

The Secular Creed

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

Jean Le Mee, a French scholar who teaches Sanskrit at Columbia University, New York has written a book on the Rig Veda which is an authoritative translation of twelve hymns from the Rig Veda. His credentials as a scholar are impeccable. In his book he writes, "Hinduism, according to its own tradition and belief, is not a religion belonging to a particular people or country, but is what remains of an ancient system of knowledge, Sanatan Dharma which, in another age, was the inheritance of the whole of mankind. It, therefore, sees itself as the holder of a tradition common to all men and encompassing all that revelation and man's efforts have produced in terms of knowledge". I quote this because the very people who calls themselves the champions of Hinduism, the VHP, have completely forgotten that this is a religion of inclusiveness, which means that no one is outside the fold, regardless of the religion or belief that they profess. It is in this context that one has to consider the remarks made by Praveen Togadia of Vishwa Hindu Parishad in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, where he said that if his party comes to power Muslims would be disenfranchised, removed from all government posts and to the extent possible thrown out of India. How can a religion of inclusiveness exclude whole groups of people?

Let us move to the other side of the spectrum and consider what the Owaissi brothers have been saying in Andhra Pradesh with their highly communally charged remarks. This invited swift police action. Let us consider the case of the Mufti of Kashmir who issued a fatwa against a band consisting of three girls from the Valley. As a result of this fatwa the band has been disbanded and the girls are in hiding. There is an earlier case of a fatwa from Deoband which said that it is unIslamic to educate girls older than ten years. No action has been taken against the Mufti or the clerics of Deoband.

In the Preamble to the Constitution the people of India gave to themselves a secular republic. Article 15 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Article 25 gives freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion. No one is excluded, not even Muslims. Article 51 A, sub clause (e) makes it the duty of the people of India to promote harmony and a spirit of common brotherhood, transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities. The right to form a band and play music is covered by Article 19, which gives freedom of speech and expression (music is an expression) and the right to form association. Togadia, the Mufti of Kashmir, and Owaissi brothers are in total violation of the Constitution. They are also liable to prosecution under section 506 IPC for criminal intimidation, section 298 IPC for speaking or acting with deliberate intent to wound the feelings of any person and sections 153 A and B IPC for promoting enmity between different groups on account of religion and making imputations and assertions prejudicial to national integration. It is absolutely essential that these persons and every other such person should be prosecuted and brought to justice.

We are faced here with an issue which goes beyond individual interests and in fact is a determinant of whether or not India is a society of laws. Secularism, harmony, a society free of strife are not principles imposed on us externally. They are intrinsic to our ruling political philosophy. Our laws are consciously framed and promulgated, our Constitution is freely adopted by the sovereign people, our secularism has arisen out of a genuine belief that we are

multi-polar and that every Indian citizen has the right to enjoy its benefits. That being the case why are we not enforcing the law when people are threatened by the utterances or acts of bigots? Whether it is Raj Thackeray of MNS, Udhav Thackeray of Shiv Sena, Praveen Togadia of VHP or Owassi brothers of MIM, if they violate the law they must suffer the consequences. A riotous mob which targets a particular group on account of religion, ethnicity, language or region is in violation of law, contemptuous of the secular underpinnings of our Constitution and is a criminal crowd which must be dealt with severely. Every time one of these persons remains unpunished our secular credentials take a hit. India cannot afford this if it is to remain a tolerant society in which there is genuine freedom of thought, expression and belief.

When a library of renown at Pune in an institution known for scholarship is vandalised by anti-social elements because the Shiv Sena does not like what an American historian had written about Shivaji, we can no longer claim to be truly secular or liberal. When Salman Rushdie is debarred from the Jaipur Literary Festival and he cannot visit Calcutta we cannot claim to be a nation which values free speech. When Bajrang Dal hooligans persecute young men and women and ransack shops and restaurants on St. Valentine's Day we are no longer a liberal society. I am not making out a case for libertarianism but I am speaking out for innocent fun being enjoyed by the young. Who gave Bajrang Dal the right to act as the moral arbiter of India?

Blasphemy laws governed society in the days of yore, especially in countries professing Semitic religions --- Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Many Islamic countries --- Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, to name just a few -- still profess these laws. Hinduism never had a concept of heresy and apostasy because it is not a revealed religion, but here, too, Brahminical orthodoxy has used excommunication and social ostracism as weapons similar to those used by the revealed religions. Is Islam so fragile that blasphemy by an individual will damage it beyond repair? Should not the heretic be left to face hell fire in the afterlife rather than be hounded in this one? Clerics need to be sensible, if not tolerant and must ignore what some misguided person has said. This applies doubly to Hindus, some of whom have become as intolerant as the Salafis, take offence at trifles and feel endangered in their belief because someone, say me, does not accept the divinity of Ram. Unfortunately the State now seems to be veering towards blasphemy laws as it increasingly allows bigotry to dictate its policy to protect those who preach intolerance.

To be great India must be truly secular which means that the State must consistently and firmly counter the forces of intolerance. This is how a strong State can be built – strong in defence, in the economy, in the justice system, in gender equality, even in secular spirituality.
