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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TERM ‘SECULAR’

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties

What value is added by the term ‘secular’ to liberal democracies, i.e. states that safeguard liberties of individuals and political freedoms of citizens? For some scholars, virtually nothing. Why? Because, while **secularism** is against discrimination only on the basis of religion, a ‘**liberal democracy**’ is against all forms of discrimination. The term ‘liberal democracy’ subsumes ‘secularism’. Why bother with ‘secularism’ then? Why not commit ourselves to the priorities of a liberal democracy instead? This is a fashionable view in Europe. Even some Indian scholars argue for the sufficiency of Articles 14-16 and 19 of the Constitution.

This view is inadequate, if not wrong. The word ‘secular’ is important. Those who claim the sufficiency of ‘liberal democracy’ must think again. True, their claim has had some validity in Europe, but it is losing relevance there too. But in places like India, it is a virtual non-starter. Why? Let us first get a handle on Europe’s specificity. Secular states did not emerge in Western Europe in the immediate aftermath of the religious wars. These wars were stopped by the establishment not of a secular but a confessional state in which people were forced to embrace the religion of the king. Those who did not comply faced death or expulsion. Every European society from then on became religiously homogenous — England became Anglican; Scandinavia, Lutheran; France, Catholic. Over time some dissenting groups were tolerated, but not without paying a price for their dissent. For example, although they were permitted to have their own church, it had to be hidden away in bylanes. Even the rich were forced to build chapels within the premises of their homes. Dissenters lived under the threat of persecution and daily harassment. The tolerant states of early modern Europe were a far cry from modern European liberal democratic states.

The return of the secular

Once other religions were eliminated or tamed, a struggle began against a politically meddlesome and socially oppressive church. The demand to separate church and state (which later came to be called political secularism) was supported by those who favoured free markets, private property and personal liberties. The moment this separation was sufficiently achieved, it began to be taken for granted, and slowly receded into the background. In this sense, ‘secularism’ lost its political and social salience in these religiously homogenous societies. The fight for a liberal state seemed sufficient.

Centuries later, when the general ethos in Western Europe witnessed the further decline of Christianity, the term ‘secular’ found itself linked to a humanist world view for which religion, whatever its private benefits, was potentially a public problem. While becoming increasingly less salient, it was etched in the bitter collective memory of these societies as the source of discord from which they had mercifully escaped. A religion, already on the defensive, faced greater devaluation and marginalisation. No one wanted religion-grounded recognition. With this, the idea of separation of state and religion lost its normative value further. These liberal states, where religion was no longer significant, granted formal equality to all citizens and called themselves liberal democratic.

But what if Europeans had to institute a liberty-loving, equality-caring state as soon as religious wars erupted? What if there was not much of a time lag between religious wars and the growth of a serious commitment to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity? Had this been so, demands for ending the religious persecution of dissenters and preventing religious

homogenisation would have been immediate. How else could a state live up to the ideals of liberty and equality? Moreover, the dynamics of a multi-religious society is such that religion would not have lost salience. Then, instead of getting rid of religious dissenters and minorities, a general consensus might have been sought to prevent their domination by the majority religious community. Had multiple religious identities been part of the social climate, a commitment to equality would have compelled European states to give impartial public recognition to all religions. Such states would be secular precisely in the sense that Indians conceived it — something with which to fight not just religious fanaticism and intra-religious oppression but also the domination of one religion by another. They would have been forced to call themselves not just liberal (subsuming within it secular in the European sense) but also 'secular' in the sense defended by Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar where it designates impartial public recognition to all religions. My point then is that the greater the salience of religion and depth of diversity in society, the larger the prospect of intra- and inter-religious domination, and the more pressing the need for a state — given its commitment to liberty, equality and impartial recognition — to call itself 'secular'.

How to rescue genuine secularism

Also, if religion-related bigotry and denial of recognition is present persistently, then it is hard to forget or ignore it. People potentially affected by them need to be repeatedly told that the state is there for them. The function of the term 'secular' is to do precisely that, to reassure anyone threatened by religious or religion-based exclusion, discrimination or misrecognition that the state is committed to preventing all this. To drop the word 'secular' then undermines confidence in the impartial character of the state.

The point can be made differently. Why lump together all forms of discrimination and oppression under the same general term? If the term 'secular' focuses on one specific kind of domination, why not to use it? Isn't de-cluttering our world and helping us focus on particular features an important function of all concepts? Why not call a flower 'red' when you have a distinguishing word for it? What point would be served by simply calling it coloured? To be sure, in some contexts, this might be sufficient. For example, if our purpose is to differentiate it from all white flowers the use of the term 'coloured' is adequate but not if one coloured flower is to be distinguished from another. Likewise, 'secular' helps focus on institutionalised religious domination, to demarcate it from other kinds of domination based on class, gender, ethnicity, etc. 'Secularism' implores us to resist it.

Is India still a minimally decent society?

In religiously homogenous societies, particularly where the importance of religion has weakened, liberal democratic states tend to be relatively indifferent to the term 'secular'. However, in religiously strong and diverse societies such as India, 'secular' is indispensable. It cannot disappear from public and constitutional discourse. Is it surprising then that after a few years of exile, it has recently resurfaced in India?

Here we cannot follow European habits but must embrace both liberal democracy and a form of secularism that fights religion-based misrecognition. Indeed, even Europe is changing. After the migration of workers from former colonies, Europe's new religious diversity has brought religion-based recognition to the fore. Therefore, in Europe too demands for an impartial secular state (in the Indian sense) will become louder.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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