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SECULARISM AND THE MASS MEDIA



Santoshkumar Revoor¹ and Hemlata Jairaj²

¹Assistance Professor , Government First Grade College, Devdurga, Dist: Raichur.

²Associate Professor , Gulbarga University, Kalaburagi (Gulbarga)

ABSTRACT:

India's commitment to secularism, in a sense, precedes Independence. Both in reputation of the two-nation theory the Muslim League and the concept of a Hindu India advocated by and, additionally, in opposition to the practice of casteism and untouchability, the Indian National Congress sought to promote a plural, liberal-religious society in which all citizens would be equal. These professions were incorporated in the Preamble to the Constitution of the new Republic. This was formally amended in 1976 to provide that India shall be a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, the words "socialist" and "secular" being addition to the original formulation.

KEY WORDS: Secularism , Mass Media , Muslim League .

INTRODUCTION:

While this constitutional amendment presumably signified a renewed concern for and commitment to secularism, there was no effort to impart definitional clarity to the concept which continues to be interpreted to mean equal respect for all religions. This is a worthy and important aspect no doubt but leaves the meaning of secularism vague incomplete. It excludes both the idea of separation of church from state as well as emphasis on modernization without surrendering that which is best in traditional values. There is, however, reference in the new chapter on Fundamental Duties to promotion of harmony and spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India, transcending religious and other sectional diversities, and to the development of a scientific temper,

The Constitution proclaims Democracy, Justice, Liberty and Equality. But another attribute enshrined in it, yet never articulated though so germane to secularism, is Fraternity. By introducing the word "secularism" in the Preamble the law-makers have in a manner of speaking weakened the import of "Fraternity" as though suggesting that is something apart. Equal respect for all regions by itself could mean equal but separate, whereas Fraternity implies togetherness-as brothers.

This concept problem is vitally important. Any limitation of secularism to "equal respect for all religions" could mean and has often meant acceptance of a balance of communalisms. Witness the artificial multiplication of religious holidays to promote secular equality; or the granting of permission to processions on the occasions of rival festivals by pandering to a false religiosity for blatantly political ends; and even the exaggerated protection of all festivals over TV and radio in a spirit of fair shares (of broadcast time) for all. Some of these attributes have in fact spawned a kind of official communalism of which these are other manifestations such as the tokenism involved in certain appointments to high places on denominational considerations. It has also entailed an attitude of letting things alone in terms not merely of not lending support but in some instances, actually coming down against progressive elements fighting for reform in the face of die-hard opposition by their communities.

These prefatory remarks are necessary because such attitudes and inadequacies affect the media which could otherwise possibly have played a more active and positive role in promoting true secularism. Now, when the boundary lines between communalism and secularism are not clear, issue get fudged.

Article 19(1)(a) guarantees freedom of speech and expression. Article (19)2 provides for the imposition of reasonable restrictions on this freedom. The only grounds for so doing that might relate to the secular ideal are restraints relating to public order or incitement to an offence by injuring religious susceptibilities or whipping up communal passions. The background to these provisions is obviously the communal tension and rioting that have disturbed civic tranquility from time to time.

Right since Independence, the Press has been enjoined to write on communal tensions and riots with sobriety, avoiding names or mention of communities or casualties and so forth. Legislative sanction was provided over the years for curbing what were alleged to be communal writings. Thus sec. 95-A of the Cr. PC grants the state power "to declare certain publications forfeited and to issue search warrants for the same". Under Sec. 153, action can be taken for "Wantonly giving provocation intent to cause rioting". Sec 153-A speaks of "Promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc, and doing acts prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony". Sec, 153-B covers "imputations and assertions prejudicial to national integration". And Sec, 295-A concerns "Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage the religious feeling any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs". This is a formidable listing.

Many prosecutions have been launched on the basis of these provisions of law and cases have been filed by State Governments and others in this regard before the Press Council.

Addressing the National Integration Council on September 12, 1986, the Prime Minister called upon the media to evolve some methods of self-regulation in these matters. He added: "I do not say that the major newspapers are such a big problem. The real problem is the very small newspapers which are circulating in villages, in the districts and in the rural areas which most of us never really see... But that is where the real poison is being spread and we must somehow get down and be able to stop the poison at that level".

