Religion, Democracy and Secularism

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South Asia is a geographical landmass with many common characteristics. However, this landmass, never in its history experienced political unity. It was always divided into several political units and today the historical and political exigencies have carved out six nation-states - India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Of all these nation-states, only India is technically a secular state, the rest has one or the other religion as state religion. Pakistan and Bangladesh have Islam as state religion; Sri Lanka and Bhutan are Buddhist and Nepal is a Hindu state.

However, India chose to be secular and has consistently remained a secular country since 1950 when its Constitution was put into force on 26th January of that year. Despite several political changes and upheavals, secularism as a political philosophy could not be touched. The Sangh Parivar has one of its objectives to declare India as a Hindu Rashtra and it has been working in that direction and had intensified its activities when the BJP-led NDA (National Democratic Alliance) Government was in power for last six years. But not only that they did not succeed; the NDA Government was thrown out of power in 2004 elections. It was a decisive defeat. The people of India have once again shown that they do not want religious state, much less put up with religious extremism.
The Indian National Congress since its inception was committed to secular polity and it was necessary as India all through its history was a multi-religious country. It never was mono-religious society in its entire history. Christianity and Islam came to India almost in lifetime of their founders. Interestingly, both entered through Kerala. The oldest history of Christianity and Islam has been traced to West Coast of Kerala. Some historians even maintain that Malabar in Kerala is the corrupt form of the Arabic word *ma’bar* i.e., the passage since it was the passage for the Arabs who traded with West Coast.

Hinduism was not a religion in the sense of Christianity or Islam. In fact, until eighteenth century the word Hinduism was never used in religious sense; it was more a geographical term. The term ‘Hinduism’ has not been used in the *Shashtras* (scriptures) also. It was only since late eighteenth century that it came to be used in religious sense and it became common currency only post-1871 census, which was the first census carried out by the British rulers. In fact, all those who were not Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Buddhists, Jains or Sikhs were termed as Hindus by religion. It was a very problematic use and even the Census Commissioner found it very difficult to define the term ‘Hinduism’ in religious sense.

It is necessary to mention this to show that since Hinduism was not a religion there were several *panths* (sects) in India, besides, tribal religions or nature worship. Then came into existence Buddhism and Jainism, which changed the very religious map of India. Of course, since the Aryan invasion, caste system became a universally practiced social hierarchy. The natives and aboriginals were not only pushed down South by the invading Aryans but also assigned the lowest rungs of caste hierarchy. India then was of sub-continental size and thus, it was not only multi-religious but also multi-lingual and multi-cultural.
As pointed out earlier, it was never politically unified throughout its history but only during later period of the Mughal rule and then during the British period it developed an administrative unity. Thus, in view of its multi-religious and multi-cultural character, the founders of Indian National Congress adopted secularism as its political anchor-sheet and never compromised on it. Not only that the delegates of the Congress elected several minority leaders like Badruddin Tyebji, Dadabhai Naowrojee, W. C. Banerjee (a Bengali Christian) as the Congress presidents so that its secular credentials were well-established.

The Congress in its Karachi session of 1930 had adopted a resolution that India shall be a democratic secular republic and by drafting the Constitution on these lines fulfilled its commitment. In fact, even the Muslim League which came much closer to the Congress through the Lucknow pact of 1916, thanks to the efforts made by M. A. Jinnah, was never a religiously-oriented political party. The Muslim League was putting forward mainly some demands pertaining to Muslims. And these were mainly political and not religious demands. Jinnah was far from being a religious fanatic. He was quite secular in his outlook. His main concern was to protect political interests of Muslim elite. In those days, Jinnah was firmly opposed to mixing politics with religion.

So much so that when Gandhiji took up the cause of Khilafat movement after the First World War and the British tried to dismantle Turkish Empire, Jinnah opposed taking up the cause of Khilafat movement as it was purely religious matter and that it would give entry to mullahs in politics. However, Gandhiji insisted on supporting the Khilafat movement as it concerned deeply with the religious sentiments of millions of Indian Muslims for whom the Turkish Caliph had religious status. Jinnah disagreed and did not take part in the Khilafat movement.
It is also important to note that Indian secularism never had overtones of atheism or negation of religion. Mahatma Gandhi was a deeply religious man. So was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and hundreds of other Congressmen and women. Indian secularism only meant acceptance of religious pluralism and non-discrimination on grounds of race, religion, caste and creed. Another aspect of Indian secularism is separating religion from politics and state functions from religion. State should concern itself only with socio-economic and political questions of citizens, never with their religious beliefs.

