

STATE OF INDIAN MINORITIES: IMPACT ON DOMESTIC POLITICS AND THE COUNTRY'S STANDING ABROAD

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Abstract

The religious, cultural and ethnic diversity in Indian society presents challenges as well as opportunities for the democratic structure of the state. India has used the vanguard of secularism to celebrate the diversity. However, its metamorphing interpretations have created a conflict between secular ideology and minority rights. The existence of personal laws derived from religion; the affiliation of political parties with fundamentalist religious organizations; and the rallying of a significant proportion of the Hindu Diaspora behind Hindutva philosophy are indicative of the conflict. This study aims at discussing the state of minorities in India and its interface with the domestic politics and the country's standing abroad. In this context, a probing look at the Indian experience due to its aspirations for regional leadership becomes pertinent. The paper argues that safeguard of minority groups in India particularly attracts the attention of the world community due to its complicated social fabric that is characterized by social ostracism on the ground of caste, ethnicity and religion.

Introduction

India is proclaimed as a nation celebrating 'unity-in-diversity': ethnic and cultural plurality and multi-religious make up, glued in a shared historical experience and political frame. It has used the vanguard of secularism to celebrate this diversity. The inter-relationship between diversity and secularism has been integral to India's political architecture for about four decades. However, its metamorphing interpretations have created a conflict between secular ideology and minority rights. The signs of this predicament in the relations between state, society and religion include the

precarious situation of India's religious minority groups, particularly the violence directed against Muslims in 2002 and Christians in 2013. In addition, the existence of religion-specific personal laws, the affiliation of political parties with fundamentalist religious organizations, and the rallying of a significant proportion of the Hindu Diaspora behind Hindutva philosophy are also indicative of the potential conflict. Whether the state can resolve conflicts and ease tension or is itself part of the problem, is a matter of political and intellectual debate.

In this backdrop, an appraisal of the Indian experience of the minority question, the religious ones in particular, is pertinent due to country's aspiration for regional leadership. This study aims at analyzing and discussing the state of minorities in India and its impact on the country's standing abroad. The paper argues that safeguard of minority groups in India particularly attracts the attention of the world community due to its complicated social fabric that is characterized by social ostracism on the grounds of caste, ethnicity and religion.

Minorities and Secularism in India

Secularism in essence separates the state and religion. However, the Indian constitution while declaring India as a secular state, hints at minority rights without clearly defining the term 'minority' itself. A comprehensive analysis of the Indian interpretation of minorities and secularism is the *sin quo non* for deciphering its impact on the Indian standing at home and abroad.

A window on the minority architecture

The multicultural existence of the Indian society is visible from the fact that it is home to a vast variety of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. The composite structure of the Indian society can be divided into "6 main ethnic groups, 52 major tribes, 6 major religions, 6400 castes and sub-castes and 18 major languages along with 1600 minor languages and

dialects”.¹Therefore, it can rightly be described as a nation of minorities, yet it is overwhelmingly Hindu.

The term minority lacks a legally accepted definition, despite great importance attached to the protection of minority rights. Francesco Capotorti defines minority as "a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the state - possess ethnic, religious and linguistic characteristics differing from the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, maintain a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion and language."² In this regard, the Indian minority groups can be divided in to four main categories on the basis of religion, language, caste and tribe. The Indian constitution provides certain rights to minorities on the bases of caste and language and not on the religious grounds. However, this study from an outsider perspective assesses the state of Indian minorities on the bases of aforementioned four categories.

