International Journal of New Media Studies (IJNMS), ISSN: 2394-4331
Volume 13 Issue 1, January-June, 2026, Impact Factor: 9.456

Role of Religion in Indian Politics: A Political Analysis

Dr. Chandrappa K

Associate Professor, Dept of Political Science, Sahyadri Arts College, Shivamogga, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the intricate relationship between religion and politics in India. Religion and politics have always been together. Religion and politics are neither new nor unique to India. Religion and politics have been entangled in every civilization. India is distinctive because it pursued a secular state inside a deeply religious society. Religion has played a major role in elections and political campaigns in India. Candidates often use religious rhetoric and symbols to appeal to voters. India's relationship with religion is very different from the West. It shapes everyday life. It influenced the national movement. Indian secularism is treating all religions equally and protecting the individual religious freedom. It affects the country's politics and its democracy. India has many religions and people have strong beliefs.

Keywords: religion, politics political, campaigns, movements, religious, and freedom

INTRODUCTION

Religion and politics stand in a paradoxical relationship with each other. In democracies, speculation comes to mean the separation of politics from religion, while it is difficult to assume that religion does not influence politics. In a country like India, religion is deep-rooted in the veins of our social fabric. Like caste, religion plays a significant role in the life of the people. We are born in a religion and it is seldom that we change it. Religion is found in our rituals, customs, conduct, behavior and times, in our activities, faith usually dominates more than rationalism. Secularism implies equal respect for all religions in the same measure as we have for our own. In our country, the liberty of 'belief, faith and worship', as enshrined in the constitution, has been implemented by incorporating the Fundamental Rights of all citizens to 'free of religion' vide Article 25-29. Secularism, as any theologian would tell us, lies at very root of all religions and faiths in this world

In no other country in the world, we do find the predominance of religion in political affairs, as we find it in India. Religious conflicts and communal skirmishes form an integral part of Indian history. "Research on voter turnout in the United States points to factors such as socioeconomic status, civic duty, and social networks that affect one's likelihood to vote in a given election; many of these factors can be found in or amplified by religious institutions" (Blais, André 2006) However, it would be wrong to assume that religious strife is a regional phenomenon, confined to the Indian subcontinent only. In fact, that is far from true. "Religion in politics covers various topics related to the effects of religion on politics. Religion has been claimed to be "the source of some of the most remarkable political mobilizations of our times"(Jelen, Ted G. 2002:1) Even a nation like united Kingdom witnesses bitter religious strife between the protestant and Catholics under the solitary banner of Christianity. Violence has often intruded preaching and preaching and practicing of a religion. But what makes the situation an entirely different one in India, is the simultaneous presence of so many religions in the land. In India, we find the pattern of a mini-world. Diverse religious sects, castes and sub-caste are existed hero together. Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, Bramho Samaj, Bahai faith and several other religions flourish here. As noted columnist, Charles Newton, rightly remarked "India is the real seat of spiritual perfection". In no other land do we find the peaceful coexistence of so many religions side by side. While the peaceful coexistence of so many religions has been a matter of pride for India. At the same time, it has been an impediment to larger progress, and unity of the nation. It has made the demographic situation within the country a unique and complex one.

In order to analyze the correlation between religion and politics. "Graham Fuller has argued for a broader notion of Islamism as a form of identity politics, involving "support for identity, authenticity, broader regionalism, revivalism, revitalization of the community"(Fuller, Graham E. (2003:21). It is imperative to trace the complexities of communal strife in India since the pre-Independence days. In their book Freedom at Midnight Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre give us a beautiful picture of the religious complexities existing in India since pre- independence days. It would be essential to remember that this work is basically a political reconstruction of the pre- independence days. We get a clear picture in the book, as to how Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated. We also come to know how the assassination was planned and executed by Nathuram Godse- a Hindu fundamentalist. In this political bestseller, Collins and Lapierrie try to trace clearly how the partition was planned and executed. In describing the political complexities of the nation, the authors devote

pages, describing the animosity prevalent between the two predominant religions- Hinduism and Islam. The difference between the two religions lays both in practicing and preaching even since pre-independence period, the communal strife within India has been primarily confined between these two regions.

