

Indian Freedom Fighters and Secularism

Vikas Nain

Assistant Professor, History, CMRJ Govt College Mithi Sureran Ellenabad (India)

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ABSTRACT

British empire ruled for about 200 years over India. They first entered in small part of India and then slowly-slowly spread their roots all over the world. They were very cruel to Indians. The first revolution against British Raj was observed in Merrut where Mangal Pandey opposed the rules of British Raj. Although, this revolution could not get much intensity and was controlled by the British Government. But, a certain fire to get independence was evolved in every Indian and in 19th century there came many freedom fighters who fought for the independence of the country. The freedom fighters like Sardar Patel, Mahatma Gandhi and Mullana Azad etc. were very keen to spread pure secularism all over India. All the freedom fighters were in favor of secularism. The current article highlights the role of Indian freedom fighters in secularism.

1. Introduction

The freedom fighters of each and every religion took part in this fight against British Raj. Some of these freedom fighters are Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Chander Shekhar Azad, Mullana Azad, Mahatma Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak etc. Thus, we can say that people from every religion participated in the journey of India's independence from British Raj. There was much more unity among the people of India of every religion as the major goal of each and every person was to get freedom.

British Government tried many times to make differences between Hindu and Muslims in the country and the freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi and Mullana Azad tried to get the confidence of people of India not to get influenced by the divide and rule policy of British Raj. But, at the end, all things went into vain when a trinity was established to divide India in two parts i.e. India and Pakistan.

Hindu and Muslim people could not control themselves and a majority of violence was carried out during migration. After independence, when constitute of free India was made then the main point was establishment of secularism in India i.e. people of each and every religion with proper identity can live in any part of India without any interruption. This can be said the victory of all freedom fighters who fought for the independence of the country and secularism.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee is a convenient starting point, with his *Vande Mataram* song and mantra that inspired generations of freedom fighters from all sections of Indian society—even some Muslims, as is little known but well documented at the time of the 1905 Partition of Bengal. There is nothing “secular” about India's national song, even after the verses invoking Mother India as *Durga* and *Lakshmi* were chopped off. Nor about Bal Gangadhar Tilak's revival of Ganesh Chaturthi, which proved to be effective in awakening nationalistic feelings cutting across caste barriers. In a 1906 speech at Varanasi, he said, “By the grace of Providence we shall ere long be able to

consolidate all the different sects into a mighty Hindu nation. This ought to be the ambition of every Hindu.” At the same time, few leaders worked for Hindu-Muslim unity as much as Tilak. The same caveat applies to Sri Aurobindo (then known as Aurobindo Ghosh), who famously stated in his 1909 Uttarpara speech upon release from a year-long imprisonment in the Alipore Jail, “I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is the *Sanatana Dharm* which for us is nationalism.” Or to Bipin Chandra Pal: “This ‘*Mother*’ in ‘*Bande-Mataram*’ ... applied the old, the sacred, the dearly-beloved term, to a new concept, that of the Motherland. Through this salutation has come into being a new cult in the land, the cult of patriotism.”

This concept of Indian nationalism, for we must now distinguish the term from Western brands of nationalism, was shared by more stalwarts of the time, such as Lala Lajpat Rai or Subramania Bharati, the latter composing high poetry turning the cult of the motherland into *bhakti*. Our modern intellectuals and historians have often accused all these leaders of having “communalised” the Indian freedom movement (of course turning a blind eye to the communalisation of Muslim politics). However, building an exclusively “Hindu nation” was never their intention. As Sri Aurobindo put it in 1908, “The new [Nationalism] overleaps every barrier; it calls to the clerk at his counter, the trader in his shop, the peasant at his plough; ... it seeks out the student in his College, the schoolboy at his book, it touches the very child in its mother's arms. ... It cares nothing for age or sex or caste or wealth or education or respectability; ... it spurns aside the demand for a property qualification or a certificate of literacy. It speaks to the illiterate or the man in the street in such rude vigorous language as he best understands, to youth and the enthusiast in accents of poetry, in language of fire, to the thinker in the terms of philosophy and logic, to the Hindu it repeats the name of Kali, the Mahomedan it spurs to action for the glory of Islam. It cries to all to come forth, to help in God's work and remake a nation, each with what his creed or his culture, his

strength, his manhood or his genius can give to the new nationality.

2. Indian Freedom Fighters and Secularism

Indian nationalism is thus not about "Hinduism" but about acknowledging the cultural foundations of Indian civilization. As Subhash Chandra Bose put it, "Indian nationalism is neither narrow, nor selfish, nor aggressive. It is inspired by the highest ideals of the human race, viz., **Satyam** (the true), **Shivam** (the good), **Sundaram** (the beautiful). Nationalism in India has instilled into us truthfulness, honesty, manliness and the spirit of service and sacrifice. ... Even at the risk of being called a chauvinist, I would say to my countrymen that India has a mission to fulfil and it is because of this that India still lives."

