Editorial: Religious diversity and secularism: Historical facts from India

India is a land of bewildering diversity with a jigsaw puzzle of people belonging to various faiths, religion and culture they all live together to create a unique society in a colorful cultural mosaic. Even so is India a real secular state? To answer this question, one has to explore the evolution of secularism. Although the Indian government maintains secularism and religious tolerance, sporadic acts of religious and ethnic violence do occur, and the root causes of such violence often run deep in history, religious discourse and politics.

India’s Hindu religious nationalism is deep rooted over millennia. The scars of ancient wounds can still be seen in the ruins of many Hindu temples across the country. For example, Muhammad bin Qasim (695-715 AD), a Syrian army general who conquered Sindh and Punjab assaulted the town of Debal, destroyed its great temple, and built a mosque over its remains. After each battle, all fighting men were executed while their wives and children were enslaved. Similarly, Ghazni Mohammed attacked the ancient Somnath temple in 1024 AD, killing thousands and triggering a precedent for invaders to destroy the temple and Hindus to rebuild it. The invasions razed again in 1297, 1394 and finally in 1706 by Aurangzeb—the Mughal emperor who cherished the ambition of converting India into an Islamic state. His reign was notably brutal. He banned the Hindu festival of lights (locally known as Diwali), taxed the non-Muslims and killed the 9th Sikh religious leader.

Later when India was occupied by the British from the 17th century onwards, they implemented social policies that deprived all, except those of European origin, of basic human rights. The Swadeshi movement started by Bal Gandadhar Tilak, a dazzling politician and scholar who triggered constitutional agitation against the British rule when India was ill prepared for an armed revolt. The political threats to British rule posed by the movement brought constitutional reforms for the first time in India. During the time of the Khilafat movement (1919-1923), Hindus and Muslims were indeed equal partners in India’s nationalism. Later when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk declared the Turkish Republic in 1923 out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, the Khilafat faction died down in India. To make matters worse, Muslim leaders were increasingly alienated by the Congress nationalism after 1942 that eventually led to the partition of India and the subsequent bloodshed that cannot be forgotten.

When Jawaharlal Nehru—educated from boyhood in Britain—became India’s first Prime Minister in 1947, he relied on the British economist Nicholas Kaldor to design tax policies that literally punished merchants who had financed the Congress party’s long struggle against the British occupation. Laws were passed during the Nehru’s regime that overrode Hindu customs and placed Hindus on a level below those of the minorities. Many ancient Hindu temples even in the contemporary India are being administered by atheists or non-Hindus while donations that pour from devotees are often seized by the government. Tirupati, for example, is the second richest religious institution in the world after the Vatican City, and is the most visited temple in the world today.

When the Congress party regained power in 2004 and appointed a prime minister from a minority Sikh religion, critics argued that there has been bias in policy favoring minority groups at the expense of the Hindu majority.
Such secularism, in which only Hindus are expected to be secular while other minorities remain free to practice exclusionary practices, has led to a Hindu religious backlash across India. An example is the re-election of Narendra Modi as Chief Minister of Gujarat State in 2007. Despite a rebellion within the ranks of his own Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and negative publicity from the media, Modi won by landslide. By winning, he undoubtedly challenged the Nehruvian policies that were embraced even by the first BJP’s Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee. The cry for egalitarianism by India’s Hindu religious community has become a political wave that could upset the Nehruvian system of ‘partial secularism’ that has prevailed in India since 1947.

India’s national father Mahatma Gandhi perceived religion as an intensely personal affair, which is separate from manmade institutions such as the state, politics and bureaucracy. But political leaders of the pre-and-postcolonial India did not fully realize Gandhi’s views of religion and state politics. Although the leaders were non-violent to the core, they were not all that robust in maintaining neutrality separating the volatile politics from the personal belief system of religion. If the two entities could have been separated at the time of India’s independence from the British Raj, the modern day’s social plagues such as the firebombing of churches, the building of the Ram temple near Babri Masjid, the murder of clerics like Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, and forceful religious conversions would not have happened or at least minimized in postcolonial India.

Despite some sporadic violence between various religious and ethnic groups, millions of ordinary citizens across India’s vast landscape prefer to uphold harmony and help each other at times of hardship. For example, when my coastal village in south India was struck by the deadly tsunami in 2004, the first relief supplies came far from the northwestern frontier state of Gujarat, an example of India’s secular compassion. Hindu religion may dominate India, but the country remains secular at heart so it continues the struggle to promote religious, cultural and ethnic tolerance with harmony at all levels.

While addressing the Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago in 1893, India’s renowned spiritual leader, Swami Vivekananda told the audience, “I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth.”

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