

Attack on Indian Secularism

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In the wake of the Godhra massacre and subsequent riots in Gujarat, we are witnessing an elaborate blame-game among Indian journalists and commentators. Attack on secularists by the BJP led Gujarat government, their VHP supporters and the local Gujarati press was expected. They have been joined by several 'patriotic' commentators like M.V. Kamath, Balbir Punj and others writing in the English national dailies and of course the NRIs on the Internet.

All these worthies refer to liberal minded intellectuals as pseudo-secularists, phoney intellectuals, and hypocrites. The approach adopted by the secularists is viewed as an encouragement to Islamic extremism as well as a factor directly contributing to the festering of Hindu-Muslim violence in Gujarat. It is pathetic that instead of holding governments of past and present to account for their inability to control riots and terrorist acts in the country, the intellectuals and journalists have resorted to their old favourite sport: the blame-game.

If the Gujarat government had pursued and punished the perpetrators of the Godhra carnage swiftly, it would have arrested subsequent riots. There would not have been any secularist backlash even if it involved arrests of hundreds of Muslims suspected of violence. The bottomline is that the

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government has failed to protect its citizens, whether they are minorities in Kashmir or minorities in Gujarat.

India did not become secular democracy by accident. Nor was democracy imposed by the departing British on their colonial subjects. Secular democracy was the vision of our freedom fighters and all the



progressive political parties of pre-independence India. It was the best, most logical and correct policy for the new state to follow given the multi-culturally embedded Indian society. Only religious parties like the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and such others found no use for secular values.

Secular democratic values served India well at home and abroad for the first two decades after independence. But after the split in the Congress engineered by Indira and due to ascendancy of regional parties and regional power brokers, Indian secularism weakened and it has not recovered since. Also the International Islamist terrorism of last two decades has badly ruptured the secular fabric of Indian Republic. The ideology of secularism is also wrongly blamed for policies such as reservations, vote bank politics, insistence of Muslims to stick to their own "personal laws", and other gripes of minority pampering. It is in this vein that the critics allege that secularists have failed to criticise the plight of Kashmiri Pundits and their forced migration from Kashmir. For this, in my view, the blame again lies with the past and present central governments. No amount of criticism by secularists or even a signed petition by all the secularists put together to ISI or Osama bin Laden would have helped Kashmiri Pundits and other minorities of Jammu and Kashmir.

Cynical though it may sound, it is realistic to think that more than secularist politics, actions of the Kashmiri Pundits and their Hindu nationalist supporters such as carrying out armed raids by their own underground organisations across Pakistan or the hijacking of Pakistan Airlines or kidnapping some high-profile Pakistanis would have worked better in bringing the world's attention to the plight of the Pundits. Why the champions of Hindu nationalism never got into any such action, is a fact worth pondering over. For, in the event of their organising such an action, the government could also have supported them through promoting and assisting the Mohajirs, Shiaites and other Pakistani minorities to organise armed insurgencies against the Pakistani Government.

Of course, while doing this it would have strongly condemned and totally dissociated itself from such actions of Hindu extremists. Such are the games modern, sophisticated states play—including of course some not-so-modern states in our own neighbourhood. It could even be argued that by encouraging the out-migration of Kashmiri Muslims (like what Bangladesh has been doing to its minorities) and by inducing non-Kashmiri Indians to populate the Kashmir valley (like what the Chinese state has been doing in its minority-populated areas) the governments could have prevented the spread of Hindu chauvinism in the country. Besides Pakistan, the other Muslim countries such as Sudan and Iran, who played a part in the ethnic cleansing of Kashmir, also need to be dealt with. If the Indian state had any strategy in this regard, it has been a well-kept secret. All that the Kashmiri Pundits and their supporters were encouraged to do was adopt a 'peaceful' method of breast-beating

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and self-pitying and the internationally respectable action of presenting their case in front of the U.S. senate!

This inability of governments to deal effectively with Pan-Islamic communal assaults on India's secular democracy resulted in a diffusion of Hindu communal sentiments, marked by an impotent rage, all over the country. This collective sense of political impotency has now assumed a fascist dimension in Gujarat, but there is no guarantee of other regions remaining immune to this virulent virus. Thus seen, the growth of Hindu fascism is an outcome of the abysmal failure of the Indian State to protect its citizens, a blame, which is now being 'credited' to the secularist-intellectuals' account.

