

Competitive Exams Essay: Secularism is simply verbal replacement of the word tolerance

What is Secularism? None can give you the right definition of the term. Even the most ardent exponent of the term differs on its meanings. In fact, their zeal to institute secularism in the Indian polity has pushed the term so far away from reality that today it has come to be more of a mirage than an accepted norm. The vested interests are now using this phenomenon of mirage as a magic wand for political gains and popularity among minorities. It is ironic, not tragic, that minorities in India have come to be identified with religion and not with community or profession. This is the reason that secularism today has come to mean as preservation of religious minorities in their traditional modes. But this is not the only meaning that is attributed to 'secularism' There are others who consider it to mean separation of religion from state. For some secularism relegates the religion to the backyard. If you are secular you cannot put your religion to the fore. It must always come afterward. But afterward of what? Nobody can tell you that.

Before we go on with what secularism means we must first find out that why the necessity arose to adopt this covenant. We do not have to go far to find the answer. It was needed because we wanted to have a stable polity in a religious, lingual and cultural diversity. In other words it was needed to structure a united nation with common goals and ideals while preserving the diverse identities in religion, culture and language. But have we succeeded in it? No. Not even a little. In fact, secularism has not only grown gradually into an anathema but also has come to be a red rag to the religious leaders with political aspiration. The establishment of such organizations as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Muslim Majlis-e-Musha-warat, Majlis Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen, Muslim United Front, Shiv Sena, Adam Sena, United Akali Dal, Akali Dal and so on are testimony to the growing antagonism to secularism. Because secularism today is being taken as a threat to religious identities, to the existence of religious diversities, though secularism was never conceived as such.

The very fact that secularism has not taken roots in the Indian polity requires that the term should be reviewed. What is secularism, after all? Before we decide what it is we must tick out what it is not? First of all secularism is not a rational term. It is not also a philosophical concept. And it is not altogether a modern concept, as it is generally believed Secularism simply is a covenant; a covenant among the religious identities for co-existence and national homogeneity. Secularism means, in layman's language, tolerance. The concept of tolerance was there even in Vedic time. So we cannot boast of having conceived it in the modern times.

Besides, the concept of tolerance cannot be treated as a creed or a principle. It is absolutely, exclusively an individual affair. It should have been publicized as such. Just because we erred in

introducing it at individual level, and instead introduced it as regimentation, we have failed in achieving the intended objective, that is, a stable polity in diversity, and also in checking the virus of communalism.

The need for tolerance, or for secularism, is a compulsion that springs from within the folds of any diverse polity. But this compulsion must not be mistaken for a dictate. It is further a safeguard for a homogeneous society. But it cannot be the ideological structure for a society. Similarly we cannot take it as a ground for a democratic setup. All it can be is a goal. A goal for a polity with diverse religious identities, cultural entities and lingual prolificacy. The concept of ground precludes the imperatives of game. Because then the teams have the option to play on a particular ground or not. But the concept of the goal precludes this option. Because the concept comes into play only when the game is on. So we come to the earlier conclusion again, that is, secularism is simply verbal replacement of the word 'tolerances' that was in vogue even in Vedic times. One cannot drench secularism as a legal or logical dictate. Such a dictate is patently contrary to the fundamental concept of secularism. Moreover, secularism is a matter of heart and not of mind. It flourishes in a soil comprising compassion and piety, it dies in administrative or political fields.

Secularism is a free choice. If we want it interwoven in the socio-religious fabric then the pre-conditions is free choice. And free choice on individual level. Not on community, religious or political level. Because matters of heart react violently to constraints, bounds and dictates. As such each religion, each individual has to chart its own way to the goal of secularism. There can be no guidelines or guide posts for such a choice. And that is where we have erred. We have tried to impose the choice, an act from which everyone shied. So we failed in converting the Indian polity with religious diversity into a secular polity.

The question arises at which point we have gone astray from the right course of secularism. This question leads to another. Were we ever on the right course? The answer is no, we tried to induct secularism into the structure of our polity as a serum and not as a free choice for homogeneity and co-existence. Hence, it was either a waste or just induced reaction. In either case it failed to achieve the intended goal. The reaction took others interpreted it as a force separating religion from State yet others though it a direct threat to the very existence of religion. Because the way secularism has been preached over the years, it had come to mean that be secular first and religious later, or that relegates the religion to the backyard because we do not need it. We need only secularism. As such secularism came to be viewed upon as a new religion. And everyone knows that conversions to new religions are not an easy matter.

Bui these are not the only reason for hamstringing the induction of secularism into the Indian polity, there are other and more potent reasons too. The most potent reason obstructing the induction of secularism into the Indian polity is the constant proliferation of communal sentiments all over India. A look back over the communal incidents over the past five, decades shows a steadily growing scheme among the fanatics who carried the religious standard but in fact, was having political ambition. Communalism became the bait for vote catch, Communalism came to be exclusively identified with religious identity. Suddenly the people

came to believe, and the belief was kept alive by the religious crusaders, that their religion was in danger of either extinction or of assimilation by another and larger religion. The feeling was not confined to the minority religions. It even infected the Hindu religion. Otherwise how one can explain the fear and the qualms of Hindus who-are in brute majority in the country. Why should the Hindus be on the defensive? Why should the Muslims consider themselves as a minority and not a second large majority? Why should Sikhs feel that their religion is under threat without any reported instances of forcible conversions?

The situation that prevails in India today, that is, extreme communalism, is the direct result of two factors. First, the opportunistic politics, which found that the political use of religion can get them captive votes; and second, the economically frustrated intellectuals who want to make their mark by bearing the standard of communalism. Both the elements are not only the enemy of the Indian polity with religious diversity which incidentally is still the most stable polity in the Third World Countries, but also destroyer of the hard won freedom by the Indians. We should not also forget that when we talk of fundamentalism or religious backlash, we are cutting the roots of secularism. The two terms belong to the medieval era and are hallmark of the fanatics and the crusaders. These do not fit with the ideology of an enlightened society.

It will be fatal if we accept setting up of so many senas by various religious fanatics simply as a 'backlash' Such senas are always anti-national the nation must come first. Because our identity, whatever it. May be, religious, political or social, directly depends upon our liberty, if we do not have liberty we do not have any identity but that of a slave. Certainly no Indian wants to be slave again. At the same time we must remove the fear that secularism means relegation of religion to the backyard, Let the people be religious first and then secular. Let not secularism take precedence over religion. Because only religion teaches tolerance, It is simply a vote catching device. But if this communalism grows into fascist populism or racist nationalism then we have had it. Therefore, let secularism be the individual choice, a choice by free will and not by imposition. Only then secularism will prevail.