Even Jawaharlal Nehru, who, like Jinnah, was indifferent to religion and religious beliefs, never construed secularism to be negation of religion. In answer to a question by an Indian student at Oxford in the mid-fifties, Nehru defined Indian secularism as equal protection by state to all religions without any discrimination. He was well aware of deep influence of religion on the minds and hearts of Indian masses. A hard nosed politician can never ignore religious sentiments of people while keeping state above any religious dogma or practices.

It was this practical sense of secularism in Indian context that made even orthodox ‘Ulama’ support the Congress secularism right from nineteenth century. When the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, Maulana Qasim Ahmed Nanotvi, while throwing his weight behind it, issued a fatwa urging Indian Muslims to join it and fight along with the Hindus to throw the British out from India. He also asked many other ‘Ulama’ to issue such fatwas and compiled them together under the title Nusrat al-Ahrar (i.e., for the help of freedom fighters) so that Muslims could join INC (Indian National Congress) in large numbers. It is ironical that while traditional ‘Ulama’ were urging the Muslims in North India to join INC, more modernistic Muslims like Sir Syed (whose services in spreading modern
education among North Indian Muslims is very seminal) were urging Muslims to keep away from it.

Thus, secularism in Indian politics right from days of freedom struggle has been a uniting force in a multi-religious India. Partition, in the view of present author, was an unfortunate development and was brought about not by Islam or Hinduism but by disagreements on the political question of sharing power between the two major communities of Indian sub-continent. Partition was not inevitable because of religion but political disagreements about distribution of power.

Even the Mughal rule was not a religious rule in any sense of the word. And the two greatest rulers of India in the past Ashoka and Akbar both were non-Hindu and both tried to rule over India on secular lines though Ashoka was Buddhist and Akbar was a Muslim in respective personal beliefs. The Mughals were fully supported by Rajputs and later by Marathas (with certain exceptions, of course) as the Mughal emperors tended to be quite impartial (secular) in their behaviour towards people of India irrespective of their religious persuasion. Regional rulers like Rana Pratap or Shivaji did fight against Mughal Emperors, not because of their religion but for the sake of regional autonomy. Again, it was a struggle for power and not for/or against religion.

In any multi-religious society, association with state of any particular religion would lead to sectarian strife and bloodshed. Even in mono-religious societies, state’s association with religion does not lead to healthy governance. Religious leaders begin to compete for power and often use religious extremism or religious militancy in order to establish their control over state power and in such competition often people's real problems are forgotten.

Thus, it will be seen that secular governance has been an age-old tradition in India and secularism as a political philosophy came to be well established since colonial period when the freedom struggle began and people belonging to
various religious persuasions and faith participated in the freedom struggle. Without secular foundations of freedom struggle mass participation would have been impossible. The British rulers experienced 'dangerous consequences' of Hindu-Muslim unity and adopted the policy of divide and rule to frustrate Indian people's struggle for freedom. Unfortunately, they succeeded to an extent and the sub-continent was politically divided.

It was only democratic secularism, which had produced unity of the people and kept religious fanaticism and religious militancy at bay. As pointed out above, secularism being politically an all inclusive philosophy, it was accepted unreservedly by the orthodox 'Ulama' also and the Jamiat al-'Ulama-I-Hind supported the concept of muttahida qaumiyyat i.e., united nationalism. But the British had sown the seeds of conflict between the two communities and composite nationalism was shattered at the time of independence resulting in the partition of the country.

However, partition did not prove that secular democracy or composite nationalism is unworkable. India, despite partition, accepted the concept of secular democracy and composite nationalism and despite all attempts to weaken it has remained secular democracy. Indian experiment has categorically shown that secular democracy is an ideal way and religious democracy often leads to militancy and violence. One can point out the fact that India too has witnessed religious militancy and violence. But, it is precisely because certain political forces in India advocate religious nationalism. It is important to throw some light on this question.

The RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), an extremist Hindu organisation, was founded in 1925 by one medical doctor known as Hedgewar. Its main aim was to propagate religious or cultural nationalism and to establish 'Hindu Rashtra'. It was totally opposed to the concept of secular democracy. In fact, it considered secularism as an alien and
western concept to be completely rejected. As opposed to secular democratic India, it believed strongly in Hindu Rashtra. It also rejected Gandhian concept of non-violence and believed in violence in achieving the objective of Hindu Rashtra.

