

THE MINORITY QUESTION IN INDIA

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The minority question has been quite controversial in India. The secular forces and parties of course not only acknowledge minority question but also want to treat them fairly and give them equal status in matters of social, cultural, political and economic rights. The freedom fighters and national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and others duly recognised existence of minorities and championed their cause. It was because of their efforts that the constitution makers gave equal political rights to them and also recognised their distinct social, cultural, religious and economic status. The Constitution of India protected their religious and cultural rights under Articles 25 to 30.

However, those who espouse communal ideology are even today refusing to recognise the minority status and their distinct socio-cultural status. The RSS, VHP and BJP leaders continue to question status of religious minorities like Christians and Muslims. Sometimes they accuse secular parties of 'appeasement of minorities' and sometimes they question their loyalty to the country and sometimes they are described as ones who came from outside and hence alien to India and Indian culture.

The Sangh Parivar and votaries of Hindutva have always described Muslims as 'Babar ki aulad (i.e. children of Babar) and used to raise slogans "Babar ki aulad, jao Pakistan ya qabristan" (i.e. children of Babar go to Pakistan or to cemetery). Christians were also dubbed as loyal to Vatican (even forgetting that Protestant Christians have nothing to do with Vatican) and described them too as alien to India and Indian culture, if not by BJP, by its more extremist outfits like RSS and VHP.

Now the RSS leaders, in the Pratinidhi Sabha session in Manglore, have taken 180 degree turn and maintained that the Christians and Muslims cannot be construed as minorities because people of both the communities have not come from outside and hence their minority status should be done away with. The general secretary of RSS Mohanrao Bhagwat said in his speech in the Manglore session that 99.9% Muslims and Christians have not come from outside and hence they cannot be called minorities. He said that their ancestors were Hindus some years ago and in their veins also same blood is running as in those of Hindu veins.

Mark the words of Mohanrao Bhagwat, particularly those italicised. Were they not aware of the fact all these years that same blood is flowing in the veins of Christians and Muslims? Why were Christians and Muslims being described as outsiders or Babar ki aulad? Why now this fact has dawned on them suddenly. It is not very difficult to understand. All these years they dubbed Christians and Muslims as foreigners so that they could be deprived of their political rights. They attacked Sonia Gandhi too as foreigner and hence a danger for the security of India.

But years of dubbing them (Christians and Muslims) as foreigners did not result in

depriving them of political rights, now they have changed their strategy and have begun to say that since they have not come from outside and same blood flows in their veins as that of Hindus why give them minority status. The Indian secular democracy is well established and no one can be deprived of his or her political rights on the basis of religion and hence the RSS leaders want to settle for lesser bargain i.e. delegitimising Christians and Muslims of their minority status, if not of their political rights altogether.

Can such demand have any political sense? Of course it is as senseless as making minorities outsiders and depriving them of their political rights. The RSS leaders in their blind hatred of Christians and Muslims have even forgotten distinction between ethnic and religious minorities. Christians and Muslims are hundred per cent Indians and will remain Indians. But that does not mean they will cease to be religious minorities. Here the example of Jains is also quite apt. The Sangh Parivar has never doubted their Indianness. But Jains do not consider themselves as Hindus but instead they fought for their minority status. Why then the Sangh Parivar does not question their minority status? Why this duplicity in their demand? Thus Christians, Muslims and Jains will remain religious minorities as much as they are of Indian ethnic stock.

Let us also not forget that all Christians and Muslims are not of same ethnic stock in India. The Kashmiri Muslims claim separate ethnic identity from rest of Indian Muslims. The Muslims of Kerala and Tamil Nadu too are of Dravidian stock and so are Muslims of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The Christians of North East do not share same ethnic identity with Christians of North or South India. Thus in Kashmir Muslims are double minority religious as well as ethnic and Christians of North East are, similarly, double minority religious as well as ethnic.

The Muslims of north India in states like U.P. Bihar or M.P. share same ethnicity as that of Hindus but are minority in religious sense. The Christians and Muslims of Kerala and Tamil Nadu share same ethnic identity with rest of Hindus there yet they are religious minority. This is as clear as crystal even to common person but the RSS ideologues, clouded as they are by their rightwing ideology, cannot understand this simple truth.

In fact the Sangh Parivar's goal is to deprive religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims of their minority status but now they have been caught in the web of their own ideology. All these years they described Islam and Christianity as alien religions and Sikhism and Buddhism though minority religions but of Indian origin. They have no objection in accepting Sikhs and Buddhists as 'religious minorities' as they are of Indian origin and now that RSS leaders themselves are saying that Christians and Muslims are also of Indian origin and same blood is flowing in their veins why are they demanding that Christians and Muslims be deprived of their minority status. Is it not obvious contradiction?

It clearly means that they are hostile to Christians and Muslims for ideological reasons, not for being Indian or non-Indian. They are opposed to Article 30 of the Constitution also as it gives Christians and Muslims right to set up their own institutions to preserve their religion and culture. But they forget that among Hindus too there are cultural and linguistic minorities. Will those ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities agree to the article 30 being abolished from the Constitution?

Mr. Lalkrishna Advani is a Sindhi and a migrant from Sindh in 1947. Do Sindhis claim status of cultural and linguistic minority or not? If Lalkrishna Advani's party or RSS (Mr. Advani is supposedly hardcore RSS man) demands abolition of article 30 how Mr. Advani will reconcile this demand with the status of his own community? Will he be able to carry his own community with him?

Even Ramkrishna Mission petitioned Calcutta High Court to declare them as religious minority as they too wanted to benefit from the provisions of article 30. Why the RSS leaders did not launch any vigorous movement to oppose this demand of the Ramkrishna Mission? Obviously because they are neither Christian nor Muslim. RSS has problem with these two communities only because of their religion, not because of their ethnic stock. The RSS espouses a political ideology, which rejects religious pluralism.

Thus real problem is with the RSS ideology, not with Christians or Muslims or Jains or Sikhs or with status of religious minorityness. And the real strength of secular democracy is inclusivity, not exclusivity. No secular democracy can ever succeed without acceptance of pluralism. For a pluralist society like India, it is not only democracy but secular democracy, which is important. In secular democracy a 'religious other' does not become a 'political other'. But an exclusivist ideology like that of RSS, religious other becomes a political other and hence to be rejected.

The globalised world's very *raison d'être* is religious pluralism and India has a unique distinction of being religiously plural for centuries, not since globalisation. The RSS came into existence in 1925 by rejecting this pluralism. All those who reject religious pluralism support political separatism. The Muslim League by espousing Muslim exclusivism brought about physical partition of India. But RSS espouses on one hand, the ideology of *akhand Bharat* (India which can never be divided) could not support physical partition but unashamedly supports invisible and psychological partition, which is any time worse than physical and visible partition.

One has to fight against both visible as well as invisible partitioning of minds. The RSS refuses to reconcile with religious pluralism though reluctantly it has accepted political pluralism. Its ideology of cultural nationalism is not only simplistic but also harmful for the country of India's diversity. For RSS diversity is weakness, for democracy it is its very basis in the modern pluralist world. No one can succeed in creating uniformity in a democracy. Democracy's very life-blood is diversity. But RSS has no love lost for democracy. It believes in authoritarianism and discipline of submission to authority.

A true democrat, on the other hand, never believes in submitting but in the right to be different and right to be different. A democrat would never compromise on the right to differ and would never surrender his/her freedom to criticise. In secular democracy the other sterling quality is respect for 'otherness'. A true democrat will concede right to other to be 'other'. On the other hand, RSS wants other to be mirror image of majority community. Such an ideology can only succeed by destroying democracy and democratic values.