The Indian constitution has used the word minorities in Article 29 to 30 and 350A to 350B, but has refrained from an unambiguous definition of the term minority groups in the Indian context. Article 29 of the constitution pronounces minority as “any section of citizens having a distinct language script and culture”. But this creates a vague picture as an entire majority community, can be termed as minority because of its distinct culture or language or a group within a majority can also claim the status. Article 30 specifically, speaks of the religious and linguistic minorities in the context of their right to establish educational institutions. As far as the reservation of seats in the parliament and jobs in public sector is concerned, it is not on the basis of religion or language or minority status but is based on the marginalized position of the scheduled tribe (ST), scheduled caste (SC) or other backward classes (OBCs). Thus, if the minorities fall under any of the three broad categories namely: Other Backward Castes (OBC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC), they can benefit from the policy of reservation. Arguably, the Constitution of India addresses various aspects of the

legitimate rights of minority groups. In this regard, Part III of the Indian Constitution guarantees certain fundamental rights for each and every citizen of India. These general rights have significant bearing on the protection of minorities.³

In numerical terms, Muslims constitute 13.4 per cent of the population, Christians 2.3 percent, Sikhs 1.6 percent, Buddhists 0.8 per cent, Jains 0.3 per cent and Parsis a few thousands⁴. A study of the geographical spread suggests that bulk of the Muslim population lives in four Indian states: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Assam. Christians are mainly concentrated in Kerala, the four south Indian states and the north eastern states, more than 60 percent of the Sikh population in the Punjab, whereas the major concentration of the Buddhists is in the state of Maharashtra and Parsis mainly reside in Mumbai.⁵ With regard to linguistic construct, more than 1500 languages are spoken in India, though 91 percent of the Indian speak 18 major languages.⁶

According to the 2001 Indian census, 16 percent of the total population of India consisted of the scheduled castes that included 'Dalits' also known as Harijans, or 'Untouchables'.⁷ The schedule tribal population constitutes 8.2% of the total population. It lists 461 groups recognised as tribes, while estimates of the number of tribes living in India reach up to 635.⁸ Among the tribal groups, six largest tribes constitute nearly one-half of India's tribal population. These tribes are: the Gonds of central India; the Bhils of western India; the Santals of Bihar and West Bengal; the Oraons of Bihar and West Bengal; the Minas of Rajasthan; and the Mundas of Bihar. Some tribes, though considerably smaller, constitute a majority of the areas in which they live: the Nagas, Khasis and Garos, for instance in India's northeast.⁹

Minority representation (mainly religious, caste and tribal groups) in all sectors of Indian life and development is abysmally low. In other words, India has not celebrated the diversity but has only accommodated it. The diversity in India is therefore tolerated till it conflicts with the unity of the Indian state and civilization. There is a covert thought that

they will soon be part of the mainstream due to the diversity of Hindu community that is in itself a guarantee for the sustenance to diversity and for minorities. Relative insignificance of the Indian minority groups is also explained in terms of a general rule that democracy is by nature majoritarian, where the tilt of policies is towards the majority. Thus, there exists every chance for the majority culture being construed as the national culture. Therefore, it is extremely important to make possible a significant position for the Indian minority groups before they lose their identity to the Hindu majority culture. As this is evident from the example of the Parsee community, which is on the verge of extinction from the Indian social fabric, due to its absorption into the Hindu majority culture. To understand the issues of minority groups in India, it is important to first appreciate the definition and various interpretations of the Indian secularism as brought forth in the Indian political history.

An Anthology of Indian Secularism

The generally accepted definition 'Secularism' explains it as "a political mode of governance based on two major principles, equal respect and freedom of conscience - and on two operative modes - separation of church and state, and neutrality of the state toward religion."¹⁰In the Indian context, the term has a unique interpretation because it is usually used in relation to the idea of a Secular State, established in the religiously pluralistic framework of India. The term secularism was embodied in the preamble of the Indian constitution only in 1976, by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for political purposes. However, the term lacked a clear definition. In the Indian social history, there have been various approaches to religion that have been crucial to the makeup and evolution of the concept. The evolutionary phases of Indian secularism can be categorised into the following three periods: The initial period of romanticism, the era of pragmatism and the rise of "Hindutva".

