The irrelevance of secularism

Posted at: 30/03/2019

The formula that the state must remain equidistant from all religions is proving to be unworkable

- A debate has flared up, especially after the Supreme Court's Sabarimala judgment, on whether the state should leave religion alone.
- The relevance of this question is underscored by the unique definition of secularism espoused by the founding fathers of the Constitution, namely that the Indian state must be equidistant from all religions while allowing religions equal space in the public sphere.

Question of definition

- For several reasons this definition of secularism has created a lot of confusion as to what the term stands for.
- First, the formulation was impractical, given the huge numerical disparity in the religious composition of the Indian nation.
- This demographic inequality paved the way for the intrusion, and now proliferation, of majoritarian religious symbols, idioms and practices in the state's domain.
- Second, given the congenitally religious nature of Indian society and the consequent political import of identity based on religion, political parties, almost without exception, found it convenient to use religious sectarianism to advance their fortunes.
- The intrusion of religion into the state's arena in the form of donning of religious garb by state functionaries while carrying out state duties and participation in religious rites while acting in their official capacity has now become common.

Blatant appeals now

- The appeal to religious identity, always a part of India's political landscape, has now become much more blatant.

- One cannot blame politicians of either the BJP or the Congress for taking recourse to majoritarian nationalism for this is what currently sells in the electoral market.
- Politicians are, above all, interested in attaining power and the route to power today seems to lie through Hindu nationalism, whether hard or soft.
- If one needs someone or something to blame, it is the definition of secularism, or lack of it, adopted at the time of Independence.
- The framers of the Constitution, Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar included, failed to erect an unbreachable firewall between state and religion that would clearly prevent the intrusion of religious idioms, practices and agendas into the political arena and insulate the state from the religious sphere.
- One can understand why they failed to do so.
- The innate religious nature of Indian society and the after-effects of Partition on religious grounds precluded this option.
- However, in this context, to call the ideological foundation of the Constitution secularism, although the term was not explicitly included in the document until 1976, has done great harm to the concept.
- The formula that the state must remain equidistant from all religions, the unique Indian definition of secularism, is clearly unworkable.
- The sooner we realise this reality the easier it will be for all concerned to come to terms with the current trajectory of Indian politics.
- It is time to jettison the use of the term rather than confound the Indian public even further as to what 'secularism' really means.

The Hindu