The other main reason for the hatred of secularism and secularists by the Indian (more particularly

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Gujarati) middle-classes is that they equate secularism with leftist politics. Interestingly, many secularist-intellectuals, though great promoters of statism, have discouraged the Indian state from assuming a proactive role in combating the terrorism which often comes to India in a pan-Islamic, communal garb. Secularism is, however, a concept autonomous of leftism. Left-secularist policies as practiced earlier by the Janata Dal and today by some state-governments have in fact given rise to reverse communalism. They, for example, promoted caste-communalism (Mandalism) as an antidote to Hindu-communalism which in their view is the only dangerous form of communalism. In fact they are convinced that the only form communalism can take in India is Hindu communalism.

A case can be made that, the root of present riots in Gujarat lies in the anti-reservations agitations of the 1980's which culminated in communal strife and riots. Gujarat's upper caste-middle class launched a frontal attack against reservations in 1980s, to retrieve the political dominance they had lost in the Gujarat society during the emergence of KHAM politics in the decade of the 1970's. This period saw the consolidation of the OBCs, Dalits, Tribals and Muslims within the Congress fold. This strategy however failed as the grip of non-*dwijas* continued, rather was strengthened, within the Congress party and in larger politics as they became more unified through the anti-reservations movement. And when their politics of regaining hegemony through anti-Reservations movement was frustrated the Gujarati upper caste-middle class deflected the movement by targeting the Muslims. Anytime there is collective political frustration and social unrest experienced by the

Hindu middle-class, the anger is directed against the religious minorities.

The other main gripe of enemies of secularism is the Muslim personal law. The practice of applying *Sharia* laws of the sixth century hurts Muslims more than others. This is an issue they have to sort out among themselves. Pray enlighten, how many Hindus practice Hindu property division law that treats man and woman equally?

Many critics have blamed vote bank politics for the predicament in which India finds itself now. In all democracies, political parties create and nurture vote blocks for their benefit. India is no exception. Without the Ayodhya issue, BJP and its supporters were in political wilderness for decades. VHP and its supporters today do not have any issue other than building more temples at other 'disputed sites'. The so called secularist parties, more precisely the castist-Left parties are equally 'issueless'. But they find the rhetoric of secularism very useful for hiding their real political agenda i.e., securing and maintaining power through collaborating with forces representing crime, corruption and casteism in society.

It is true that a large section of the population is disillusioned at the way in which secularism is practiced by the Indian state since Independence. It has been a policy of alternating appeasement of the majority and the minority, practised at the detriment of the basic values by which a modern state is expected to function. But is making India a *Hindu rashtra* an answer? Imagine India *sans* secular democracy. The Indian Republic would not have lasted beyond a decade after independence had it been formed as a Hindu Republic. In that eventuality, the Sikhs would have

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certainly got their own homeland and the Christian minorities forced to migrate in disenchantment to western countries or wherever they found refuge. A large number of Muslims—manifolds larger than the number which left India during and soon after partition—would have been forced to leave the country or demand many more partitions. What kind of blue print for governance would this religious state have had for the Hindus? It is difficult to imagine, for there is no such precedent in history of such a state in India. All Hindu rulers of past were neither theocratic nor secular in the modern sense. But they did practise tolerance for religions other than their own. If however one thinks that this *Hindu rashtra* would have become some kind of a liberal democracy, he or she lives in a fool's paradise. This new nation would have copied the next-door Islamic Republic of Pakistan in all aspects. Leadership of this theocratic state would have naturally fallen in

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the hands of our sadhus, sants and babas of all kinds. Business classes of the Hindu society could not have asserted any power. Nor this nation would have produced ethos favourable to the growth of a warrior class dear to the *hindutvavadi* imagination, a class that would defend the territorial integrity of the *Hindu rashtra*. Look at RSS, VHP and Sangh Parivar leadership of today. Do they have any agenda either to enrich the worldly life of their Hindu followers or any ability to protect national sovereignty? If they were at the helm the universities would have been exclusively teaching the *dharmastras* and astrology to their students and places of higher learning been cleansed of all foreign sciences and philosophies. As it is we are now witnessing consequences similar to those of the Islamic revolution in Iran. But it seems the *Sanghis* envy the Iranians for having beat them to a religious revolution. On a more serious note, do the citizens of any country governed by religious forces, enjoy even a reasonable degree of individual freedom and prosperity? Prosperity and freedom in modern times, whether one likes it or not, is associated with and ensured by the functioning of secular and democratic institutions of the state. For example, the moment George Bush heeds advice of Christian fundamentalists in matters other than religion, the WAPS hegemony in America, and the American hegemony in the world would be finished. Sooner the Hindu nationalists realise that it is secular democracy and not *hindutva* that would secure the Indian nation-state for the Hindus, better will it be for them as well as for rest of us— Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Isai and Secularists! □

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