

# Gandhi, Secularism and Shudra Politics

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## ABSTRACT

**Gandhi's approaches are anti-untouchability, and bear the potentiality to be, in very different ways, anti-caste. He believed in Sarva Dharma Sambhaav which can be termed as secularism. Gandhiji's secularism was based on a commitment to the brotherhood of religious communities based on their respect for and pursuit of truth. Gandhi preached his ideals of secularism and religious tolerance across the length and breadth of the country. Gandhi's view, the state should be secular to promote sociability and fraternity among communities. Indian secularism is a positive secularism where all religion enjoys equal status.**

**Key words: anti-untouchability, Hinduism, secularism, Brahminical, communalism and programme**

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## INTRODUCTION

Gandhi was highly programmatic. The validity of a programme is strictly time-bound. You can carry on with the thoughts which were valid in the last century or the last half century. But you cannot repeat the programmes which were grandly effective fifty years ago. So it is silly to be a Gandhian. The liberal secularist and Gandhi's approaches are anti-untouchability, and bear the potentiality to be, in very different ways, anti-caste. It is a 'secular' government, that is, it is not a theocratic government, rather, and it does not belong to any particular religion. Gandhi's position on religion and politics was very clear - he believed in Sarva Dharma Sambhaav which can be termed as secularism.

The ideological paradigm of Gandhi was extremely thin and consisted of some absolute values like truth and nonviolence. In order to talk about a Gandhian approach to things, one has to do such a lot of reconstruction that any two interpreters of Gandhi must differ from one another. If they do not differ, they are not to be taken seriously.

The problem of communalism appeared before Gandhi in the form of a task: that of Hindu-Muslim unity. Hindus and Muslims are two religious communities. They were to be taken as such, and unified so that the Indian nation would emerge strong and viable. This has to be contrasted with the present-day secularist approach.

Gandhi hardly used words like "secular" and "secularism". He did not also encourage the concept of "minorities". It is only in the post-1947 era that Nehru popularized the "secular" idea in collaboration with socialists and communists. Strangely, the Christians and Muslims, because they looked upon Nehru as the saviour of the English language and minorities' interests, clung to the banner of secularism. To them secularism gave the impression that to be religious was not a bad thing for the non-Hindus. The Hindu secularists almost said: "Look, we are running down our religion. So you (non-Hindus) can feel safe with us". Such an irresponsible use of the secularist idea has distorted the Hindus. It has titillated Hindu intolerance and fuelled non-Hindu conservatism. Had the secularists been honest in their creed, they would have given rise to a new ethics of public life and private living of those who came under its influence. The pity is that secularism in India has not been able to elaborate a code of behaviour. "Babas" and God-men frequent the inner chambers of many a secularist politician.

Secularism has worked better when it is joined with socialist and communist movements. There it becomes a way of life and acquires a morality. The communists of Kerala and West Bengal have contributed to the containment of communalism in those states. But Nehruvian secularism, that is, Congress secularism, is hollow. In recent years, socialist and communist movements have been eroded even from their bases. Mere secularism, unaided by a revolutionary faith, will be unable to prevent the growth of BJP-like forces.

Ridiculously, Indian secularism has been a reaction to growing communalism. The real function of secularism is not to give ground for communalism to grow. And that is what Gandhi achieved in his time.

Gandhi was undoubtedly a socialist. But his approach to the communal problem was, as already stated, religious. He appealed to the two levels of the Indian consciousness: the religious and the nationalist. Unlike the secularists who suspect religion to be a source of communal politics, Gandhi arrogated to himself the status of a religious leader. As a

symbol of Hindu religion, he stood head-and-shoulder above the “Babas” and Shankaracharyas of his day. He perhaps could not weaken Muslim communalism, but his success was one hundred per cent in reducing the political power of Hindu communalism to almost a zero. Hindu Mahasabha leaders like Savarkar and Munje paled into insignificance because they could exploit neither the Hindu consciousness nor the nationalist consciousness of the people. It is only after the Partition was agreed to and the leadership of the Congress had passed from the hands of Gandhi that Hindu communalist politics could raise its voice with some confidence.

The negligible strength of the Hindu communalist politicians in Gandhi’s time could be attributed, by a section of our intellectuals, to the spread of Western education and modernization, thereby discounting the Gandhi factor. Was not secularism the inevitable companion of Westernization? The fact is that Western education and modernization are much more widespread today, and still communal politics is growing by leaps and bounds.

What was the Gandhi factor, then? What was the rationale behind the religious reform approach? Every old religion has a history of revolt against orthodoxy and establishment. But, in the case of Hinduism, the revolt is almost in-built. No other organized religion is so much decentralized and pluralistic. There are no Popes and Imams and fixed scriptures. Devout Hindus often do not know what a Shankaracharya is. Gandhi maintained that every Hindu had the right to interpret the scriptures. When a revolt of this kind is widespread and consolidated, it results in a regeneration of the people. Such regenerations have occurred in the long history of India on numerous occasions. At times, the revolt and regeneration are confined to a small region or a segment of the population. It needs to be examined if all or most of the brighter periods of Indian history were somehow linked with movements of religious dissent, that is, dissent against the Brahminical order. It is also doubtful if India or any part of it made spectacular progress when the Brahminical order was intact and unquestioned.