Thus, the RSS was completely opposed to Nehruvian secularism on the one hand, and, Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, on the other. Consequently, one of its members Nathu Ram Godse, did not hesitate to assassinate Mahatma Gandhi. For the RSS leaders, Gandhi was an enemy of Hindus and deserved to be killed as he 'favoured' Muslims. The RSS also considers Muslims and Christians, the two principal minorities of India, as 'outsiders' and thinks that they should not be accorded citizenship of India. In the Hindu Rashtra of RSS' concept, Muslims and Christians, have no place as full citizens. They should not enjoy any 'privileges' at all. They should live as subordinate to the Hindus.

Thus, while the concept of secular democracy is all inclusive, the concept of religious democracy like Hindu or Islamic democracy always tends to be exclusive of some sections of society. It also invariably leads to militancy and violence. Thus, the RSS and the Jan Sangh, the political wing of RSS (which was later renamed as BJP, Bhartiya Janata Party) were involved in many communal riots in post-independence India. Now the other members of the Sangh Parivar like VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and Bajrang Dal tend to be much more violent. The VHP indulges in trishul (trident) distribution and trishuls are then used in communal riots as weapons.

Once religion is allowed to be used as a legitimising political philosophy, it is almost impossible to check sectarianism. Though religion should be an important resource for peace in politics, due to powerful vested interests, it often is associated with violence. Thus, all over the world, religious extremism and violence have become
almost two sides of a coin. Not only in South Asia but in South East Asia, West Asia and Africa, religious violence is becoming endemic.

India, though a secular country, has been witnessing communal violence on a large scale ever since independence. The more religion gets politicised, the greater is the outburst of communal or religious violence. In fact, in developing countries due to large-scale poverty and unemployment, violence is often accompanied by the process of development and religion provides legitimising philosophy for use of violence. Mostly unemployed youth are tempted to take part in rioting and killing in the name of religion. In all the communal riots that I have covered in post-independence India, I have seen that unemployed youth are 'employed' by the communal and sectarian forces to fulfil their political objectives. In the Gujarat carnage of 2002, incited by the BJP-VHP and Bajrang Dal, members of the Sangh Parivar, incited the Dalit youth (i.e. untouchables of low Hindu castes) and tribals to kill Muslims. The victims of violence are also usually the poor who provide the soft targets for the violent mobs.

The Sangh Parivar (the Saffron Family) was losing all hopes of winning the coming assembly elections in Gujarat. Thus, they tried to win the elections by inciting Hindu mobs to kill Muslims by branding them traitors and Pakistanis and tried to legitimise violence against them. The dalit youths, I heard from many people in Ahmedabad, were paid Rs.500-1000 and a bottle of liquor to kill a Muslim. There was also temptation to loot the shops and household goods. More than 2000 Muslims were killed brutally and several women were mass raped before being killed.

The RSS has been poisoning minds of thousands of youths throughout India for decades now and inciting hatred and violence, rejecting concept of democracy and secularism. Thus, there is a dilemma of democracy in poorer and developing countries. The politicians are
tempted to incite religious militancy to garner the votes of their own community. The BJP in India and some Islamic parties in Muslim countries have often incited violence to win elections.

The Saudi society too is experiencing great deal of violence as a section of ‘Ulama’ incited religious extremism against non-Muslims in general and, the West in particular. As unemployment is rising in the Saudi society, the youth is getting attracted towards violent actions to vent their spleen. Such violence gives to the frustrated youth a sense of martyrdom and glorification. Their minds are totally brainwashed and they think they can achieve martyrdom by killing innocent people. It gives them some ‘purpose’ in life.

Thus, whether it is democratic society like India or authoritarian one like Saudi Arabia, there is a tendency for violence owing to religious extremism, which often gets aggravated due to poverty and unemployment. However, one should remember that poverty and unemployment by themselves do not generate extremist violence unless religious militancy is preached by religio-political agents.

The powerful vested interests in the west, particularly in USA, have deliberately promoted theory of clash of civilizations, thus legitimising violence against Asian countries. As pointed out above, religion can be a powerful resource for peace but the vested interests want to use it only for promoting strife either between different nations or people of the same nation.

People of India and also of other South Asian countries are peace loving and deeply religious. Thus, their religiosity could become a powerful asset for maintaining or promoting peace. But in post-colonial societies, religions have been systematically exploited for promoting hatred and violence since the late forties and the early fifties when these nations became free. The violence has been religious, ethnic or communal. Thus, instead of development, more and more
financial resources have been spent on policing for internal security or for armed forces for external security.

