

Is Secularism a Fairytale?

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Ideally secularism advocates the separation of the authority and organization of religion from the authority and organization of politics. Religion and politics are twinned in numerous ways even where the two are constitutionally de-linked, as in countries like the U.S.A., Canada, India and Turkey. In communist countries, of course, religious authority is restrained by political authority. Socratic irony lies in the fact that in countries such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and England, countries where constitutional linkages exist between the Church and the State, secular values are more prevalent in every day practice and norm.

The idea of secularism provokes widespread cynicism nowadays. Religion and the commitment to the sacred are more alive than ever before. Governments are either accused of fundamentalism at one extreme, or “minorityism” (pandering to the sentiments of minorities) at the other. There is skepticism about secular pretensions of governments across the world. But there is no doubt that secularization as an evolutionary process has come a long way so that the dominant principles which govern society are increasingly humanitarian and rational. New findings in science and technology are used for everyday well being, and increasingly the citizen has freedom of expression in the arts and faith, freedom from authoritarian relationships, freedom of choice of representatives in governance, and in general, freedom to make life choices.

The post-modern celebration of many faiths, traditions and cultures is only possible in a secular society. But these celebrations also create conflict between communities and between the individual and the community. Revolution in communication technology disseminate religious values, with conflicting notions of morality, faster than the new values which pull towards a secular society. The ancient sacred symbols are deeply embedded in society and are, of course, easier to recall than the newly emergent ideals of secularism.

Multiculturalism and minorityism (a word which seems peculiar to India and is not there in the dictionary) are humane impulses. However, the contexts in which they become divisive and create intolerance between communities need to be examined, especially since the dark side of these humane impulses is the politics of vote banks. There are many man made obstacles to secularist ideals, and much that the governments can learn from across national borders from mistakes/success in dealing with diversities. However, “the politics of recognition” of *difference* has its own momentum. The presentation will illustrate with some of the trends in coping with religious and ethnic minorities in different countries.

At one end of the spectrum is the French variety of secularism. The French Revolution and the Declaration of Human Rights is probably the defining moment for secularists. The 200 year old battle against religious authority continues even today. A Secularism Law passed in France in 2004 prohibits wearing “conspicuous” signs of belonging to a religion in state funded schools, and those employed in hospitals and government offices, etc. The Sikh turban, the Muslim hijab, the Christian cross, the Jewish yarmulkes/skull caps are banned in specified places. One would think that encounter and

familiarity with such diverse symbols has the potential for increasing tolerance and thereby secularism. The policy dilemma seems to lie in the fact that symbols can also convey messages of confrontation.

At the other end of the spectrum is the multicultural policy in many countries. While protecting the culture of communities, multiculturalism has the potential of hurting the individual's secular interests as a citizen. Moreover, multicultural policies in the context of ghetto neighborhoods, lack of shared spaces for communication and interaction between communities, are certainly not conducive to the emergence of secular values and identities.

In conclusion, two ideas are put forward for strengthening the secular society.

First, a vigorous and active National Secular Society on the lines of the one in Great Britain could enable reflection and awareness of secularism as a value. The National Secular Society in Britain is an aggressive watch dog on issues of secularism both situational and at the policy level. It must be especially noted that the National Secular Society in Britain does not promote minorityism. To illustrate, when policies were floated by some employers in Britain to recognize the religious beliefs of employees by allowing festival holidays and prayer breaks, the National Secular Society was quick to block the move by raising the question as to who will cover for the employees who are at prayer and celebrate festivals? This, of course, becomes a clinching issue in a country where there is no disguised unemployment.

Minorityism may even be a reflection of fairly healthy level of infused secularism extant in society today. A National Secular Society could, therefore, additionally play a strong advocacy role by taking on root cause issues, such as policies for the integration of second generation migrants, issues of gentrification of ghettos, and perhaps even lobbying for tax rebates and rewarding infrastructure measures for the evolution of lower and middle class *mixed* neighborhoods.

A National Secular Society should not allow membership to professional politicians so that the Society cannot be hijacked for causes other than its own. Further, the Society cannot be identified as a society of atheists in order that it may have the credentials to question dogma and fundamentalism routinely and aggressively.

Second, a secularity index on the lines of the human development index is suggested. There are now National Integration Awards in India. But secularism is not merely about communal harmony and tolerance. Secularism is about the rights of the citizen and humanitarian policies on the basis of reason. A Secularity Index with components like diversity in work places, institutions, rationality in policy formulation (ban on sex education in schools in Maharashtra?), authorities which encourage/cull hate from school texts, shared spaces for diverse communities in events, in media, in advertisements. If a methodology for formulating a secularity index could be derived, it could be used for ranking governments at the State and National levels, ranking of institutions, advertisements, media, election manifestos, etc. enabling *competition* for secular values.

In other words, can we strengthen secular values essential for democracy, by throwing secularism to market forces? In India if such a secularity index were to be applied, perhaps only the Bollywood industry would rank high, perhaps, there is a lesson that can be learnt from that!