The romantic underpinnings of secularism in the Indian society, initially flourished with the exposure of India's

intellectuals with the Western liberal political thought in the colonial era. Since the late nineteenth century, the Indian political and intellectual thinkers have been faced with the fundamental problem of discovering or devising some shared norms, coherent values and common commitments that could link and keep the diverse Indian society together. The answer of this dilemma was initially found in socialist nationalism. This approach of non-religious philosophy of secularism is associated mainly with the early 'liberal rationalist' Nehru and 'dialectical materialist' E.M. Sankaran Nampoothiripad. They did not view secularism separating religion from politics, rather maintained state neutrality in personal religious choice and intervened by codifying the Hindu Personal Law to protect the individual's family affairs.

An era of pragmatism starts with the second interpretation of Secularism, by the advocates of Gandhism and other ideologies of 'liberal Hinduism' like Radhakrishnan. It declares that the idea of Indian Secularism is an expression of toleration based on the traditional Hindu doctrine of equality of religions. Gandhi's opposition to the two-nation theory of Muslim League based on the religious differences between Hinduism and Islam and the partition of the country arising from it, was indeed religious. Gandhi said:

“Partition means a potent untruth. My whole soul rebels against the idea that Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures and doctrines. To assent to such a doctrine for me is a denial of God...we are all, no matter by what name designated, children of God”.

Thus, public adherence to the policy of constituting a secular democracy by post independence India was defined as the provision of just reverence to all religions, rather than the segregation of religion and state.¹¹ Therefore within a short period, the 'great Indian consensus' was moulded, thus creating a religious –secular India rather than a secular republic.¹² The third stage heralds the period of the rise of Hindutva philosophy or 'Indian Fascism'. It originally started as a nationalist movement under the RSS¹³ in order to

overthrow the British imperialism and Muslim separatism by Keshav Baliram Hedgewarin 1925. The philosophy of Hindutva¹⁴ was formally revived with the rise of BJP in 1980, an era infamous for promoting communal politics.

In essence, the evolutionary stages of secularism led to the development of a visible rift between the Indian nationalist project and the secularized constitution, due to the conflicting natures of their 'civilizing missions'. The former tried to liberate the newly born nation of the western influences and eventually cultural minorities, whereas the later craves for the recognition of religious and cultural plurality through secularized constitution and compartmentalizing religion and state.¹⁵

Religious society and secular norms: Tension in the Indian Polity

There are divergent views with regard to the success/failure of secularism in India. Efficacy of the creed is questioned by Hindu nationalists as against their political opponents (mainly the Gandhians and the Leftists) on a two-fold rationale: it is viewed as a vehicle of appeasement of minorities and thus in practice, always biased against Hindu majority. However, instead of renouncing the creed, the Hindu nationalists would rather give it a different interpretation and seek a "Genuine Secularism" as against the "Pseudo-Secularism" of Congress and Leninists.¹⁶

The question arises, what does the secular state offer by way of an emancipatory minority politics? It may be argued that a major rationale of constitutional secularism lies in its promise of support to minority groups. The debate on its uses, limits, and contradictions is a complex and extensive one, but there would be agreement about both their necessity and their insufficiency, with different emphasis placed on each. In particular the modern state offers itself as the alternative to religion and its norms, according to one definition of secularism (separation of church and state); but according to another it is committed to "protecting" the religious and

cultural rights of communities.¹⁷ Moreover, the existence of four sets of personal laws, (discussed in detail further down in the paper), belonging to each of the major religions, plays a major role in exacerbating majority-minority tension over specific issues, contributing to the decline of Indian secularism.

In addition, the Muslim representation tends to be minimal in the political, administrative, judicial and other departments of public institutions but it appears to be part of the Indian political strategy to project itself as an inclusive society. The Indian government has often resorted to the practice of electing the least represented communities to important political and public offices. To explain, Iqbal A. Ansari argues: "to periodically appoint Muslims on positions of high visibility like a President and a Chief Justice is to give impression that Muslims are equal participants in the public life in India"¹⁸ while the facts speak otherwise.