It is indeed an irony that despite more money being spent on policing and armed forces, violence breaks out more frequently and more insecurity spreads among the people. The huge policing and armed forces budget is also going into lining the pockets of politicians and bureaucrats. Every now and then scandals in purchase of arms break out in these nations. Thus, it is wrong to think, as many rationalists tend to do, that violence flows out of religious dogmas and doctrines. Many religious dogmas may not be in keeping with reason but that is a different debate. However, being contrary to reason or extra-rational is one thing and being violent is something quite different.

Poor people tend to be quite superstitious, as they have no resources to develop their faculty of reason and power of intellect. But that does not mean they tend to be violent unless they are incited by creating in them a sense of insecurity by spreading false rumours or feeding them false information by those who want to benefit from such violence. In fact, violence is used by those who boast of developed faculty of reason and who have acquired high degree of education from colleges and universities. The poor is often victim, not the perpetrator of violence.

In all communal riots that I have seen, violence is hardly a spontaneous eruption. More often than not, it is planned with a specific purpose in mind by those who are usually quite educated and often indifferent to religion and religious practices. All communal politicians tend to be otherwise quite modernistic in their thinking and way of life. They hardly subscribe to religious dogmas and doctrines.

However, that does not mean that its opposite is not true i.e., that those preaching religion and religious dogmas will never be involved in violence. It all depends whether they have been politicised or have political ambition of their own. Thus, it is not Islam per se or Hinduism per se that is
the problem but political Islam or political Hinduism that becomes problem. Combination of religion and politics is an explosive combination and in this combination religion as an ideal guide for life is always a loser and politics as a means of gaining power a distinct gainer. In such combination, religious sanctity is grievously injured and political opportunity clearly triumphs. All the violence we see today throughout the world in the name of religion falls in this category. We would like to throw some light on this category of violence. Many people whose knowledge often depends on newspaper headlines blame it on religion and particularly, if it happens to be religion of Islam. But those who study things in-depth with an open mind know that religion itself is caught in a complex web of political, social and cultural developments.

Even major events like attack on the New York Towers had nothing to do with Islam or Islamic teachings. It was a result of complex developments both in the western and Islamic world. If it is true that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda was behind those attacks they were not motivated by the Islamic jihad and attracted by the concept of martyrdom alone. It was mix of political developments in the USA, its ambition to dominate the Arab world and its oil, the oppression of Palestinians at the hands of Israel fully supported by US rulers, the betrayal by the USA of Osama in Afghanistan and the stationing of US Army in the Saudi Arabia.

US rulers deflected attention from these complex issues by coining a term ‘terrorism’ and invited more such violence by declaring ‘war against terrorism’ and thus this ever rising spiral of violence is continuing ever since. The US policies are primarily responsible for inviting more and more violence. Bush follows right wing Christian policies; all his advisors belong to the right wing Christian movement in America. However, since media is controlled by these very
elements, entire blame is thrown on ‘jihadi terror’ or ‘Islamic terror’.

The Bush administration also raised the bogey of weapons of mass destruction being produced by Saddam Husain of Iraq. This itself was a great political myth devised by Bush administration to find excuse for invading Iraq, which in turn has given rise to so much violence in that region. All this is being now dubbed as ‘Islamic terrorism’. Such terminology is also politically inspired.

Thus, it will be seen that politics uses religion and not the other way round. It is for this reason that I maintain that religion should never be politicised. Religion is basically for moral, ethical and spiritual development. It is another matter to draw moral inspiration from religion to keep politics value-based and for service to humanity. However, religion has never been source of inspiration for healthy politics and good governance. It has always been misused and exploited by the politicians in their struggle for grabbing power, more in symbolic than in substantial sense.

It is also to be remembered that violence cannot be erased simply by separating religion from politics. Separated it must be. But much more than that is needed. USA is a democracy, yet in the twentieth century and at the beginning of twentieth century, it has shed much blood in the world. Thus, being democracy is no guarantee of ensuring peace. Democracy coupled with pro-people politics based on values can alone ensure peace. We have seen in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that democracy can become handmaiden of powerful vested interests. American democracy is no more the idealistic democracy it once was. It is handmaiden of vested interests and they manipulate it the way they want.

