

# The Problem of Democracy and Secularism in South Asia: An Analysis of India and Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

India and Bangladesh are two of the most important countries in the Asian subcontinent. Establishment of democratic governments in both countries. If we look at India in terms of population, we can see that it is a Hindu inhabited country, but on the other hand, if we look at Bangladesh, we can see that it is a Muslim inhabited country. Since independence, there have been problems with secularism in both countries, which are still present today. There have been various problems with secularism since independence in both countries, but no proper solution has been found. I have tried to analyze and show through this paper the problems that have arisen as a result of secularism in both countries and the problems that have arisen in democracy as a result of secularism.

**KEYWORDS:** Democracy, Secularism, India, Bangladesh, Crisis of Democracy, Crisis of Secularism

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The history of parliamentary democracy is ancient; the modern parliamentary democratic structure was introduced to South Asia mainly during the post-colonial period. The most important event during the colonial period was the emergence of a distinct state structure in divided India where the diversity of the presence of many religions, languages and castes came together. The history of the transition from colonial rule to parliamentary democracy is well known. Here we will discuss how democratic development has taken place in South Asia and how secular presence is playing a role in that development or how much democracy can be maintained by democratic institutions and the discussion will be mainly on India and Bangladesh.

Religion is an integral part of society and politics in the Indian subcontinent, and since religion is one of the determinants of society and politics in the subcontinent, it is impossible to discuss the post-colonial representative democratic state structure of all these countries without religion. But in general, representative democracy has a negative relationship with religion because in a truly representative democratic structure, the representation of all religions, castes and races is recognized. If the issue of political institution and governance is determined on the basis of religion, then the issue of representation and equal rights of all citizens is violated, especially in a democracy where there is a risk of loss of minority rights and dignity. The aspect of ideals and reality is embodied. In South Asia,

especially in Indian society, the structure of secularism and democracy is very complex.

## II. THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

There are so many thinker discussed theories about democracy. One of these theorists is David Held who discusses the range of social sciences from the ancient GREEKS with the help of a model aimed at understanding the dynamics of modern democracy. To him, democracy is not just a simplified one-sided concept of people's rule, but he says that democracy is a condition for the well-being of the people, as he believes that democracy is desirable because most of the conditions for a healthy and normal life can be observed. But Held's model is not as successful in explaining democracy in the Western world as it is in the Third World, more specifically in explaining democracy in South Asia. This is because of the diversity of South Asia. This is why the state of democracy in South Asia says that the idea of democracy has transformed South Asia as much as South Asia has transformed the idea of democracy itself. The language, the practice and the institutions of democracy have transformed popular commonsense every day practices and relations of power. South Asia has reworked the idea of democracy by infusing it with meanings that spill over the received frame of the idea of democracy. These two influences have reinforced each other and helped create South Asian culture of democracy distinctly modern and specifically South Asian. It is further stated that democracy in South Asia did not take

a pre oriented path. The experience of democracy in this region defies conventional nations of preconditions for and outcomes of democracy. South Asia disproves the nations that democracy cannot be instituted in the conditions of mass poverty and literacy, that deep and politicized diversities and anathema of sustaining democracy, that democracy must be restricted to small scales. It also goes against the expectation that democracy can be trusted to deliver development, security or dignity. One of the issues associated with democracy is equal rights and wide participation, and secularism is truly accepted in a democracy when it is properly observed.

### III. MEANING OF SECULARISM

Secularism is an ideology, opposed to all form of institutionalized religious domination. It is a normative doctrine which seeks to realize a secular society, i.e. one devoid of either inter religious or intra religious domination. Positively it promotes freedom within religious and equality between as well as within religious.

Secularism, a companion and concept of democracy

- Secularism gains meaning and substance only when we see it as legitimate from the perspective of democracy and its core principle of equality.
- Logically there is no reason why a society should be committed to secularism, unless it is committed beforehand to the concept of equality.
- Both democracy and secularism are constitutive of a just state, a state that ensures its equality of status between individuals as well as between religious communities.
- Democracy takes care of the first avatar of justice, the equal right of all individuals to certain goods.
- Secularism secured the second avatar of justice that religious groups are not disadvantaged for arbitrary and it is irrelevant reasons and that these groups have equal model standing in society.