Thus, the Indian Secularism has evolved into a unique political mode of governance that neither resembles the traditional western secularism nor it finds itself at home in the Indian social setup. Therefore, a dilemma is faced when it comes to fit India in the Western liberal multicultural niche. The reason for which tends to be India's association with a civilization and its identification with the Hindu majority culture, declaring communities different from it as minorities. The concept of defining majorities and minorities is unobjectionable, but the problem lies with the very idea that there exists an uncompromising difference between the majority and minority culture. That has led to an increasing clash between the majority and minorities over issues such as language rights, regional autonomy, political representation, education curriculum, personal laws, even national anthem or public holidays.¹⁹

State of Indian Minorities: An Overview

Socio-economic disparities

The complicated Indian social fabric that is characterized by social ostracism on the grounds of caste, ethnicity and religion tends to confirm the susceptibility of the minority communities to discriminatory practices: exclusion, violence due to their marginalized position, poverty and low political representation. The minorities' whether religion-based or recognized as under-privileged classes, remain marginalized in the socio-economic milieu. In this backdrop, the ideal of 'secularism' offers glue to the Indian diversity but stays short of serving as the vehicle of equal opportunities or even progress for various communities in the arena.

The Indian constitution seeks to secure the minority groups and other socially marginalized groups while efforts under this umbrella have proved insufficient in the redress of grievances among different communities. The provisions do not *ipso facto* apply on the religion-based minorities, a far greater reality in the Indian scenario. The constitution guarantees fundamental rights of the citizens in Part III without any discrimination, whereas Article 29 proclaims the rights of minorities for maintaining their distinct culture or language. Similarly, Article 330 and 335 Part 16 reserve seats for the disadvantaged social groups (ST, SC and OBCs) in the government jobs and the Indian parliament. Under this system of compensatory discrimination, a total of 49.5% of the seats are reserved in the form of quotas²⁰ for the ST, SC and OBCs, out of which 27% are reserved for the OBCs, 15% for the ST and 7.5% for SC. However, there are no special provisions provided for securing minority groups because the reservation policy tends to take in its domain the marginalized communities in a certain social group, not the religious or linguistic minority groups until they fall in the category of the ST, SC or OBCs because of their disadvantaged position.

The reservation of quotas in government jobs has proved ineffective in speeding up the process of upward social

mobility of the minorities. For example, the percentage of minority recruitment in the government sector especially the public banks have continuously declined. According to the minister of minority affairs K. Rahman Khan, it has gone down to 6.24% from 10.18% in 2010-2011.²¹ Similarly, the backward classes, which include the Shudra sub castes and the Dalits (Scheduled tribes and scheduled castes), and women are consigned to lowly unskilled jobs because of the prejudiced approach of employers, unequal distribution of the resources and a history of unfavourable status²². Likewise, the limited scope of the quota system introduced by the government for the welfare of minorities does not help in offering any relief as most of the quotas focus on securing jobs in undesirable areas such a menial or janitorial work. As a result, they remain employed in cast-based areas.²³

The religious minorities especially the Muslim community face countless hurdles in seeking jobs in the government sectors: Ayesha Pervez in her report on India's working Muslims, terms such discrimination as the presence of "religious exclusion" in India's public sector. She has reiterated the existence of such religion-based exclusions in the region of West Bengal despite the state being home to 27% of the Muslim population; their political representation that stands at 4%. Low political and economic figures force the Muslim population in masquerading as Hindus for getting jobs.²⁴ The Sachar Committee report of 2006 and the Mishra Commission Report of 2007 also emphasized the deplorable condition of the Muslims in educational, political and socio-economic field. The 2011 Human Development Report by the Indian government reemphasizes the miserable socio-economic status of the Muslims.²⁵ Nevertheless, in a society that is based on the principle of caste and class the Muslim Ashraf has adjusted very well; they are well integrated as elite-middle class in politics, administration, education and culture of mainstream India. However, the fruits of this integration have not transformed to common Indian Muslim.