Another important role in modern days is played by the media. Those who own media can create public opinion based on cleverly manipulated information. Even
democratic freedoms are manipulated by powerful vested interests. Freedom in fact becomes illusion of freedom. And combination of media moguls with powerful political rulers is more dangerous combination than that of religion and politics.

It is also important to note that role of religion, politics and media varies from place to place. In countries like Saudi Arabia, it is combination of religion and politics which is quite explosive, and in countries like the United States it is this combination which is as deadly as the combination of religion and politics. Clever manipulations by media magnates in favour of powerful vested interests are as dangerous as religious extremism at the service of monarchs, dictators and authoritarian rulers. It is difficult to say which is more dangerous than the other. To single out only Islamic militancy and Muslim extremism would be a partial truth.

To say this is not to defend Islamic militancy at all. It must be condemned as strongly as possible. But one should also understand situation in totality and not be victims of powerful propaganda indulged in by the powers that be. In Saudi Arabia, violence has erupted as the Saudi monarchy suppressed freedom of expression all these years and justified it by invoking teachings of Islam selectively. In Saudi Arabia, it is well known that there is alliance between the Saud family wielding political power and the 'Ulama' brought up in rigid Wahabi Islamic tradition. This combination has proved to be quite problematic and has now assumed violent form.

The quest for peaceful democracy is very important and should continue. For peaceful democracy number of conditions has to be fulfilled and it is very difficult to fulfil them. All those who advocated peace and non-violence and value-based life often paid with their lives. Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi both died violent death at the hands of powerful rulers or vested interests. There have been
advocates of peace, non-violence and compassion throughout ages but they were either marginalized or hanged or assassinated.

The political history of Islam has no doubt been violent but it is not the whole history of Islam. The Sufi Islam was a great advocate of peace, love and compassion. Who has not heard about great Sufis like Muhiyuddin Ibn Arabi and Maulana Rumi. Both believed in the central doctrine of love and peace. Maulana Rumi is one of the greatest poets of Islamic world whose poetry is full of message of peace and wisdom. In terms of intellectual and spiritual influence, no ruler, howsoever great, can match Ibn Arabi or Maulana Rumi.

The media is either unaware of this Islam or deliberately ignores it, and projects only militant Islam followed by handful of people in the Islamic world. The Sufi Islam wields tremendous influence throughout Islamic world except perhaps in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia too, all Muslims do not follow the ideology of Wahabi Islam or Purist Islam. I have met many Muslims from the Kingdom who are in complete disagreement with ruling ideology and stand for peace and co-existence.

Religion undoubted ly is and should be very healthy influence in human life and it is so for millions of people in the world of Islam. It is only some politicians who give bad name to the religion by misusing it and this is so in all faiths and traditions. It is, therefore, highly necessary for intellectuals and leaders in the world of Islam to promote dialogue with people of other faith communities from east as well as west. We live today in a globalized world which is tremendously diverse. Even Asia is bewilderingly diverse, and diversity can be sustained through dialogue.

It is also to be noted that dialogue should take place not only through words; it should also be translated through deeds. No culture should be allowed to take dominant position, rather should be equally respected. All cultures
have contributed to human civilization and human richness. It is not through talking alone but showing active respect that one can promote active dialogue.

The media can play very important role in the whole process if the journalists writing in major papers are trained properly. Unfortunately, more often than not, the journalists tribe is highly prejudice against minority religions and cultures and carry the load of majoritarianism. The terms used also are indicative of these prejudices. For example, Islamic terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, lack of democracy in the Islamic world, Islam against modernism etc. are less substantive and more stereotypical. Such terms only spread misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims.

Even BBC is far from being objective in its reporting. One cannot establish peace in the world without media being fair towards Islam and Muslims. Muslims too should shed their sense of superiority and learn to respect all other religions. It is part of the Qur’anic teaching. Also, they should be seen engaged in dialoguing more actively than others in order to fight prejudices against Islam and Muslims. They should also be seen actively promoting democracy and democratic values and should wage struggle against authoritarian regimes at home.

No action to promote peace and understanding can ever be one-sided. Multilateral efforts are needed. Culture of dialogue should, therefore, be promoted throughout the world and international fora should be used for this purpose. Bodies like UNESCO can play very useful role. The USA, when it comes to its own interests, totally ignores UNO. This should not happen. The US has promoted much violence by totally ignoring UN resolutions against war in Iraq. Thus, the USA will have to change its ways first before it can expect war against terror to succeed.