It is fairly easy to monitor and take action against the medium and larger newspapers and periodicals published in district towns and cities. But, as the Prime Minister stated, this is not so easy below the district level. Many "newspapers" and periodicals are irregularly published and tend to mushroom elections or other times when there is a "cause" to be advocated. Among these are papers that do not observe any standards and are often patronized by influential local and political interests. These papers are necessarily registered under the Press and Registration of Books Act, may have received local accreditation and may even be in receipt newsprint quotas and advertisements from official sources. The answer cannot lie in simply saying that these papers be denied these facilities, as the authorities are prone to use such powers to threaten and victimize small but independent papers which may be inconvenient. One remedy might be to constitute district-level harmony committees consisting of a mixed group of fair-minded citizens commanding local credibility which could offer an advisory opinion on the basis of which alone action might be taken, but with be press council or some other body acting as an appellate authority of sorts. This is necessary as free press is as much a safeguard of democracy, equality, secularism and communal harmony as a potential danger to these values when it is manipulated for wrong ends or acts with deliberate malevolence.

A recent instance is illustrative. The General of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (East Zone) in Calcutta lodged a complaint before the Press Council against the Telegraph of Calcutta for a dispatch filed by its Haryana correspondent regarding the purported conversion into a temple of what had until recently been a derelict mosque but now under renovation in a village near Hansi. The heading "Haryana's Babri Masjid" was unfortunate and should have been avoided. But prima facie the story (running into two parts and based on-the-spot verification and meetings with representatives of both sides) could not be said to be communal. The plea that a small incident had been blown up by a major newspaper published from a distant city was unconvincing for unless such incidents are exposed and their recurrence prevented, communal tensions will be generated where they do not exist. Public exposure in such cases can inhibit wrong-doing by surreptitious means and cause public opinion to assert itself on behalf of communal harmony and proper standards conduct in the matter of sensitive community relations. The formal verdict of the Press Council is awaited in this matter.

While it may have been desirable and even necessary through the early years of Independence to require the Press to discuss communal issues and riots without reference to the names of communities or of the victims, and generally published the barest details, such restraint does little service to the cause of secularism today. The National Integration Council has generally favoured the continuance of the earlier policy of minimum publication. On another view this has merely placed these issues in purdah, and allowed blatantly communal elements literally to get away with murder without educating public opinion (and sometimes the authorities) about the fact or underlying background. It has thereby failed to build public sanctions against communal wrong-doing or official inaction in the face of communal provocations by whomsoever. Forty years and more after Independence the people of India are sufficiently mature and discriminating to make a sober and objective appraisal of the facts in good time, and to raise their voice and mobilize civic action against communal tendencies.

Indeed, the recent policy has become a cover for communal in many instances. Detailed investigations and exposures- as at Meerut and Maliana in 1988 –are embarrassing in so far as they show up the complicity, inactivity or indifference of the authorities. So many would prefer that the facts are not brought out or remain in dispute. Anonymity controversies are convenient and enable the instigators to go about with injured innocence and to strike again. The argument that detailed reporting might arouse passions is specious in most if not in all cases. Likewise the plea that the issue is under administrative or judicial inquiry and, therefore, “sub-judice”. This has sometimes become a cover for delaying inquiries or for white-washing the event. The most outstanding example of this is, of course, the Delhi riots of October 31, November 3, 1984 when thousand of Sikhs were massacred.

The tortuous processes and procedures of some riot inquiry committees has been dismaying. Publication of their reports, when submitted, has been delayed. When published, copies are sometimes not easily or quickly available. And there have been instances when little or on action has been taken on the findings and recommendations on one plea or another. Immediate, contemporary, detailed, objective and responsible reporting of communal events and their background, couched in temperate language, without any attempt at sensationalisation, and displayed under sober headings, can do a word of good in exposing communalism and communal crime and in promoting secularism. There could be excesses initially or on occasion in such reportage. But this would be by far the lesser evil than the conspiracy of silence that prevails too often today. The danger of silence or failure to report the fact and accurately is that rumor takes over and spreads like wildfire, causing panic, bitterness, angry reactions, premature statements and fear. One unleashed, it is difficult to catch up with rumors or to scotch totally even thereafter. Punjab offers a tragic example. Operation Blue Star was shrouded in censorship. This single act played havoc. Myth and reality were mixed and official credibility has not since recovered.

It is not small papers alone that are guilty of communal writing. Powerful regional organs have sometimes played a very negative and irresponsible role. The war of words carried on in fairly vitriolic language by the Jalandhar press, both in Hindi and Punjabi almost since Partition- and in some ways a carry over of pre-partition communal attitudes when they published from Lahore- has embittered communal relations. Some of them must now rue the bitter harvest.

