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RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

AUTHORED BY - TANMAY BANSAL

ABSTRACT

Nationalism in simple terms means devotion towards one's nation or nation-state and developing a feeling that one's nation is superior to others. For a major part of the 20th century, nationalism was seen as a force of battling colonialism in Africa and Asia.¹ However, in the post-independent India, nationalism has been molded by several groups ranging from different religions, castes, cultures etc. This paper wishes to answer the question whether religious nationalism is existent in India and what effects it has had on the country's functioning?

INTRODUCTION

Religious nationalism, or the synthesis of religious and national identities and objectives, is a component of nationalism that is gaining prominence. Religious and national identities coexist and even reinforce one another, rather than secular nationalism simply displacing religious identities and allegiances. Such religious nationalism becomes a potent force in reinforcing popular religiosity and attitudes, empowering religious organizations to influence policy in a vast array of sectors, and shaping the patterns of inter- and intra-state violence. These findings have two ramifications: the need to engage in improved metrics and operationalization of religious nationalism, and reassessing the very logic of state and nation building.

Despite the fact that religious nationalist groups are so diverse, they appear to have many common characteristics. To begin with, the majority of religious nationalist parties have a puritanical element that colors their political platforms and subsequent methods of government. Second, in many nations, religious nationalists argue for economic austerity or draconian anticorruption measures through moral appeals and rhetoric. Thirdly, religious politics frequently reveals a majoritarian nationalism that strives to redefine the foundation of national identity in a way that excludes or marginalizes religious minorities.

¹ Gellner, E. (n.d.). (1991) *The Coming of Nationalism and Its Interpretation: The Myths of Nation and Class*.

In India, the mixing of religion and politics is not a novel phenomenon. This blending initially began with official patronage of the Brahminical Vedic tradition in which state backing of religion insured that clerical leaders would, in turn, protect the state. In India's early state forms, the rajas controlled political power but were dependent on the legitimation of brahmins, whom they paid with safety and monetary resources guarantees.² In sharp contrast to China, for instance, where religious authorities were subject to elites with coercive and economic power, brahmins in India possessed a high degree of moral authority independent of governmental power, for according to the Manu Rules, the Brahmin or the priest was higher than the Kshatriya or the warrior in the caste system.³ In 1947, with the overthrow of the British Raj, India's new constitution established a secular republic that did not have a tight church-state separation as in many Western democracies, but rather a "principled distance" between religion and the state. Under this umbrella, the government attempted to maintain a balanced acceptance of India's diverse religious sects without unfairly favoring any one sect.

However, in order to maintain tabs on the following of law to the teeth, it is important to question, whether this distance successfully maintained? If not, how and which has religion influenced politics or visa-versa? How has the said influence, impacted the growth and development of other religions in the country? And finally, can the said differences be eliminated?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to derive a definitive response to the said questions, it is pertinent to review the hypothesis and conclusions reached by theories answering similar questions before this.

Irfan Habib in his article *Nationalism in India: Past and Present*, counters the once famous argument that India was never unified before the British rule. He states "that India was widely recognized as a country by the knowledgeable among its inhabitants from quite ancient times, when, looking at its social and cultural uniformities, they could easily mark the universal presence of the inequities of caste system, or the prevalence of Sanskrit as the language of the learned."⁴ It would be important to note the difference between a country and a nation in the said scenario.

² Peter Friedlander, "Hinduism and Politics", 70-71, in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016)

³ Francis Fukuyama, "*The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*", 159, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)

⁴ Habib, "Nationalism in India: Past and Present." *Social Scientist*, vol. 45, no. 3/4, 2017, pp. 3-8. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26380341>. [Accessed 2 Nov 2022]

While India truly could be classified as a country due to the Magadha or the Mughal empires, it was actually the attached sentiment and symbols like Bharat Mata, Charkha and the tri-color which made it into a nation during the unification under the British rule. It is interesting to note that before 1947, the only basis of being classified as a nationalist was the opposition of the British rule; thus, contrasting parties like the RSS and the Muslim League were classified under the same umbrella. He further notes that what was supposed to be a welfare state, is now nothing more than a divided economy and a concentration of opportunities for the 'privileged classes'.