The religious minorities in India are also the victim of insecurity and anxiety that arise due to the animosity of Hindu

religious fundamentalists targeting minorities in general and Muslims in particular.²⁶ For example, the Muslim community has been singled out in the communal violence during 1992 Babri Mosque incitement where the state machinery proved highly ineffective in providing protection. Thus, the scenario, contradicted the secular principles of the Indian constitution.²⁷ The communal riots in 2001 witnessed the involvement of fundamentalist groups in setting the dalits against the Muslims. Many such incidents have been experienced by other religious minorities: the Kandamal Riots in Orissa (2008) involved Christian minorities where during the communal violence, the relief agencies were stopped by the administration from undertaking any relief work.²⁸ Arguably, the high profile position of Muslims in almost all aspects of Indian state and society is not entirely superficial but it reflects the integrated position of Muslim Ashraf through English education. It may be one of the reasons that migration to Pakistan of a section of the Indian Muslims stooped after the mid-sixties and they began to seek accommodation in secular-democratic India. The majority Urdu-madrassa-educated lower sections of the Indian Muslims are the real losers who live in poverty and communal strife.

The general grievances of the tribal minorities concerned with their demand of autonomous status and their below average socio-economic conditions, thus creating a dismal economic picture. The Jenukuruba tribe in Karnataka is a pertinent example of economic injustice. Despite being a population of 60,000, it lacks a single degree holder and are still dwelling on the trees.²⁹ Thus, the deplorable economic conditions of a group in a society starts a never ending vicious circle that leads to a meager political representation, as a result, the group is orphaned and unable to address its grievances, thus dying a slow death.

The linguistic minority groups are highly concerned about the recognition of their languages as the official language of the states, for strengthening their identity and solidarity. There are states with officially recognized state languages in

India such as Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Mathali etc but on the other hand some states, where the local languages of the major minority groups lack official recognition e.g. Hindi is not spoken by the majority of the people in Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland.³⁰ Thus a community that is socially and economically marginalized will fail to secure an effective political representation and their weak status puts them in a disadvantaged position creating the problems of political representation.

Political representation of minorities:

The political representation of minorities in India has been victim to majoritarian secular debate, quota controversy, discriminative elites and abuse of the system by the upper classes. The government of India has enacted various legislations, for ensuring smooth functioning of Indian democracy and elimination of the fear of encroachment of minority rights. Article 330, Part 16, of the Indian constitution, calls for the reservation of seats in each state for the marginalized groups (SC and ST) in the lower House of the Indian Parliament, in proportion to the size of their population in the respective provinces. That makes it obligatory on the SC and ST groups to contest elections in the reserved constituencies.³¹

The secular identity of the Indian state excludes the possibility of religion-based reservation of seats in the electoral process and provides reservations to lower castes to uplift their economic status. It assumes that Muslims, for example, are a community (not a minority in the classical sense) in the multicultural mosaic, and they will gain strength equal to the others while operating in India's political arena. Conversely, the electoral report card has been dismal. In 1952, Muslim representation in the Parliament was 4.3 per cent and the highest it soared was in the Parliament during 1984-89 period when it stood at 8.4 per cent. At one point, it dipped to 2.9 per cent. Comparing the results of 15th and 16th Loksabha elections, the Muslim representation, despite being the largest

minority, is at the lowest ebb. It is just 23 seats which means only 4% representation for a community that constitutes 14% of the population. The number of Muslim MPs had always remained between 20 to 30 except in 1980 when it was the highest 51 Muslim MPs and in 1984 the number was 48.³²

Despite the fact that the quota system helps ensuring a more balanced and cohesive democratic societies, it has been criticized in India and otherwise for being discriminatory to the majority groups, creation of incompetent legislatures, time consuming, and involving a long cumbersome process.³³ Moreover, the middle and the lower class religious minority groups such as Christians and Muslims are doubly discriminated: firstly, for being a minority and secondly due to class dynamics. Furthermore, the social stratification into castes and classes produce elitist tendencies in the Indian democracy. The elites whether from the majority or the minority groups tend to act in unison for preserving the discriminatory social structure for their personal gain.

