

Why A Secular State Always Trumps A Theocracy

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

One truth which one can call universal is that the State deals with the temporal aspects of human lives, whereas the Church, that is, the institutional arrangement for religion, deals with the spiritual. To the extent that religion sets a certain moral code of behaviour, accepted voluntarily by its followers, it can guide how the State will govern. However, because religion is specific to a faith, or belief, whereas the State governs everyone within its boundaries, it has to be even-handed in its laws and their enforcement. That is why Henry II Plantagenet, in the eleventh century A.D, insisted that in all temporal matters Church and State will be separate and the laws of the land will apply to all, including the Church. This really is the definition of secularism and the secular State.

A country based on theocratic supremacy, as is Pakistan, cannot ever be democratic because the people who follows the Faith are above all others residing in that country. Just as the Semitic religions, which are revealed and have the Book which contains the one and only Absolute Truth, consider the Believers to be the Chosen People and everyone else as The Other, a theocratic State also considers people of the faith of the State to be citizens and everyone else to be a lesser human being. Incidentally, such discrimination is not the monopoly of a theocratic State. States which have an extremist ideology can also be equally discriminatory. For example, Nazi Germany followed a completely misguided philosophy of racial superiority of so called Aryans, treated other races such as the Slavs as ‘untermenschen’ or subhumans and looked on Jews as vermin to be exterminated. The white supremacy State of South Africa followed the policy of apartheid, theoretically equal but apart, but actually a system of total white supremacy, racial, political and economic, combined with a totally segregated and disempowered coloured and black community. No society which thus discriminates between its own citizens can ever be democratic.

India decided as early as 1935, through the Government of India Act, 1935, as legislated by the Parliament of the United Kingdom, which delegated the power of government to the Provinces, that the country would be a democracy, both under British rule and after Independence. Therefore, after Independence we adopted a Constitution whose roots lay in the Government of India Act, 1935, but which incorporated the Fundamental Rights in Part III, based on the U.S. Bill of Rights. We opted for—

1. A democracy based on universal adult suffrage as per Article 326
2. Separation of powers, as per Part V, between the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary.
3. Equality before law as per Article 14
4. Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, race, sex or place of birth as per Article 15.
5. Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion as per Article 25
6. A federal country as per Article 1, which says, “India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States”.
7. The distribution of legislative powers between Parliament and the State Legislatures as per the Seventh Schedule (Article 246).

To put it more pithily, India is a democracy, everyone is equally empowered by the Constitution, the laws and the time honoured institutions, it is secular, non-discriminatory and egalitarian and has no room for bigotry, ideological extremism or for targeting a particular community. Any actions of individuals or a group which do not honour the democratic, secular, egalitarian principles enshrined in the Constitution are violative of the tenets of the Constitution and the laws of the land. Such people are more akin to the Lashkar-e-Toiba of Pakistan and by pushing a particular religious agenda they themselves fall in the category of bigots. Can any Indian, particularly a Hindu, want to be so typecast?

A thousand years of Islamic rule, over two hundred years of British rule, of which the period of up to the first quarter of the twentieth century witnessed fairly aggressive evangelical religious militancy, could have seen the entire population proselytised to either Islam or Christianity. That did not happen and today the Muslims constitute about twelve percent of our population and the Christians about two and a half percent. The Hindu faith owes its strength to its resilience, its inclusiveness, its ability to absorb every hostile thrust and yet come through unscathed. One track faiths may appear solid but in fact they are brittle. To protect themselves these brittle religions envelop themselves in blasphemy laws though, fortunately, Christianity has opened its windows to liberal ideas and, therefore, it has moved away from the harshness of the Old Testament and moved forward towards the relative openness of the New Testament. Islam, unfortunately, has moved backward to a religious revanchism in which it hopes to regain the ground lost to any liberal ideas such as Sufism by resort to orthodox Wahabism or even the Salafist form of extreme Islamic thought. Whom should we follow, Abdu Wahab or Vivekanand? This question is for Ashok Singhal, Ayodhanath, Praveen Togadia and others of their ilk who are trying to promote a form of Hinduism that few can understand or recognise. In Agra, for example, some of these extreme elements organised a mass conversion of 53 Muslim families to Hinduism. All of them are poor and vulnerable to inducement, in fear of violence and generally can consider immediate conversion given the right environment. Such conversion is superficial, opportunistic and is morally and legally reprehensible. How can a person thus converted ever be steadfast in his faith, unwavering in loyalty and faithful to any principles? What is the value of such conversion?