### IV. NEHRU ON SECULARISM

'Equal protection by the State to all religions'. This is how Nehru responded when a student asked him to spell out what secularism meant in independent India. He wanted a secular state to be one that "protects all religions, but does not favour one at the expense of others and does not itself adopt any religion as the state religion". Nehru was the philosopher of Indian secularism. Nehru did not practice any religion, nor did he believe in God. But for him secularism did not mean hostility to religion. In that sense Nehru was very different from Ataturk in Turkey. At the same time Nehru was not in favour of a complete separation between religion and state. A secular state can interfere in matters of religion to bring about social reform. Nehru himself played a key role in enacting laws abolishing caste discrimination, dowry and sati, and extending legal rights and social freedom to Indian women.

While Nehru was prepared to be flexible on many counts, there was one thing on which he was always firm and uncompromising. Secularism for him meant a complete opposition to communalism of all kinds. Nehru was particularly severe in his criticism of the communalism of the majority community, which posed a threat to national unity. Secularism for him was not only a matter of principles; it was also the only guarantee of the unity and integrity of India.

### V. PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY AND SECULARISM IN INDIA

The establishment of the National Congress is a significant event in Indian politics. After the establishment of the National Congress in 1885, the term secular began to gain political prominence in Indian politics. After the establishment of the National Congress, the non-Hindus of India at that time, especially the Muslims, began to think of the Congress as a Hindu organization. Later, Badruddin, the first Muslim president of the Congress, tried to convince Sir Syed Ahmed Khan that the Congress was a secular institution. The concept of secularism in the Indian political context is clearly understood because it refers to all religions. Secularism arose in the West through the tug of war between the Church and the political establishment, but the perspective of secularism in India was completely different.

Manabendranath Roy and many of his followers spoke of adopting the Western model of secularism. He says secularism is not a political institution; it is a cultural atmosphere which cannot be created by the proclamation individuals however highly pleased and intensely sincere. Our state is called secular when it is not organically associated with particular religion which relation persisted through centuries even after political war was wrested from the priest craft.

The severance of that relation was a major formality in the Christian countries where cultural progress had sharpened the conflict between the church and the state. He further said that in a secular state a mediaeval monstrosity like Kumbh Mela would be forbidden. But the government cannot take such a step which should be done for the sake of public health, if not for other reasons, given a free election, it would be turned out of office. Prudence may counsel moderation but shot of the drastic measure of prohibiting such mass monstrosities, the government could have done things to discourage them.

India's journey as an independent democracy began after August 15, 1947, and the new constitution of India was adopted on November 26, 1950. But the word "secular" was not included in the preamble to the constitution of an independent democratic state led by the National Congress, which began its journey with a secular image. Although the world's largest constitution grants basic civil rights to all people, regardless of religion, caste, or gender, many believe that it has been able to carry the idea of secularism.

Bidyut Chakraborty and Rajendra Pandey in their book Indian government and politics have tried to explain why the word secularism has not been included in the Indian constitution. They commented that the nation of secularism has a long enduring value of Indian socio-cultural life, not only found commanding heights through the judicial pronouncements but also by delving deep into the Psyche of the people as well as government life.

Needless to say, a democratic society is based on the principle of equality and the political consciousness and values required for the principles and ideals enshrined in the constitution to function in this social system were not present among many politicians. So gradually they started giving more importance to religious entity or linguistic entity

than nationalism which led to the politics of separatism. Even this led to the rise of political parties based on religion in later times.

The declared policy of the National Congress was secularism; there was no shortage of opportunistic power-hungry leaders of the Indian National Congress in the history of all-time politics. Despite Nehru's good will, he could not make the right and timely decision in all matters. He knew that true education could awaken a sense of secularism in the minds of the people. But unfortunately the education system of independent India has not changed radically. After independence, educationist Zakir Hossain, who later became the President of India, gave a practical advice on primary education in consultation with Mahatma Gandhi, although it was not accepted due to lack of political will. The various commissions and committees set up for education in the post-independence period failed to take effective steps considering the progress and development. The Kothari Commission was formed in 1964 and there were some important issues raised and nothing was done to solve those problems due to lack of political will.