The mode of political reservation in India provides the right of reservation to the marginalized groups under the broad category of scheduled Tribes (ST) and scheduled Castes (SC) that can be utilized by the religious or linguistic minorities or the minorities in general only if they tend to be economically and politically marginalized. Such reservation is not guaranteed on the bases of ethnicity or religion. The percentage of reserved seats for minorities on the basis of their marginalized position in the lower house of parliament in 2008 were 14% for SC, 8 % for ST, 1 for Anglo-Indians and 2% for Zorastrians, Jews and Christians.³⁴ However, despite such an arrangement, the minority representation tends to be extremely low.

The main beneficiaries of the reservation system tend to be the upper classes of the societies or the influential people within the poor community (mainly the SC and ST). For example, Laloo Prasad's wife the ex-chief Minister of Bihar, who won the seat based on women reservation but in reality, the CM tended to be her husband. Thus, under the policy of

women reservation usually a wife, daughter or daughter in law is politically appointed but the real authority rests with the male member of the family. As a result, reservation works to the benefit of the well-to-do politicians.³⁵ Further more political reservation has increased atrocities to the very individuals who are meant to benefit from the policy i.e. the SC and ST.³⁶ There are divergent views held in India regarding the policy of reservation in the political and economic sectors of the government. A section of the society believes it has played an important role in dwindling the divide between the poor and the affluent castes by providing increased opportunities to the former in jobs, education and governance. Whereas others criticize it for widening the socio-economic and political disparities amongst the Hindu majority and minority groups ,discouraging merit-based system and encouraging vote-banking politics which has encouraged the growth of disruptive elements within the society.

Issues of personal laws:

Indian secularism contradicts the concept of the western secularism, mainly because of its inclusive approach to the religious laws, as binding on the state, unlike the segregation of the two. The four major religious communities, the majority Hindu, and the minority Muslims, Christians, and Parsis, have their own personal laws (other religious groups such as Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, and tribal and scheduled castes are subsumed under Hindu law). Despite the efforts made by the Sikh, Jains and Buddhists to declare themselves as distinct faiths, the Indian constitution views them as the offshoots of Hinduism. An effort was made by the National Commission for Minority Act in 1992, for recognizing Buddhism as a separate religion but it was challenged in the Supreme Court in 2005.³⁷

Personal laws operate in matters relating to inheritance, marriage, divorce, maintenance, and adoption, which are regarded as "personal" issues, understood to be matters that relate to the family or "personal" sphere. Such as the Indian Penal Code, section 494, declares bigamy illegal, thus making the person contracting second marriage while the first is intact

as guilty of the offence. This takes in its scope also people who can by religion have more than one wife. Thus, the very fact that the operation of such penal provision is religion dependent is seen as the state interfering in the religious aspects of its people.

Similarly, the Muslim Women (protection of rights on Divorces) Act, 1986 regarding the treatment of divorced Muslim women by giving them rights available to the women of other religion, is looked at as the excessive interference by the state into the personal affairs of Muslim population, which should be decided according to their religious discretions. Likewise, in the case of Hanif Qureshi vs. State of Bihar, a decision upheld by the state, declared cow sacrifice as non-obligatory act for the Muslims. And state decisions of the nullification of Christian laws of inheritance on grounds of gender justice.³⁸

The existence of anti-conversion laws in five Indian states: Gujarat, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh operate under the pretext of protecting vulnerable communities from forceful conversions.³⁹ These laws threaten the religious freedom as it restricts not only the people's choice or option to change their beliefs, nevertheless makes conversion literally impossible. The end goal of secularism that concentrates on restricting the state from legislation that confines the religious freedom of its citizens,⁴⁰ thus violating the fundamental rights ensured by the Indian constitution.