It is true that earliest force of civilization was religion. In the West, it was religion, whether pagan or Christian, that consolidated the ideas of political sovereignty. In the East, it was religion again that provided the foundation of the state. The glorious structure of the ideal Hindu state or Ram Rajya was religious to the backbone. The ideas of the Islamic state in the imperialistic history of Islam, as distinguished from the domestic history of few ideal Muslin rulers, is nothing but the conquering sword of Islam dripping with the blood of the victims of the religion of Islam. For a time, religion was a necessity and a boon to keep people together within the organization of a state. But as fanaticism increased, the force of reason declined. Faith became corrupt, and religion became a source of discord and bloodshed. Some of the greatest wars of the world and the bloodshed massacres have been perpetrated in the name of the religion. The history of the middle Ages in Europe is a record of the havoc which religion played in the national and international fields. It was, therefore, found necessary that States should tear themselves away from the world- devouring force religion.

Relationship between religion and politics has existed in every society and in every age. Religion symbols, ideas and institutions have been used by rulers to perpetuate their control over the ruled. Clashes between opposing religions are also facts of history, religion factions within and between religions have dominated the course of history in every age and in all societies. As a result, "political scientists are divided on whether to consider it alongside other ethnic cleavages such as race, language, caste, and tribe, or whether to recognize it as a separate, special kind of political influence" (Wald, Kenneth D.2006:523). Like caste, religion works both ways, positively, it mobilizes people of the same faith, negatively, it constitutes sources of cleavage. Religion has assumed a special significance in the traditional societies of the third world countries in general and in multi-religious societies like ours in particular.

India is a land of multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual people with a plethora of castes and sub-caste. All the major religions in the country, viz, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism teach their followers to imbibe the love of truth, faith in God and love for all human beings. Yet our people have developed ethno-centric attitudes and peculiar spiritual attitudes regarding their own religion. Today, religion the opiate of the masses disintegrates people through communal violence and riots at the behest of political parties and their unscrupulous leaders. Religion as an ally of politics is fraught with danger. Thus, we cannot do without religion but something has to be done regarding the cancerous spread of communalism in the country. The 42nd Constitutional Amendment has proclaimed India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic Republic. In the Indian Context, secularism means equal respect for all religions. India does not have any Official Religion like Nepal (Hinduism) or the Islamic nations. The state does not interfere in any religious affairs. According to articles 25 of the Indian constitution, people have the freedom of conscience and are free to profess, practice and propagate religion. The Constitution thus upholds the unity of all religions, based on their moral precepts and humanistic teachings with the sole objective of building unity in diversity. This shows that India as secular state is either religious or anti- religious; it is completely detached from all religious dogmas. The irony, however, is that we are far from realization of this noble ideal of secularism both in thought and in our deeds.

In India's context, communalization of politics has been a byproduct of politicization of religion. The process began in 1909 when the British granted communal/ separate representation to the Muslim in India councils, leading ultimately to the communalization of politics before and after independence of India. Indeed, there were numerous religions before the advent of the British in India, but there were never communal conflicts. "Its power to transcend national boundaries. Religion is arguably the largest unit to which individuals claim loyalty (Islam claims roughly 1.5 billion adherents, Christianity roughly 2 billion – respectively 22% and 33% of the world's population)" (Grzymala-Busse, Anna 2012:421) The British, following their policy of 'divide and rule', exploited the differences to suit their imperialistic designs. They welcomed the formation of political parties based on religion. Thus were welcomed the Al, India Muslim league, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Akali Dal, Christian organizations. So were encouraged the communal representation in legislatures during the British rule. So was accepted the demand for a Muslim state and the country was partitioned in 1947. The entry of religion into politics communalized all political issues and when the country became independent, religion remained the significant factor but now as determining the electoral politics. Politics is now completely communalized, the state is declared secular but the society remains bases on religion as it is on caste . the electoral politics has made political parties and political leadership use religion as an instrument of politics, appeasing religious minorities and at the times communalizing politics.