Gandhi was placed at a historically advantageous position. He had been preceded by a long line of pioneers dating almost from the Bhakti period. The banner against the Brahminical order was already flying high when he entered public life in India. His immediate predecessor was Swami Vivekananda. Gandhi consolidated about three centuries of religious dissent, and tried to make it a part of the Congress culture. This was something like the “cultural revolution” inside the freedom struggle. After the attainment of Independence, the Congress rulers frittered away its gains because they never had grasped the essence of the Gandhian approach to rebuilding India. Nevertheless, the centuries-old religious dissent has reappeared in another form now.

Most observers missed the drama underlying the UP assembly elections of 1993. After 6 December 1992 till the election, the secularists, especially the Communist, Janata, and Congress parties, had turned panicky. Communists frequently declared that they were ready to join hands with Congress in order to prevent BJP from coming to power. A perusal of the newspapers of 1993 will confirm this. While BJP’s victory was considered imminent in UP, it was expected that the jump from UP to Delhi would be a short one. The secularists heaved a sigh of relief when the results came. BJP had lost, not because of the secularists’ performance, but as a result of the SP-BSP alliance. The alliance was the culmination of the anti-Brahminical upsurge in north India during 1990-1993. The Rath Yatra and the Shudra power both emanated from the Mandal debate representing the two contending forces of Hinduism.

Hindu communalism is the politics of those who have a vested interest in the Brahminical order. So long as there is an active political force based on the anti-Brahminical movements, communal politics will not achieve its final triumph. Nobody knows this truth better than the BJP alliance. The alliance of course was foredoomed because its leaders were casteists and opportunists. They were not sincere to the cause of social equality. Had it been their goal, they would have extended the alliance to the social plane.

On the contrary, Mulayam Singh encouraged his kinsmen to persecute the Dalits of UP, and Kanshi Ram played into the hands of the BJP. BJP, no doubt, is the only dynamic party now in the political mainstream of India. But before it can fulfill its desire to rule India, it has a few obstacles to overcome. First of all, it must be able to foil all attempts at uniting the Shudra and Dalit forces at the political and social levels. Right now the task does not seem to be stupendous because the Shudra and Dalit forces are being led by fragile men who can be easily manipulated by BJP strategists. The BJP may itself prefer to undertake a programme of socio-religious reform in order to lure the backwards into its fold. That only underscores the point in question, that Hinduism has an internal weapon against communalism. Gandhi had wielded that weapon.

Nationalism, in the sense that patriotism is coterminous with the nation-state, was a political consequence of colonialism in the Afro-Asian countries. In order to struggle against imperialism, the colonies had to arouse themselves in the format of nation-states. Historically there was no escape. Gandhi was deeply aware of the shortcomings of the nation-state idea. But he made the fullest use of it. The advantage with nationalism is that it has a strong emotional appeal in times of crisis. The Indian people’s vulnerability to the nationalist appeal prepared them mentally to accept the idea of a composite culture. So the Indian experience is that nationalism weakens communalism.

The top layer of the educated class in India may complacently think that the people cannot see the insult to the nation inherent in the policy of globalization of the economy. True, the people cannot see. But they can feel and they will respond if a proper lead is given. The small gesture to scrap the Enron agreement has aroused an astonishing degree of support from the public, although the latter is unable to understand the technical intricacies of the deal. Ironically, the public also does not understand that the rulers who want the ouster of Enron will be ready to substitute another MNC in its place. Be that as it may, the public mood in the Enron debate is an indicator of what colossal response there would be if a major political front like the NF-LF had the courage and conviction to demand a total scrapping of the so-called economic reforms. If there is any nationalist programme that would appeal to the people in the future, it is the programme of liberation from economic enslavement and external debt.

The BJP would not undertake it because its nationalism is limited to questions that touch Islam. If the Swadeshi Jagaran is extended beyond wall writings, then the temple programme will suffer. That is the BJP's dilemma. The tragedy is that amongst the mainstream political parties, BJP alone presents a nationalist image. There is a stupid section among the secularists which equates nationalism with Hindu chauvinism just because BJP calls itself nationalist. The greater stupidity is the belief that communalism can be defeated by denouncing communalism. That is what Indian secularism has been doing these days: denouncing the marching steps of communalism. Secularism will be effective when it is able to project an alternative focus for the people's emotional loyalty. If it has no use for religion and if it is afraid of becoming nationalist, then what remains? Secularism is reduced to minoritism.

### **CONCLUSION**

Gandhi as a mass leader and his inclusion of religious politics and religious vocabulary in the Indian national movement. Already in the early 20th century, Gandhi argued Brahmacharya (abstinence) to be integral to spiritualized politics. In Gandhi's political philosophy, religion occupies a unique position. Gandhi's secularism was almost a political stage to universalize religion, inconsistent in that he meant to go beyond the invincible prevaricate of privatization by making religion deeply individualized. The liberal secularist and Gandhi's approaches are anti-untouchability, and bear the potentiality to be, in very different ways, anti-caste.

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