Indian Minorities: Impact on Domestic Politics

The preceding discussion of the minority issue in the Indian domestic scene has been reviewed exhaustively with particular reference to three elements: Socio economic disparities and communal violence; low minority representation in country's administrative and political institutions; and a dichotomy facing the religion-based personal laws. The discussion also reconfirms that besides the aforementioned factors, the mere tension in the Indian society owe to a lack of accepted definition of secularism and the term

minority, in an established diverse setting. The term secularism remains a subject of varying interpretation in keeping with the convenience of various political forces. In essence, the dismal socio-eco and political conditions of minorities in general and the Muslim community in particular, contradict the secular pretensions of India.

The very problem of Indian secularism has been associated with the daunting task of making a religious society secular. That has resulted in developing a concept of Secularism that runs contrary to the western secular ideals, mainly because of its inclusive approach to the religious laws, as binding on the state, unlike the segregation of the two. The existence of different personal laws on the basis of religion and the prevalence of anti-conversion laws run contrary to the secular principles and violate fundamental religious freedom.

The transforming concept of secularism has created insecurities amongst the minority groups at every stage whether it's the communal approach of the Hindu nationalists or the secular approach of the secular parties. Both have tried fidgeting with the religious aspect of the minorities and have treated them differently from the Hindu majority population. Consequently, minorities face a constant discrimination in all fields. The problem with Indian nationalism lies in its historically racial character unlike western nationalism that has successfully accomplished a certain level of unity in its society, Indian secularism is yet to achieve that level of maturity. It is because secularism in India is defined in majoritarian (Hindu) terms that minorities should define themselves by the so called Indian society and culture which in essence, is Hindu. On the other hand, minorities also play the race card and get certain privileges in education and jobs reserved for the backward classes.

In the wake of the existing domestic scenario, the Indian political scene has become associated with the two divergent interpretations of secularism as manifested in the political agendas of competing political forces. Firstly, the traditional mainstream parties, namely the secular politics of Nehru and

Gandhi that have an accent on egalitarian treatment of the minorities. Secondly, the Hindu nationalists identified with the rise of Hindutva and BJP have been associated with the notorious character of promoting communal riots.

The impressive BJP victory in the recent 16th Lok Sabha elections: securing 282 out of the total 543 seats, is characterized by the lowest Muslim representation which remains the largest minority community group since independence. Comparing the results of 15th and 16th Lok Sabha elections, the Muslim representation is just 23 seats which means only 4% representation for a community that constitutes 14% of the population. The number of Muslim MPs had always remained between 20 to 30 except in 1980 when it was the highest 51 Muslim MPs and in 1984 the number was 48.⁴¹ Conversely, it is hardly two Muslim MPs in the 16th Lok Sabha election.

The lack of political representation of the largest Muslim minority with an impressive size of 14% of the total population, reduces their say in the legislative process of the country resulting in government policies that are non-representative of the minority issues. In addition, rise of BJP to power, with its tainted track record, can put the country in a difficult situation by making the largest minority group feel insecure. In essence, the domestic issues of the Indian social life will take their toll by creating a negative image for India in the outside world, hindering India's progress toward realizing its regional ambitions. In this context, gauging the impact of minority issues on the global standing of India becomes pertinent for analysis.

India's Global Standing and Minority Factor

India's global profile is overwhelmed by the country's standing as the largest democracy and a growing international market. Concurrently, the total Muslim population of India makes it one of the third- largest Muslim countries on the world map after Indonesia. That statistically means Muslim community makes about 14 percent of India's 1.2 billion

people. The minority factor can therefore play a substantive role in India's global standing that may be viewed with a six-fold focus:

