A hollow secularism

There are still parts of India where governance is trifling. A bulky but weak and corrupt state keeps the poorest and weakest out of their rights, social mobility and empowerment. No wonder we have secularism but are riven with religious and caste conflict. Still, the issue is more nuanced. Image for representation.

For all its pluralism, India is lacerated everyday by sectarian, religious and inter-caste violence. The song and dance about Indian secularism and pluralism hinges on the standpoint of people who stake
This claim. Individuals at different rungs of Indian society might not share such secular and plural optimism. The debate over equality in society is crucial in interpreting Indian secularism.

The fascinating evolution of western secularism is associated with the development of the modern State in Western Europe in the medieval period. The notion of the modern State itself took off with the Renaissance. In countries like England, the nobility influenced the issuing of the Magna Carta in 1215 and took it further with Simon de Montfort’s Parliament in 1265 to check the powers of the king.

In turn, the subaltern peasantry pushed back on noble and royal overreach with Wat Tyler’s Peasant Revolt of 1381. By the Renaissance and after, the social structure of English society came under strain. Consequently, erstwhile economic minorities like the peasantry found a way up English society, with the opportunities that imperialism created in the colonies.

Progressively, these developments impelled the king to become answerable to public representatives. Over many epochs, it led to the increasing secularisation of power and creation of democracy. All this was, in some form, predicated upon notions of creating an equal society. State strength corresponded with social equality. These were no outright successes, but big advances ensued in both spheres.

Later, superpower States like Great Britain saw economic growth and upward mobility for indigent sections run parallel with secularising their polity. Secularism and social equality went hand in hand or were close behind each other. Former colonies like India fare poorly on this count. A glaring gulf marks the relationship between the State and society. The two entities seem to be working at cross purposes with each other.

Indeed, in such inchoate states, there is an ongoing tussle between the mandate of the State and the imperatives of organised religions that shape society. We have free and fair elections, but with exceptions. We have universal adult franchise, but without substantive equality and literacy. Barring the Indian Emergency there has been no suspension of democracy, yet India has bendy institutions of justice and power distribution.

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In many periods of human history, the sense of one’s political identity has been bound up with religious identity. The latter has predated most modern notions of political identity. This happened as most religions evolved into organised religions and turned into social service providers. They oversaw the individual and community’s worldly and otherworldly concerns. Regardless of its limitations and prejudices, organised religion provided succour to wide strata of society.
Many of these religions used methods of charisma, coercion, persuasion and negotiation. Through this expansion, religion coordinated into an enterprise. It executed the functions of the State. The king/sultan/maharajah, the lord, though remained a war collecting, war-mongering entities in the eyes of commoners.

So, while rulers like the king had political power, religion had moral legitimacy over society. During the time of the emergence and consolidation of the modern State, there were clashes between the church and the king in Europe. But the church still had sizable power over the configuration of society.

Countries like India chose Western models of the State after getting freedom. They did this while attempting to retain their civilisational strengths. But organised religion still retained primacy as an organiser of society in post-colonial nation-states because the new State quickly became a den of cabals, elites and vested interests.

Since it stymied genuine social equality, many of the features of the State drew public cynicism and scepticism, while idioms of organised religion, for all its faults, retained public legitimacy. Therefore, for most Indians, religious identity occupies a more exalted position than the modern-secular-liberal citizen-self. Organised religion still provides the safety net that the State purports but doesn’t offer.

In large parts of Western Europe, state-sponsored secularisation succeeded as the state distributed the benefits of growth to previously disempowered groups. Secular citizenship and liberalism grew out of this roughly even spread of growth. The State earned the credibility to instill secular modern ideology.

The situation in the Indian subcontinent, like in large parts of Asia, Africa and Central and Latin America, was the opposite. The state here did not have the conditions to embed a genuine modern, liberal, secular ecosystem. It was sitting atop, and perhaps aggravating, a highly unequal society. Therefore, organised religion was still the only option for the commoner. In short, our secularism is hollow.

(The writer is Assistant Professor at the Jindal School of Liberal Arts & Humanities, O P Jindal Global University)

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