Bipin Chandra in his journal article *Secular and Democratic India on the Threshold of the New Millennium*, stated, "It was one of the great triumphs of Indian National Movement that, despite the partition of India in 1947 and the barbaric and horrendous riots and killings and migration of millions that accompanied it, the Indian people accepted secularism as a basic value, enshrined it in the constitution, and set out to build a secular state and society."⁵ However, the author then recognizes the changes that have erupted in the last couple of years and how they have change the face of the country, towards the worse. In the early years of the new millennium and 21st century, communalism is unquestionably the nation's most significant challenge. This difficulty has two kinds. One is the political challenge posed by the RSS-BJP's successful occupation of the political ground of the alternative party to the Indian National Congress, a position it is expected to maintain for many years. Thus, there is a clear and present danger that the Indian State may become sectarian. The second aspect of the expanding communal difficulty is the communalization of Indian society. This political opportunism has a tendency to make communal parties and groupings legitimate and even legitimize communism in the eyes of the general public. The National Movement and the Nehru era rendered communism a terrible word, although this is becoming less and less the case. Community violence is a consequence or feature of the propagation of communal ideology. The core of communalism, however, is the propagation of communal ideas and thought patterns. The effort for social reform must be increased, and not just to combat communalism. This purpose, however, necessitates the complete elimination of communalism. The battle must also lead to the adoption of the best of ancient and modern ideals. Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian communalisms are viewed as variations of a single communal worldview. It becomes evident that one must simultaneously resist all of its versions.

⁵ Chandra, "Secular and Democratic India on the Threshold of the New Millennium." *Social Scientist*, vol. 27, no. 9/10, 1999, pp. 3–17. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3518099>. [Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.]

ANALYSIS

There are two kinds of nationalisms prevalent in India in terms of religious nationalism. Secular nationalism, which combines a commitment to territorial integrity with the cultural concept of political plurality, whereas Hindu nationalism mixes territorial unity with Hindutva, or the view that India is fundamentally a government by, for, and on behalf of the Hindu majority group.

Secular Nationalism- The Indian Constitution has many characteristics of a traditional secular state. It grants residents religious freedom and forbids discrimination on the basis of religion. The country's constitution also guarantees every person universal suffrage, regardless of religion or social status, in contrast to the majority of democracies, which expanded the franchise to women, minorities, and the poor only gradually. Nonetheless, the Indian Constitution gives adequate grounds for state intervention in religious matters. For example, the constitution recognizes both collective and communal rights, as well as the rights of religious minorities. The state is required by law to support educational institutions administered by religious organizations. Therefore, not only can the state properly intervene in a nation's religious matters, but it can also do so without neutrality limits. In truth, India's secular approach openly recognizes religion, contrary to what opponents may assert. Supporters of the country's unique approach contend that neither complete separation nor a full acceptance of the majority religion, Hinduism, would have been sustainable in India's pluralistic, democratic government. In light of India's astounding religious and cultural variety, providing Hinduism preferential attention would have necessitated sacrificing India's syncretic traditions. Taking into mind India's formation in the context of the partition of the subcontinent, calls to separatism, and the possibility of foreign interference, a secular approach helped maintain a diverse polity together at a time when the nation was under considerable strain. In addition, proponents of India's type of secularism argue that the constitution had to grant the state the authority to rectify disparities and harmful social practices that arose from particular religious traditions.

