

PROCESS OF SECULARIZATION

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The process and movement towards secularization has certain antecedents both in the world at large and in India. Taking the overall development into account, one has to remember that secularism developed as a philosophy in reaction to the hold of religion on state. Secularism was equated with rationality, positivism, materialism, utilitarianism, etc. Holyoake is regarded as the father of secularism who started propagating the movement in 1846 and laid down its principles in his books *Principles of Secularism* and *The Origin and the Nature of Secularism*. Even though secularism was regarded as materialistic and rationalistic, all the same it was an ethical system founded expressly to provide an alternative theory of life. The movement arose out of the desire to separate religion and state. In India the movement towards secularization has its roots in the efforts to bridge the gulf between the Hindus and the Muslims so as to evolve a nation. It was felt that only through secularism could India evolve itself into a meaningful entity, particularly in terms of fighting against the British. In view of the communal riots which preceded and followed the partition of the country, secularism became an article of faith with our leaders who wanted to shape the destiny of India along secular lines. The leaders felt that it is only through secularism that the two nation theory which played such a havoc, and is playing even now, particularly in respect of Kashmir, could be finally put a stop to. In the Indian context, one has to remember that the content of secularism stems out of this major concern. The other aspects of secularism, viz., materialism, rationalism, etc., are not given adequate emphasis and therefore secularism has been primarily a political action rather than an overall process. If secularism has to develop into an overall process, it will have to be a much broader and fundamental movement than the political and constitutional activity it has been so far. It is true that in India secularism has been both a conscious philosophy and a matter of policy in respect of the elite who guide the destiny of our country. There is, however, considerable room for inculcation of secularism as a philosophy of life and conscious activity so as to embrace every aspect of life and reality. There has to be thus a conscious slant on rationality.

Then again in the Indian context, one has to analyze secularism in terms of the desire to modernize. Modernization is a very complex process and entails certain structural changes. The way modernization by and large is understood in India, it is equated with economic development and technological change. However, if secularism has to be a

process of overall development, it will have to be something much more than mere economic and technological development. Some of the structural characteristics which would be an integral part of secularism would be as follows: (a) rationality and emphasis on cognition; (b) scientific spirit; (c) individuation and individualism; (d) universalism and freedom from particularistic loyalty such as those of caste, kinship, region, religion, etc.; (e) rule of law; (f) achievement ethics. These characteristics constitute an essential feature of modernization and secularism.¹ Even education would be of no avail until some of these characteristics are well established in day-to-day life and interaction.

Secularism should properly mean not only separation between state and religion, but also the inclusion of other aspects stated above, if it has to be an all pervading process rather than a merely political and constitutional mechanism. Conscious change is needed in the social structure which is largely governed by traditional culture. Even the Indian intellectuals are not free from the influence of traditional culture, not to speak of the people at large. In order to understand the force of the Indian social system, one has to analyze it in terms of culture, personality and social system. The values which emanate from the Indian culture are quite congenial to the maintenance of tradition. The way personality development takes place in India is also congenial for the maintenance of the tradition. The various social institutions, such as caste and kin, system of age grades, etc., put a premium on maintenance of the traditional pattern. In fact, innovation or departure which would develop into a break from the past is discouraged.

As mentioned earlier, the process of secularization has to be viewed in the context of separation of state from religion, but one has also to remember that secularization came to be an important handmaid of the entire process of modernization. Secularism has been thought of in various ways such as its antithesis to religion and values, and its consistency with rationality, utilitarianism, materialism, individualism, etc. Secularism has been regarded as the *sine qua non* of economic development, industrialization and an overall development in favour of rationality. A breakthrough from traditional social structure is implicit in the process of secularization. Secularization is felt to be congenial to innovation and change. On the other hand, a society where religion predominates is not so congenial to innovation and change. Howard Becker has worked out a systematic typology to compare and contrast societies based on sacred or secular factors.² His typology is based on the distinction between a

1. See Y.B. Damle, "Education and Modernisation" (1965) 29 *Radical Humanist*, Nos.4—6 (January 25, 1965).

2. H. Becker, *Through Values to Social Interpretation* (1950).

traditional and innovating social structure. The sacred society is one which is not amenable to innovation and radical change. Utmost premium is put in a sacred society on traditional ways of doing things. Tradition itself is sacred and not to be questioned, existing knowledge and attitudes also should not be changed. On the other hand, secular society is easily amenable to innovations and change notwithstanding the traditional ways of doing things. The entire emphasis is on utility and adaptation. Environment has to be mastered. Propositions are revisable. This is not to suggest that a secular society is devoid of norms. Of course, it could develop into a normless state if technical competence is unduly emphasized. But a secular society must and would have its norms, though, of course, they would be changed from time to time. A sacred society, on the other hand, has a set of prescriptions which have to be adhered to irrespective of practical consequences, because such prescriptions attain a sacredness through time and tradition. A great deal of premium is put on collective approach. In a secular society great premium is put on individuation and individualism. The criterion of accepting or rejecting a change is its utility. This typology which has been evolved by Becker reminds one of the typology evolved by Toennies, viz., the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft*. According to Toennies, a society which is characterized by *Gemeinschaft* relationship is governed by natural law, whereas the one characterized by *Gessellschaft* relationships is governed by rational law.