Amongst the developing countries, India is famed by its commitment to secularism as the guiding force of state policy and action. The conception of secularism in India is not just a trophy won by some intellectual group. It has been acquired by paying the price of flesh and blood, through the martyrdom and sacrifices of our freedom fighters. Further, the sacrifices of countless known and unknown Indians, who stood up for a secular nationhood at critical moments in India's history. India's secularism is not just quantitative but also qualitative.

Even though modern-day secularism has been imported from the western democracy, its roots can be found in Akbar's court, or in Shivaji's army. There are countless instances where India stood for secularism in the past.

As Gandhi ji says: "*Hindustan belong to all those who are born and bred here and who have no other country to look to. Therefore, it belongs to Parsis, Beni Israels, to Indian Christians, Muslims and other non-Hindus as much as to Hindus. Free India will be no Hindu raj, it will be India raj based not on the majority of any religious sect or community but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion.*"

This was the definition of nationalism for which the Mahatma was shot dead by a terrorist, who was the member of a fundamentalist organisation. Our founding fathers were not keen to design a new India on the lines of religion like Pakistan – they knew such an approach would fail. Because the religion has this stupendous tendency to get offended with everything and anything. One can cross-check it by just looking at countries which had been or is being governed by religion. Many of them are failed states. The only way a nation of diverse faiths like India can survive is to be governed by logic and scientific laws.

No one can paint this multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-regional, multi-faith land into one colour. Because it is just not in the nature of humans to live in a stagnant mode; we are bound to intermingle because humans love diversity. For example, religion-based festivals are not something you choose. But in a country like India, one can celebrate Eid as well as Holi. This very nature will make you secular, while religion will only make you work on a predetermined set of rules.

Secularism as practiced in India, with its marked differences with Western practice of secularism, is a controversial topic in India. Supporters of the Indian concept of secularism claim it respects a Muslim person's religious rights and recognizes that they are culturally different from Indians of other religions. Supporters of this form of secularism claim that any attempt to introduce a uniform civil code, that is equal laws for every citizen irrespective of his or her religion, would impose majoritarian Hindu sensibilities and ideals, something that is unacceptable to Muslim Indians. Opponents argue that India's acceptance of Sharia and religious laws violates the principle of equal human rights, discriminates against Muslim women, allows unelected religious personalities to interpret religious laws, and creates plurality of unequal citizenship; they suggest India should move towards separating religion and state.

The Morley-Minto reforms provided separate electorate to Muslims, justifying the demands of the Muslim league.

3. Discussion

In the first half of 20th century, the British Raj faced increasing amounts of social activism for self-rule by a disparate groups such as those led by Hindu Gandhi and Muslim Jinnah; the colonial administration, under pressure, enacted a number of laws before India's independence in 1947, that continue to be the laws of India in 2013. One such law enacted during the colonial era was the 1937 Indian Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, which instead of separating state and religion for Western secularism, did the reverse.

It, along with additional laws such as Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act of 1939 that followed, established the principle that religious laws of Indian Muslims can be their personal laws. It also set the precedent that religious law, such as sharia, can overlap and supersede common and civil laws, that elected legislators may not revise or enact laws that supersede religious laws, that people of one nation need not live under the same laws, and that law enforcement process for different individuals shall depend on their religion. The Indian Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act of 1937 continues to be the law of land of modern India for Indian Muslims, while parliament-based, non-religious uniform civil code passed in mid-1950s applies to Indians who are Hindus (which includes Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Parsees), as well as to Indian Christians and Jews.

Secularism in India, thus, does not mean separation of religion from state. Instead, secularism in India means a state that is neutral to all religious groups. Religious laws in personal domain, particularly for Muslim Indians, supersede parliamentary laws in India; and currently, in some situations such as religious indoctrination schools the state partially finances certain religious schools. These differences have led a number of scholars to declare that India is not a secular state, as the word secularism is widely understood in the West and elsewhere; rather it is a strategy for political goals in a nation with a complex history, and one that achieves the opposite of its stated intentions.

Nehru's India was supposed to be committed to 'secularism'. The idea here in its weaker publicly reiterated form was that the government would not interfere in 'personal' religious matters and would create circumstances in which people of all religions could live in harmony. The idea in its stronger, unofficially stated form was that in order to modernise, India would have to set aside centuries of traditional religious ignorance and superstition and eventually eliminate Hinduism and Islam from people's lives altogether.

4. Conclusion

After Independence, governments implemented secularism mostly by refusing to recognise the religious pasts of Indian nationalism, whether Hindu or Muslim, and at the same time (inconsistently) by retaining Muslim 'personal law'.

The first view argues the state be equidistant from all religions – refusing to take sides and having a neutral attitude towards them. The second view insists that the state must not have any relation at all with any religion. In both interpretations, secularism goes against giving any religion a privileged position in the activities of the state. Sen argues that the first form is more suited to India, where there is no demand that the state stay clear of any association with any religious matter whatsoever. Rather what is needed is to make sure that in so far as the state has to deal with different religions and members of different religious communities, there must be a basic symmetry of treatment.

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