Secularism aims at promoting mutual tolerance and respect among the multi-religious Indians. Religion, on the other hand, encourages communalism,

fundamentalism, secessionism, ruthless violence and rank casteism in a society that has assimilated several religions and strains of thought over the millennia. "It's demanding commitment by followers to a specific lifestyle, affecting dress codes, diets, political views religion proposes an alternative lifestyle defined by supernatural" forces (Stark R, Finke R. 2000). The British created an incurable rift between Hindus and Muslims that led to the partition of the sub-continent of 1947. The rift has widened since then. Today, Ram Janmabhoomi and Babri Masjid are there to speak of communal violence, the latest being the 1992-93 Mumbai riots. Further, the desecration of statues of leaders like Dr, B. R Ambedkar, persecution of Christian missionaries and the exploitation of minorities, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes- all these point to the sad fact that we are all drifting away from the ideal of secularism which aims at binding together the multi-racial, multi religious , multi-lingual and multi-ethnic social fabric of India. This is not; however, to say the working of secularism in India has always has been flawless and smooth. There is a growing feeling in the country that the functioning of secularism has suffered some setbacks. The factors and forces that have been working against the smooth working secularism can be counted very easily.

Communalization of politics and the politicization of religion stay in India. The communal riots on the eve of India's partition , in the wake of pre and post Indira Gandhi's assassination, the construction of ram Temple at Ayodha, the Gujarat riots, or the terroristic attacks engineered from across the borders are all example of communalization of politics. The politicization of religion is seen during elections and thereafter in the formation and running of governments. Though, a great number of political parties demonstrate a secular and non-religious outlook, some others stick on to their religious base. And yet, party manifestoes speak of the protection and promotion of religious and cultural minorities, party tickets are given on religious considerations, ministerial berths are distributed to accommodate certain religions.

In any traditional society as that of ours, the role of religion in our social life is always significant while it influences politics, despite our efforts to secularize. This can hardly be denied. Political leadership does not mind using religion for its political advantage.. political parties do not , at all, ignore the role of religion in their political activities and use it when it is to serve them. The fundamentalists use religion for their sectarian gains, at times to create dissension and promote terrorism. "Religious institutions often provide dense networks that help facilitate political mobilization, which helps explain why individuals who attend religious services frequently are more likely to vote in a given U.S. election" (Smith, Lauren E. 2012:399) Though, the Indian state claims to be secular, it does admit the presence of religion is the public domain. An individual is a citizen and yet he/ she is a person with a religion, for the former is an image in public and the latter, an image in private.as with a religion, an individual is free to profess and propagate and manage one's religion while the state assures him/ her of his/ her of his/ her religion and cultural identities. The state, in fact, does not intervene in his / her religion.

Ethnicity includes, among many other things, linguistic, nativist and religious affiliations. India's concept of a nation-state implied, immediately after independence, the accommodation of respective languages of numerous diversified areas as well as of regional and nativistic feelings, i.e., unity of diversities. The demand to accommodate numerous languages was not regarded as something anti-India or anti-national. It would have been suicidal for the leadership to have sought the imposition of one language over the people speaking different languages, though English language was, immediately after independence, the accepted official language for some times. Hindi was spoken in most regions of the country and that was why it was to be the national language in the future, yet the acceptance and encouragement of the regional were also considering befitting the needs of time.