- Firstly, India's 180 million Muslim population, makes India one of the largest single Muslim country. This coupled with its secular face, affords India the opportunity to make inroads in the Muslim World and allows it to demand representation at International Muslim bodies such as the OIC, and, an access to the oil rich Middle Eastern region.
- Secondly, the well-being of the largest Indian Muslim community can earn goodwill for India in the Muslim countries including Pakistan. It can create favourable circumstances for regional stability, by opening up trade and economic ventures, fuelling not only India's economic growth but also unlocking the potential chances for Indian regional aspirations.
- Thirdly, for the projection of liberal democratic attire that is crucial for India's regional and global ambitions, the government has often, resorted to fudging facts related to the conditions of minorities. For instance, India has tried presenting the Indian Muslim community as a robust and healthy part of the society through a few high profile appointments of minorities at home and abroad in the form of presidents and diplomats. The facts on ground confirm a dismal picture, as evident from the zero percent representation of the Muslims in the ruling party (BJP) and parenthetically low Muslim representation in the overall make up of the Indian Parliament. Perceptibly, this portrays a 'hypocritical picture' of secular India, thus flagging an unhelpful image dilemma in the broader region.
- Fourthly, liberties promised to minorities in India have not prevented multiple serious human rights abuses that are hallmark of scenarios in many Indian states. This not only contradicts the liberal democratic norms but carries the potential of damaging India's global image.

- Fifthly, India's image dilemma has an unavoidable relationship with the prevalent discriminatory practices and the human rights abuses towards minority groups, together with the broader view of conflicts in South Asia. This enforces argument for hindering India's ambitions for a permanent Seat at the UNSC.
- Sixthly, for Pakistan, BJP's government with an accent on economic growth is good news. However, fundamentalist leanings of Modi and BJP invites uncertainty for the future. Thus, any incident of communal violence in India has the potential to ignite violence in Pakistan.

In a nutshell, for a society to progress, it is essential that all fractions of the society are taken on board and none is marginalized. The rise of BJP with its Hindutva philosophy has proved disastrous for the minority cause in the past but its recent pro development rhetoric might lead into the direction of an unexpected change. Only, if the new government resorts to an egalitarian distribution of the perspective economic opportunities that might become available. Thus, if all the communities are on a level playing field, the development of a prosperous Indian nation becomes sustainable.⁴²

Conclusion

To sum up, in a diverse society like India, secularism serves as a cohesive factor. It is called upon to serve varied functions in a contradictory and variable fashion as it negotiates within a very narrow range of options between cultural nationalism, minority rights, liberal individual rights, and identity politics. In India, its own socio-political missteps, as much as the unleashing of religious intolerance, have caused much violence in the form of riots, civil wars, and genocide. One would not expect an outcome to the contrary as the Indian state has engaged minorities as legal minorities, not as citizens. Invocation of secularism in Indian society is very formal, but what it is in concrete terms, is yet to be explained.

In Indian politics today, minority issues are increasingly taking a centre stage, whether in the shape of demands for increased political representation or the calls for providing protection to many religions and cultures in the country are rising. India however, seems to remain compartmentalized in the future because this division favours the interests of the country's elites that dominate the state apparatus. Consequently, the elite and their interests make the state a party to the marginalization of the minorities in the country. Another disturbing characteristic in the last few years has been the rise of fundamentalism in India. Religious prejudice through the rise of Hindutva has been on the increase challenging the future communal relationships in the country.

At present, the ruling BJP seems to follow the soft Hindutva philosophy but there is a very thin line that can be easily crossed toward hard or extremist Hindutva. It will be in favour of India and the BJP to bring the minorities into the fold by allowing them maintain their distinct identities rather than following soft or hard Hindutva. Thus, the challenge for India and its newly formed government will be to put in a mechanism and establish a process that addresses the concerns of minority groups. This, in turn, will lead to the much needed stability at home and improved image abroad. In a nutshell, the era of increasing interdependence demands the weeding out of the parochial thinking and embracing an attitude of acceptance of the differences a nation is made of. It is this effective intertwining of diversity that can raise a country to the exalted throne of a regional or world power.

Notes

¹ Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1989, p.43.

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