

RELIGION STATE AND SOCIETY-A PERSPECTIVE

It is beyond any question that any society or nation is not void of religion of some kind or other. Today religion and its various practices have become the macro-determinants of social, economic, cultural and political aspects of any nation. Both in history and at present, religious beliefs, ideas, philosophies, structures, social systems, cultural patterns, institutions, rituals and symbols are in the process of exploration. There are theories that suggest a mode of interdependence wherein one sees religion as the soul of the society, but such a perspective does not take into account the existence of certain aspects of societies or cultures whose identifiable elements do not fit into popular prescribed religious elements. Such heterogeneity is confused with and against grammatical directives of dominant religious praxis and popular culture, which clashes with a societal interpretation of functional rules for a nation's governance and policymaking.

Karl Marx in his statement notes that 'Religion is the opium of people.' For many intellectuals, perhaps this statement is the lone source to know about the ideas, ideology and writings of Marx, mostly quoted – rather misquoted – as per the whims and fancies. This is more specific when such intellectuals from the European Christian background or that of any other similar religions. This differing opinion about religion needs a serious revisit. This snippet from Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* goes like this...

'Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, and the soul of the soulless conditions. "It is the opium of the people."

The abolition of religions as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their conditions is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.'

In the Indian context too, one could observe many critiques of religion. In modern India, Ambedkar was the first person to challenge the more liberal paradigms of Vivekanand and Gandhi where he emphasised untouchability as part of the caste system, whereas caste system is the foundation on which the Hindu religion stands. He believed that repairing the blot of untouchability

would not remove the systems of graded equality, social hierarchy and blockades to freedom. In 1935 in his Nasik address he said that Chaturvarna must be abolished and the Brahminic religion must be uprooted. He goes on to say that caste as an institution cannot be destroyed and therefore expecting equal treatment in an unequal structure will not be wise. Thus it is essential for the untouchables to leave the Hindu fold itself and acquire a new identity.

Ambedkar the strongest critics of Hindu religion India had ever seen, however, was not undoubtedly less critical of Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism. To him religion was the social force that bound people together as a single group or community, though a set of codes, laws and sanction. Accordingly it could also be mechanism of establishing slavery of specific set of people. His thoughts on religion surrounded the question to what extent a religion delivers justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. Despite his tactical conversion, from his personal point of view and from multiple sociological perspectives, he could be easily termed as an atheist having strong faith on human realities, science and scientific inventions.

Ambedkar's contemporary radicals in India, critically failed to address this reality of religion, rather the likes of Gandhi went on to uphold the *Varna Ashram* dharma. Religious critics like Bhagat Singh (in *Why I am an Atheist?*) delimited their criticism to that of rites, rituals, practices and structures of religion (particularly Hindu and Sikh). Nehru and Bose could not dare to come up openly against the philosophical and doctrinal delimitations of Hindu religion. Thus Ambedkar's search and struggle for a different religion turned more rigorous ending up with Buddhism. The Buddhism propagated by Ambedkar was in itself the rejection of religion order including other schools of Buddhism such as Mahayana, Hinayana, Vajrayana, Theravada and many similar ones. This rejection of religious doctrines including that of the multiple schools of Buddhism could be seen in the 22-vows given by him. Thus an idea of secular religion marked its entry in modern times.

The inclusion of the term 'secular' in many nation states, marked a subtle paradigmatic shift from a heterogeneous religious society to an inclusive 'all religions' one. On the other hand the policy of Secularism has also resulted in non-acceptance of certain religious beliefs in favour of a homogenous society. The line between the popular and not so popular religions in a society has resulted in a centre-periphery debate yet again. Ideas of non-religiousness, has always revolved around rational debates on religion. The elite religious beliefs distances itself from such practices by either absorbing certain rituals, practices and tradition or by overlapping, or abstaining from those which are not very comfortable to acknowledge.

Today, the political game planners blueprint the entire election campaigns on the basis of religion and sell dreams of employment, prosperity and comfortable lives – all in the name of God. Hence God is the most appropriate saleable commodity to attain power. Critical analysis of this determination makes one look back and re-examine the relationships of religion and the society, the reasons behind its vice like grip on all aspects of life and its continual vivisection of the society. Such analysis also proposes to look at attempts to build alternative models of religion in the society through

secularism and inclusion.

In an age of technology, how are religions or more explicitly non-religious communities creatively and productively engaged? In what ways might communities set agendas for personal and community actions? What principles of companionship the religion could offer to the society as a whole, and how could it provide leadership roles on issues like inter-faith dialogues and as a locus for the development across unified voice in differing faith systems. How are questions of justice, freedom, love, peace, inequality, poverty and human suffering addressed by religions/non-religions/ atheism/ secularism? In this issue of JPS, the authors explore these in detail. We hope it would bring forth cross-sectional analysis and new knowledge to academic explorations.

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