Let us take the arguments given by the pro-conversion lobby. It is argued that because Article 25 of the Constitution gives the fundamental right to every Indian to profess, practise, preach and propagate a religion, that right vests in Hindus also. This is undeniable. It is also argued that if conversion to other faiths is not illegal, why is there objection to conversion to Hinduism? The Constitution gives the followers of every religion the right to propagate it. What it does not permit is the offering of threat, inducement or promise, or the bringing of any kind of pressure on an individual or a group to change his or its religion and embrace another religion. In other words, faith is very much between the individual and his God and in matters of religion there has to be complete voluntarism. To preach and propagate is not the same as to proselytise and if there is proselytisation by the Muslims or the Christians that has to be opposed. But what applies to Islam and Christianity applies in equal measure to Hinduism. Therefore, it is not permissible for Hindu leaders to give themselves publicly proclaimed targets of conversion or to hold camps in which mass conversion is done. The Indian Constitution is not one sided and, therefore, the type of conversion threatened by Vishwa Hindu Parishad and R.S.S is totally illegal and must not be permitted. Suppose the Tablighi Jamaat were to announce that it would hold camps for mass conversion of non Hindus to Islam. Would this not lead to outrage and violent reaction from R.S.S and organisations belonging to the Sangh Parivar? Would it not be considered illegal and, therefore, liable to action by the State? How, then, can RSS expect to be immunised from law and be allowed to do the very things which our law does not permit?

At the best of times intercommunity relations in India are fragile. That is why we have to keep convincing ourselves through empty gestures that we Indians are all one and that there are no inter-communal problems. That is why, while superficially hugging each other during a community festival, we are only trying to reassure ourselves that we are in fact a very united and peace loving people. The fact is that there is a degree of ghettoisation of Muslims, that many forms of social taboos still prevail in the matter of inter-community social intercourse and that just below the surface lies a simmering layer of potential conflict which may turn violent. Running away from this will not make India safe and strong. We have to face boldly the realities of Indian society and then govern in such a way that social peace and harmony, especially in religious matters, is maintained on an even keel and that any factor which tries to disturb this equilibrium is ruthlessly eliminated. At present with the pronouncements of the more militant Hindu groups the exact opposite is happening and this is not good for the maintenance of law and order or the existence of a society in which tension is eased and harmony is emphasised.

Shri Mohan Bhagwat, the Sarsanchalak of the RSS has not reached this apex of preeminence without intelligence, knowledge and commonsense. He is certainly not a rabble rouser and his voice is not shrill and accusatory. I take it that he does think rationally, that he is cognisant of the realities of the Indian social structure, that he is a patriot and that he wants India to be a nation at peace with itself. He must also understand that the real strength of Hinduism lies in its tolerance, its inclusiveness, its emphasis on harmony and its complete lack of rancour at other faiths and people of other faiths. In his heart of hearts he also must know that a nation whose Vedas date back to several thousand years, with the roots of its main religion, Hinduism, being firmly embedded in the Vedas and that a religion which has survived thousands of years, even of foreign rule, is not so fragile as to need special protection. Why then is there such sudden acceleration of a revanchist form of Hinduism whose ultimate result can only be a complete breakdown of inter social relationships and the promotion of violence which can tear this country apart?

As a leader of an organisation which itself has been able to survive many vicissitudes because in the ultimate analysis it has liberalism in its core, Shri Bhagwat knows that Hinduism is in no danger from any external forces. Therefore, an aggressive form of Hindutva is guaranteed to lead to conflict which, though it might leave the minority community mauled and battered, would equally harm the majority. How will this promote Hindutva, how will it help in developing this country as outlined by Prime Minister Modi? In fact if India goes the Pakistan way in communalisation, this should make good government well nigh impossible, it would leave the country in a state of political fragmentation and would do for India what the Wahabis and the Salafists are doing for Pakistan. My fervent appeal to the RSS Sarsanchalak would be to rein in the extremist brigade, give up forced or induced conversions and instead use the route of persuasion, propagation and volition to promote his own message. The rest should be left to the people who will undoubtedly gravitate towards the faith which they can trust. That, incidentally, is the true message of the Sanatan.