Truth be told, another obstacle to the spread of secularism is that although civil society was formed in a pluralistic social structure, it could not be completely free from religious sentiments, so in many cases civil society was not seen to play its proper role. On the other hand, the media plays a constructive role in any democracy. The Indian media has been instrumental in protecting the interests of the majority, although the media has not been silent on the interests of the minority. Large-scale communal riots erupted in India at various times, such as the 1961 Jabalpur to 2002 Gujarat riots. Although there was a provision to take action against it, the police administration could not implement it due to political pressure or goodwill. Similar propaganda continued after the 1992 Babri Masjid incident. But it has been observed that the police administration has not been able to play a proper role in defending secularism which has had a negative impact on the common man. Some media outlets exaggerate the less important issues for their popularity and T.R.P to the general public. This is where the question arises about the positive role of the media. Political parties have played with the cards of religion with the vote bank in mind and are still doing the same thing to protect their own interests by putting religion first. At present, various political parties are trying to maintain their secular image, but their narrow political realities are emerging which is creating a crisis of values and secularism in the Indian democratic structure.

Here are three key points made by former Chief Justice of India PV Gajendra Gadhkar on secularism in India.

1. The state will not show respect to any religion separately.
2. 2) The state will not be anti-religion.
3. 3) Every religion must be treated with respect. But in many cases the Supreme Court of India has been unable to implement the numbers recognized in the Constitution of Secularism.

Rajiv Vargav is one of the most well-thought-out theorists in discussing secularism in the Indian context. There are three aspects of secularism in the Indian context.

1. Hyper substantive secularism- Religion and politics are completely separated
2. Ultra procedural secularism- value-neutral distinctions between religion and politics are made primarily in bureaucratic reasoning.
3. Contextual Secularism - The community is kept at a distance but the state and religion are not completely separated. Here the basic aspect of values is taken into consideration and no special privileges are given to any religious group. The Indian Constitution forbids the state from infiltrating the religious sphere while electing voters on the basis of religion etc. and demanding state intervention in some religious spheres. In this context he says contextual secularism is always guided by non section principle, feature consistent with a set of values constitutive of a life of equal dignity for all. Admittedly in recent time's sectarian consideration have become important as I accept and religion has entered politics where it should not have been allowed to do so, and excluded when much would have been achieved by inclusion. Get contacts wall securities I'm the only appropriate from of secularism in India.

According to Amartya Sen, in the Indian context, secularism is a comprehensive idea that recognizes the diversity and plurality of people of many languages, many colors and many religions. Criticizing conventional secularism, he said secularism is basically a demand for systemic political treatment of different religious communities; balanced political treatment can be achieved in rather disparate ways.

## VI. PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY AND SECULARISM IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is the fourth largest Muslim-populated country and the third-largest Muslim-majority nation in the world after India, Indonesia, and Pakistan. When Islam come Bangladesh from outside then it easily adapted to local culture and secularism. However, looking at the history of the next four decades of independence, it is clear that there are some problems with secularism. To understand Bangladesh's secular democracy and the two-pronged equation of religion and state, we must go back to the history of the nation's formation in the South Asian subcontinent. When the British liberated India, they strategically left two nation-states. The first was the year of secular India with a Hindu majority and the second was a semi-religious Pakistan with a Muslim majority. But the Muslim League's claim to separate territories was partly responsible for the geographical location of this new Pakistani nation. Although, the demand of the Muslim League was thwarted for the Indian Muslims. Even after partition, there are still about 150 million Muslims in India because they think that secular India is more secure for them than Pakistan. When military rule was introduced in Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh gained independence with the direct cooperation of India.

The four principles that were promulgated in the constitution of Bangladesh in 1971 were secularism, nationalism, socialism and democracy. But within four years of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman coming to power, a military coup took place in Bangladesh which created political instability in Bangladesh and hampered democracy and secular state structure. Later, the military ruler General Ziaur Rahman took over as the military ruler of Bangladesh. General Zia came to power through a military coup, so he



began to give direct or indirect support to extremist religious fundamentalists at home and abroad in his own power. What he did quickly after coming to power was to remove the two words socialism and secularism from the Bangladeshi constitution. During the military rule of Bangladesh, the neo-liberal states in the West became interested in investing money and at the same time, politically, the Islamic fundamentalist forces began to cooperate with these military rulers. In the same way, the next military ruler, Esharad, enlisted the help of religious fundamentalists to legitimize military rule.

