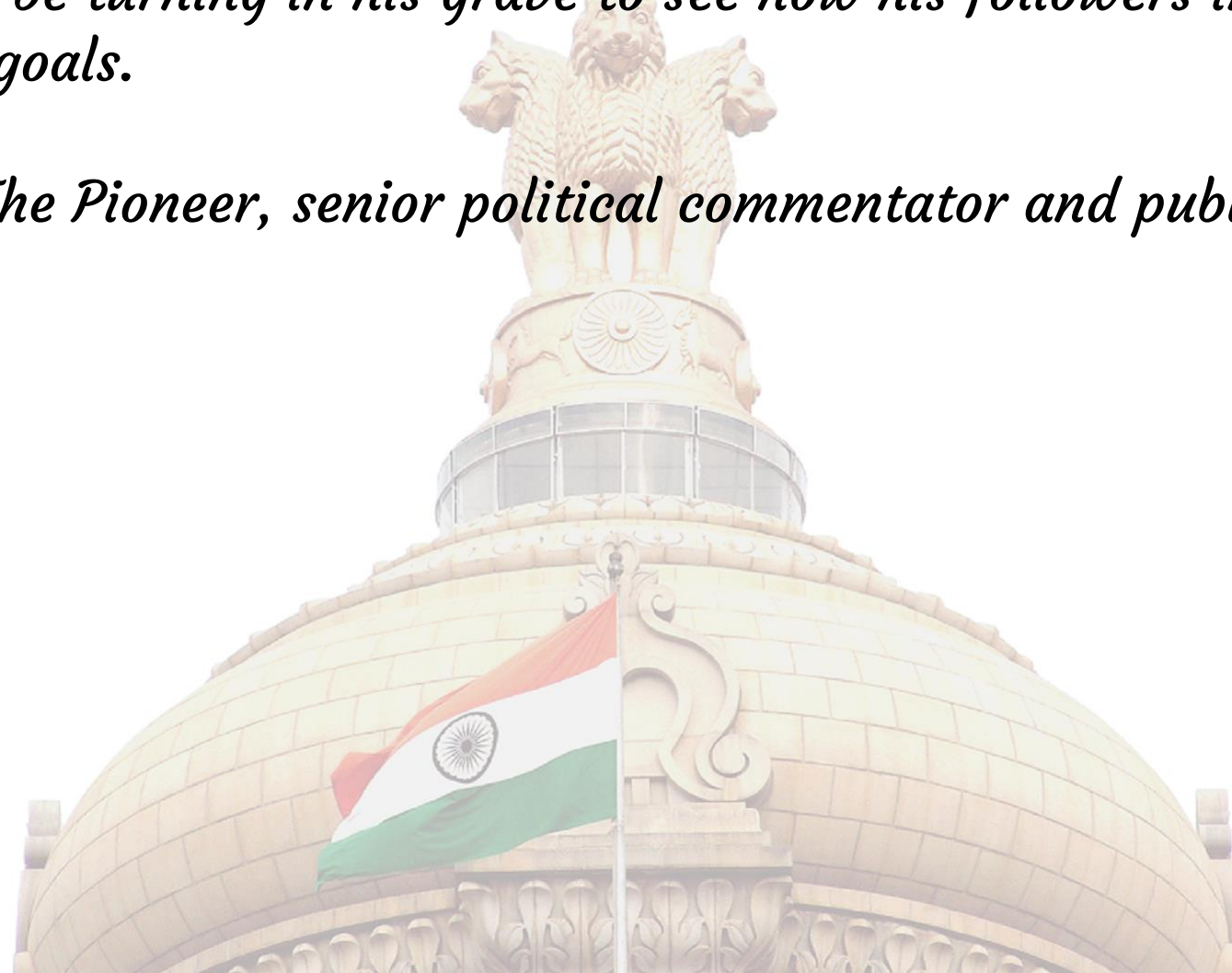
A secular state can be anti-religion, which would mean that religion not only has no official



stature but also that it is to be suppressed by means that are considered just by the authority. Or it can be accommodative of all religious hues without giving one preference over the other. There can be arguments against the first type and discussions on the practicality of the second. But there is little merit in the third kind of secularism which the Marxists-Socialists-Centrists have foisted on India — where the state deliberately leans in favour of one religious community on the pretext that the latter is in a minority and needs, therefore, special treatment that may brazenly discriminate against the majority. The card of minority-driven politics to counter, or worse denigrate, majority sentiment, is not secularism.

Finally, returning to the Marxists who have positioned themselves in this country as great champions of secularism, it must be remembered that their political saint Karl Marx had little time to dwell on the nature and definition of secularism. Indeed, for him, religion was an impediment to the mission of galvanizing the working class (proletariat) against the elite (capitalist). His belief in material as the base and everything else — culture, ethnicity, language etc. — as the superstructure had little room for religion. He dismissed religion as some sort of an illusion, when he said, “Religion is the opium of the people.” When read in context, he expressed that “the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness... The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.” Marx would be turning in his grave to see how his followers in India have misused religion to further their political goals.

(The writer is Opinion Editor of The Pioneer, senior political commentator and public affairs analyst)



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