The Indian national Congress had itself proclaimed during the 1920s that after independence, the country would be administratively demarcated on linguistic lines so as to promote and protect diversities. Depankar Gupta says: "It was that provincial boundaries thus delineated Indian soil". It would enhance greater participation at the lower levels and help in rooting democracy deep in Indian soil". This is why, he continues, "national parties had little ideological reluctant to enter each such the agitation for linguistic states". The demand for unlingual system satisfied the advocate of and bounded each such linguistic movement without damaging the linguistic state to the grill of national politics on the other. Gupta writes, "The entire polity through its segments was activated on single universal demand which principle did not do injustice to other constituent segment". From single universal principle he continues, "Several particularistic, even primordial, demand were satisfied ". The linguistic states formed in 1950s accommodated ethnicity as expressed in the concept of a host of languages 1960s. the "sons of soil" began to demand that they be given major economic benefits on the soil of their linguistic states without interference from people belonging to other linguistic communities, The Shiva Sena in Maharashtra and all Assam student Union in Assam were on ethnicity rather than linguistic reason. National political parties supported such movements to gain electoral allies, though particularize, in the process, came to be encouraged.

The Constitution itself has failed secularism because although articles 48 are couched in secular phrases, it has sanctioned a ban on cow-slaughter, which is a religious sentiment. The unchecked growth of fundamentalism among both, the Hindus and the Muslims, is posing a serious threat to secular character of our policy. Our political parties, including the national parties aid and abet communalism. They do not allow secularism to take precedence over their political interest or others tolerate communalism to retain power. Thus, all are guilty to some extent or other. Top-ranking leaders of the most secular political party of the country had openly led in 1984 ant-Sikh violence, killing thousands of innocent Sikhs by burning them alive in broad day –light and before the eyes of thousands of onlookers. And yet the party continues to claim that it is the standard –bearer of Gandhian values of Ahimsa and non-violence. The main reason for the collapse of the national front Government in October 1990 was the Ramjanma Bhoomi- Babri Masjid issues. Religious zeal on the part of the leadership of another national party had almost rocked the V.P Singh Government. There are several overt and covert ways through which secularism is being diluted. Performance of religious rights and rituals at official functions, misuse of media for propagation of anti-secular material are undermining the very foundations of a secular polity including official.

India is a land of diverse region. Regional identities, naturally, constitute one of the ethnic elements of our politics. To accommodate regionalism does not amount to accommodating separatism. The ideas of federalism is not unionization of regional disparities, it is rather the acceptance, protection and promotion of diversities as part of the national whole. The rise of the Akali Dal in Punjab, the Dravida Mannetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagan(AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Telagu Desam in Andra Pradesh are examples of regional identities seeking not only recognition but also their protection and promotion as well. Rising almost initially to demand separation, these political parties have settled down to seeking regional identity and regional autonomy under the Indian Union. These regional political parties associated themselves with one or the other national political parties to support them at the national level and enjoy power at the level in the name of regional identity.

CONCLUSION

The concept of nation-state accepts the ideas of regional identity and to that extent accommodates regional autonomy without damaging the Nation's sovereignty. To conclude, secularism is the dire need of the hour for uplifting the nation from the abyss of religious myths and beliefs and waging a united war of all the people as well as political parties against the cancer of communalism and other social evils hindering our country's development and progress. Even though the task appears daunting, the present generation must strive towards moulding the mass opinion and evolve a truly secular and democratic India. Our ultimate aim should be to prove to the world that secularism has nothing to do with religion.

REFERENCES

Blais, André (15 June 2006) "What Affects Voter Turnout?". Annual Review of Political Science. 9:

Esmer, Yilmaz; Pettersson, Thorleif (2 September 2009). "The Effects of Religion and Religiosity on Voting Behavior". The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior. Oxford University Press.

Fuller, Graham E. (2003) The Future of Political Islam. Palgrave MacMillan.

Grzymala-Busse, Anna (15 June 2012) "Why Comparative Politics Should Take Religion (More) Seriously". Annual Review of Political Science. 15:

Jelen, Ted G. (2002) Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective. Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Lauren E.; Walker, Lee Demetrius (1 May 2012) "Belonging, Believing, and Group Behavior". Political Research Quarterly. 66 (2):

Stark R, Finke R. 2000). Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wald, Kenneth D.; Wilcox, Clyde (2006) "Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor?". American Political Science Review.