Another sorry example of dereliction comes from Gujarat when some major Gujarati dailies, particularly one of them, fanned the anti-reservation agitation and riots against the Harijans and Dalits in 1980. A report of the Editor Guide of India, entitled “The Crooked Mirror” tells the story. False report were manufactured and planted in the paper, there was suppression and exaggeration. Provocative captions given to photographs. The display was loudly sensational. Facts were distorted. Contradictions and corrections issued by the State Government were not carried, though some were published later as paid official advertisements a strange and shocking situation. The Gujarat Samachar was censured by the Press Council.

Stereotypes are common trap into which news papers fail. Thus reference to “Sikh terrorist”. Not all Sikhs are terrorists and not all terrorists are Sikh. Officials agencies have for their own party reasons sometimes given credence to such stereotypes. Thus during the early phases of the Assam agitation in 1980 the media, alas, by large followed by official lead for some time in labeling the All-Assam Students Unions leaders and their movements against foreigners or infiltrators from across the international border “secessionists” and “anti-Muslim”. When in all movements there are like to be fringe elements, this virulent distortion of the facts for quite some weeks was the cause of much lasting confusion and bitterness that cost the country dear.

There are other stereotypes too. Urdu is quite commonly assumed to be a “Muslim” language

and the synonymous with a Muslim press. No doubt sections of the Urdu press may be Muslim owned. But the stereotype was for long and even in the official view allowed to gain ascendancy with all its communal overtones. Such is the elementary lack of thought given to these matters that phrase "India Muslim" carries –a communal overtone whereas "Muslim Indian" is the more secular expression.

Lately, communalism has been politicized like so much else in the country. The Government may have acted hastily in enacting the Muslim Women's Bill and in banning Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses". Censorship always poses dangers, and has resulted in the banning of various books, including text books; and bans on films and plays such as *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Yet it must be said that many of the loudest protesters were not so much interested in women's rights or literary freedom as anxious to seize a handy stick with which to beat the Muslims for their alleged conservatism or fundamentalism. This is evident in the silence of some of these same elements over "Riddles of Hinduism", which aroused much passion in Maharashtra, or over the sati of Roop Kanwar in Deorala in 1987. There was rioting in Bangalore some years ago when the Deccan Herald reproduced an earlier published short story by a Malayali author in translation in which a leading character bore the name of the Prophet.

Religious sensitivities are understandable; but these are sometimes exaggerated and deliberately aroused and manipulation for selfish or political ends by vested interests. All communities have been guilty of communalism at some time or other. There is danger too in the efforts of some to whip up kanoritarian communalism, sometimes by evoking nationalism. Thus every Sikh was at one time called upon to prove his patriotism by denouncing the Anadpur Sahib resolution. These are unfortunate trends, sometimes quite unconscious, but nonetheless damaging in so far as they create certain emotional images and stereotypes. The press is often the unthinking vehicle for propagating such ideas.

Loose and constant use of the phrases "majority" and "minority" and the Constitutional references to religious and linguistic minorities has also had unfortunate consequences. Who is a "minority"? What is a majority"? Hindus constitute a "majority" in India. But Muslims are a "majority" in J&K and Sikhs in Punjab. Yet Hindus remain a majority in Jammu and Jalandhar while even within those cities, there could be Muslim or Sikh majority pockets. The fact is that we are most of us both majorities at different times though constant misuse of these phrase has created certain fixed images in our minds. When constitutional safeguards are accorded to "minorities" confusion can grow. An extraordinary case was that of the Ramakrishna Mission's denial in the Calcutta High Court of being Hindu, in order that one of its educational institutions might gain or retain certain "minority" privileges or concession of which it would otherwise be deprived.

In conclusion, we can urge that it is time that concept of secularism was objectively reviewed. "Equal respect for all religious" is an inadequate and limiting definition. The broader concepts of Fraternity and modernization should not be ignored. Universal primary primary education for all could do more for secularism than much of mumbo jumbo people keep mouthing. And what a failure on universalizing education. Likewise, a reversal of current policies (and laws) about wanting on communal incidents or trends has, by keeping these matters in purdah, discouraged public education and awareness about secularism and frustrated more active intervention by enlightened (hence informed) public opinion. Finally, we must fight stereotypes and the danger of permanently dividing everybody always into "majority" and "minority", the sheep and the goats.

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