Hindu Nationalism- It's proponents believe that Hinduism, not the delicate balance of all ethnic and religious groupings in India, is the fundamental basis of the nation's identity. In the opinion of Hindu nationalists, India's Hindu identity is significant both for its own sake and because it has the capacity to produce the type of cohesive national community required for social stability and international recognition. However, their argument that India is the birthplace of Hinduism and thus, is a Hindu country seems to be flawed, for it is also the birthplace of Sikhism, Jainism and

Buddhism. They contend that the territory internationally recognised as contemporary India is intrinsically related to an old religious and cultural Hindu tradition that takes precedence over all other traditions found within contemporary India's borders. Some historians have suggested that the mixture of religion and culture is deliberate: the two cannot be separated according to the majority of Hindu nationalist ideologies. This mentality contradicts the secularist perspective, which regards religion and culture as separate categories.

With the electoral triumph of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party since the late 1990s, India's electoral climate has witnessed a rise in religious content (BJP). Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP has had a resurgence over the past seven years after experiencing a decline during the majority of the 2000s. The recent electoral triumph of the BJP has once again brought to the forefront an alternative nationalism based not on secular ideals but on the premise that Indian culture is identical to Hindu culture. This break from India's secular legacy, which was originally harmed by the Congress Party's self-inflicted wounds, presents grave concerns regarding India's political future and its longstanding adherence to the motto "unity in diversity." The Congress Party's relations with religion and propensity to meddle in issues inside and amongst religious communities opened fresh chances for the Bharatiya Janata Party. The latter party quickly abandoned its initial moderate stance for a more strategic Hindu identity-building agenda that might capitalize on a growing sense of Hindu vulnerability. The 2014 election result was a breakthrough for the BJP and the Hindutva ecosystem, something many insiders had denied was achievable. The Hindutva politics of the BJP is evident from its politics in portions of Uttar Pradesh, particularly the western regions surrounding Muzaffarnagar, which had suffered ethnic violence between Hindus and Muslims in 2013, they did not shy away from polarising sectarian rhetoric. Similarly, in the border state of Assam, the BJP leveraged the delicate topic of Bangladeshi migration to bolster its support. From Ram-Mandir to Rohingya migrants, and from the Citizenship Amendment Act to the Removal of Article 370, all have in some way or the other been given a religious angle and thus act as a promoter of the idea of Hindutva.

This extremism has taken a huge boost from identity politics. Speeches by minority leaders across the nation is a fuel for increasing this feud. Hindu nationalists take cover under such events to further their agenda and push for a Hindu Rashtra. It should be truly alarming that an ex-law minister of the largest democratic and secular nation of the world called for the removal of the

word Secular from the preamble of the constitution.⁶

CONCLUSION

The above stated comparison between Secular and Hindu Nationalism show a transition in Indian history, before and after the 1980's. As stated, all the three commonly identified requirements of religious nationalism have been ticked by the Hindutva movements. It has puritanical element that has been evident from their governing and stances on issues like, rights of third gender, wherein they argue, that such unnatural acts and people are against the idea of our culture and religion. Secondly, they have an economic motive for gathering wide support, in terms of anti-corruption movements. And finally, they aim to redefine the identity of the nation's citizens which aims at leading to the feeling of exclusion for one or more religions in the country, in this case, Muslims and Christians.

The ideas of Hindutva holds the power to incite violence to an extent which may lead to a civil war, something which turned out to be the bloodiest and biggest migrant movements in the world, not less than 75 years ago. The success of the secular, democratic, and socialist forces in facing this challenge will depend not only on the practice of the Indian people, but also on the theoretical effort required to lead and analyze the actions of social forces.⁷

⁶ Thehindu.com. (2015). *Preamble row: Govt. not to remove words 'secular', 'socialist'*. [online] Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Preamble-row-Govt.-not-to-remove-words-%E2%80%98secular%E2%80%99-%E2%80%98socialist%E2%80%99/article60117148.ece> [Accessed 2 Nov. 2022].

⁷ Chandra, "Secular and Democratic India on the Threshold of the New Millennium." *Social Scientist*, vol. 27, no. 9/10, 1999, pp. 3–17. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3518099>. [Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.]