Elections to the Democratic Parliament of Bangladesh were held on December 29, 2008, ending much-anticipated debate and uncertainty. After winning the election, the secular party Awami League formed a coalition government with the help of a small but leftist party, occupying 262 seats out of 300 and establishing a government with an absolute majority. This overwhelming majority of the Awami League surprised political experts. With this victory of Awami League, the political circles saw the victory of secularism. However, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party used religion against the Awami League very well in this election.

Khaleda Zia's BNP campaigned in this election. If the Awami League alliance comes to power after the election, the existence of Islam in Bangladesh will be endangered. However, in the aftermath of the vote, the people of Bangladesh were able to make it clear that there was no danger to the existence of Islam if the Awami League came to power. The BNP campaigned that if the secular Awami League came to power, India's dominance in South Asia would be established. India's sweet relationship with Awami League Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was distorted by the BNP.

Judging from the analytical point of view, it can be understood that religion plays a special role in the society of Bangladesh both spiritually and intellectually. However, at the state level, Bangladesh encouraged and accepted the formation of a secular state. However, many have said that the proposal to form Bangladesh was based on the consensus of all the multi-lingual and multi-religious people of Bangladesh at that time and the proposal to form a secular state was adopted for the purpose of gaining public support for the formation of Bangladesh. Moreover, they also had the support of the intelligentsia behind the Awami League, but not everyone wanted an Islamic state from a very orthodox Muslim point of view rather many people told in favour of secular state.

The Awami League re-emerged as a secular party in early 1950 through the efforts of two leaders, one of whom was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Other small secular groups are also included in this group. Through the War of Liberation in 1971, with the united efforts of Hindus and Muslims and with the help of India, the journey of Bangladesh as an independent state began after being liberated from the military Islamic rule of Pakistan. The goal of independent Bangladesh is to establish an independent secular state free from external control, which is why secularism is one of the most accepted principles of the Bangladeshi constitution. Although leftist intellectuals have strongly attacked secularism in Bangladesh, secularism in Bangladesh cannot be called real secularism. But an in-depth analysis reveals

that in most South Asian countries his idea of secularism is based on religious freedom. After the independence of Bangladesh, a number of Islamist parties were banned because they were accused of being involved in the anti-liberation struggle.

According to 1999 data, the total number of madrasah in Bangladesh is 640,000 out of which only 7122 madrasah are run with government grants and the rest are either through local grants or foreign grants.

According to the Daily Star, about 30 religious fundamentalist organizations are active in Bangladesh with the aim of establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh through jihad. However, the then Khaleda Zia government did not acknowledge its existence at the government level.

Bangladesh jamaat-e-islam never saw itself as a political party but their aim was to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic state through a larger social movement. Jamaat-e-islam is the oldest Islamic party in Bangladesh and has a good base of support. Islamic Unity took to the streets in protest of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, saying "we will be Taliban and Bangladesh will be Afghanistan."

In the 1996 elections, jamaat-e-islam won only three seats and most of the candidates' deposits were forfeited. But in this election they support the BNP so that the BNP can come to power as a single majority alliance. Needless to say, some intellectuals, government employees and some other sections of the society were behind the Jamaat's intelligence.

But since the Awami League came to power in the 2008 elections, religious fundamentalist politics has come down a lot, but how long it will last depends on the future. Because it is clear from decades of experience that the secular image of Bangladesh has put the democratic structure in the face of an invisible question mark. This invisible question mark is detrimental to both secularism and Islam in a democracy. However, standing now, it can be clearly said that the Awami League government will somehow represent Bangladesh at the international level as a secular state and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina should be applauded for its achievements.

## VII. CONCLUSION

One of the major problems of democracy in these two South Asian countries is the crisis of secularism, which political leaders are often reluctant to address due to narrow interests. Civil society can play a big role in overcoming this crisis. Civil society fails to play its rightful role in many cases. Perhaps South Asia will be more stable if we not only raise awareness but also think in the greater interest of real education and the religious narrow-mindedness of educated people. In this case, the media must also play their proper role in the interest of the people.

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