Parsons³ discusses the problem of secularization in terms of structural differentiation. Parsons talks of the tendency for secularism, in the sense of opposition to organize religion in general. Secularization does not, however, mean that organized religion is eliminated from the social scene but there is a reordering and redefinition of its place in the social system. A new position of equilibrium is evolved between the religious and the secular elements in the social systems. Parsons says: "The cognitive meaning of existence, the meaning of happiness and suffering, of goodness and evil, are the central problems of religion." However, religion is a matter of "concern of the innermost core of the individual personality for his own identity and commitments." There has to be not only a separation between church and the state, but religion also becomes a matter of individual concern. There is a progressive shedding of the earlier functions performed by the religion in respect of providing education. In a society which is structurally differentiated, education becomes a responsibility of the state. Moreover, with the development and inculcation of intellectual culture, even in an educational body which is controlled by religion people are evaluated on the basis of their intellectual attainments. Besides, individuals are free, not to be governed by any religious body insofar as

3. Talcott Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* (1960).

they adhere to the code of conduct expected of a citizen. There is a separation between citizenship and religion. The minimum standards are set by political authority in respect of what constitutes legal marriage and divorce. The norms of behaviour, conduct and interaction, emanate from the society rather than from a religious body. In a structurally differentiated social system there is equality of access to facilities, such as education and health, so that one's development could be ensured. Moreover, there is activist or instrumental orientation towards life and reality. The conception of good life is primarily secular rather than religious. Parsons says that the development of psychiatry is very significant in the sense that it treats mental disorders in a scientific manner rather than in a religious manner. Secularism naturally means denominational pluralism. Secularism in the sense that there is a repudiation of affiliation with any organized religious body is institutionalized and legitimized. Such legitimization is extremely helpful in the development of intellectual culture and rationalism. Naturally, secularism helps the process of innovation and change. Secularism provides an alternative way of behaviour and interaction. And, this alternative is regarded as an equally good way. Religion becomes a matter of personal concern. There are many others such as Ponsieon, Lerner, Spengler, etc., who have discussed the problem of secularism in the context of modernization.⁴

Discussing the process of secularization in the Indian context, it is important to note that the problem has been primarily discussed by political scientists such as Ved Prakash Luthera, Donald Eugene Smith, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *et al.*⁵ However, it is important to delineate the whole problem in the perspective of the social system. It has already been mentioned that culture, personality and social system have all to be properly discussed in order to understand the process of secularization in India. The scheme of values as exemplified by world view⁶ needs to be adequately taken note of. The emphasis on other-worldliness and the degeneration of material gains and activity can become a very important stumbling block in the development of secularism. Activist or instrumental orientation to life and reality is discouraged if not condemned. At the most such orientation is condoned. Hinduism is said to be a very tolerant religion, embracing various sects and points of view. Hinduism does not

4. See R.J. Braibanti and J.J. Spengler (eds.), *Tradition, Values and Socio-Economic Development*; D. Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958); E. de Vries (ed.), *Essays on Unbalanced Growth: A Century of Disparity and Convergence*.

5. V.P. Luthera, *The Concept of Secular State and India* (1964); D.E. Smith, *India as a Secular State* (1964); *Seminar*, No. 67 (March, 1965), A Symposium on Secularism.

6. J. Goheen, "India's Cultural Values and Economic Development: A Discussion" (1958) *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 1-12.

put premium on any single method of worshipping and attaining salvation. All the same, it has to be remembered that caste system has been and continues to be an integral feature of Hinduism. The caste system puts a premium on role differentiation, mainly on an ascriptive basis. Caste system does not permit universalistic orientation. There is emphasis on quality rather than performance, to use Parsonian scheme of pattern variables. The fact that the Hindus constitute a majority of population in India and also the fact that Hinduism is not an organized religion gives rise to a great deal of interference by the state in personal laws pertaining to the Hindus. In its attempt to ensure religious diversities and identities the state in India has taken upon itself only to reform the Hindu law, leaving Muslim and Christian laws untouched. Moreover, there is a preponderance of the Hindu cultural rituals in respect of inaugurations of industrial plants, dams, etc., which is objected to by persons belonging to religions other than Hinduism. The entire system of age grades puts a premium on ascriptive basis. Rationality and innovation are discouraged. It is a patent fact that even in the sphere of intellectual activities, these social structural features, such as the caste, family, age grades, dominate the scene and queer the pitch of inculcation of rationality, innovation, etc. Individualism is discouraged, not to say condemned. There is a great deal of scope for stereotype prejudices to flourish under such circumstances. A situation is not judged on its merits.

A possible solution to further the process of secularization in India : No attempt is made to provide a cut and dried solution to the problem. However, it is believed that by indicating the features to be emphasized as well as to be eliminated one could offer at least the guidelines. Economic growth and structural differentiation are extremely necessary for the development of secularism. However, there should also be development of education which would facilitate the development of rationality, individualism and innovation. Cognitive approach should be emphasized. Scientific spirit should be inculcated. Religion should be purely a matter of individual concern. With the inculcation of universalistic orientation and role specificity, coupled with facilities for development irrespective of one's group, religion would no longer hamper the unity of India. Particularly in view of the two nation theory being emphasized again by Pakistan which is being supported, advertently or otherwise, by other nations, it is extremely important to transcend narrower loyalties exemplified by caste, kin, region, religion, etc. Inculcation of loyalty to the Indian nation irrespective of any other groupings, would ensure the development of healthy secularism.
