

The Revolt of 1857: A Search for Secular Approach

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Secularism is a concept where government or other entities adopt the policy of separating the state from religion and/or religious beliefs. In one sense, secularism means a freedom from governmental imposition of religion upon the people within a state that is neutral on matters of religious belief. When someone caters to the word secularism, one certainly lays down two different paths for religion and politics to tread on. In medieval Europe there was a strong tendency for religious persons to despise human affairs and to meditate on God and the afterlife. As a reaction to this medieval tendency, secularism, at the time of the Renaissance, exhibited itself in the development of humanism, when people began to show more interest in human cultural achievements and the possibilities of their fulfillment in this world, which for some analysts were the initiation of Renaissance. From its birth, secularism started its journey with a view that state will remain free from religious affiliation. Another important feature of secularism was that religion is only an individual affair and in public affair religion should have no role to control or lead human life. It mainly arose to fight against Christian laws which led to blasphemy in medieval Europe. Secularism never denied religion in human life but it denies the necessity and importance of religion in politics. In the present day world, the term secularism encompasses all values and beliefs devoid of any religious-spiritual code.

In a general way, the definition of secularism is taken to be as a belief in the fulfillment of life in this world through material instrument, a belief in natural causation that there is a cause behind every event of nature located in natural laws, recognition of reason, free inquisition and conduct experiment as intermediary of human vocation, inviolability of each person irrespective of accidents of birth and inherent human rights to freedom and autonomy. In another sense, it refers to the view that human activities and decisions, especially political ones, should be based on evidence and fact unbiased by religious influence.¹

It has been argued that secularism is a movement toward societal modernization. This type of secularism, on a social or philosophical level, has often occurred but secularism on a social level is less prevalent^{2,3} Within countries as well, different political movements support secularism for varying reasons.⁴ Religious beliefs are widely considered a relevant part of the political discourse in India. This contrasts with other countries (Western) where religious references are generally considered out-of-place in mainstream politics. Positive ideals behind the secular society are —

- a. Deep respect for individuals and the small groups, of which they are a part,
- b. Equality of all people,
- c. Breaking down of the barriers of religious differences.⁵

In the Indian context, secularism from the mid 19th century has been viewed from a very positive dimension. The great revolt was a watershed in the history of modern India. It marked the first national challenge to the British rule in India, emboldened the growth of Indian nationalist politics and presaged significant constitutional changes in British India.⁶ The nineteenth century India witnessed many anti-imperialist uprisings against British imperialism. Amongst the most significant were the Kol Uprising of 1831, the Santhal Uprising of 1855, and the Kutch Rebellion, which lasted from 1816 until 1832. There was also precedence of a soldier's mutiny when Indian soldiers in Vellore (Tamil Nadu, Southern India) mutinied in 1806. Although unsuccessful, it led to the growth of unofficial political committees of soldiers who had several grievances against their British overlords. The 1857 revolt in India was much more powerful. The various societal fringes that existed during the revolt were broken up amongst various class and religious divisions since long. But when the revolt took place such division or barriers simply withered, where one can witness groups fighting against a single exploiter irrespective of their caste or religion. Such amalgamation of barriers can be attributed to a sudden birth of a sense of equality and secularism among the rebels who fought against the East India Company. One may also note that the barriers disappeared amongst the rebels only during the revolt. Difference existed, before and continued to exist even after the revolt. In this paper an attempt will be made to highlight the cohesive attempt of the sepoys against the common enemy as a whole. The revolt started with the mutiny of Indian sepoys over the use of greased cartridges, but the sepoys were soon joined by broader sections of people whose economic, political and social rights were encroached and had been exploited by the East India Company. The unique feature of the 1857 revolt was the solidarity amongst the rebels cutting across religious and cultural barriers. Leaders of the revolt issued proclamations to stress the importance of communal amity, emphasizing the need of unity of the Hindus and the Muslims to join hands together to drive out the Britishers and protect their own rights, customs and rituals. For the colonised, the feeling was of patriotism, sacrifice and of an overarching solidarity cutting across the traditional divides in Indian society. The Azamgarh proclamation⁷ called upon the Indians of all classes and of all religions to rise up against tyranny of the British. The rebel leader Feroz shah's proclamation of August 1857 reiterated the same national spirit: "it is well known to all that in this age, the people of Hindustan, both Hindus and Mohammedans, are being ruined under the tyranny and oppression of the infidel and treacherous English".⁸

Historians have also drawn our attention to such examples of muslim rebel leaders banning sacrifices of cows during the Id festival to avoid any Hindu- Muslim discord. The striking feature of the revolt of 1857 was that both the Hindus and the Muslims assiduously organized the front against the foreign rule. Hindu – Muslim unity was visible among soldiers and people as well as among leaders.⁹ The frustration the sepoys felt was largely caused by the policy of organizing the army by the British Imperial Government. For reasons of convenience, the British recruited soldiers for the Bengal army from an area where people spoke and understood the same language namely; Hindustani.¹⁰ Rules were framed in 1850 to include the stipulation that upper caste men only would be recruited to the Bengal army. At the same time in order to encourage cohesive action at command, divisions on religious

lines were not introduced in the Bengal army. Imperialism had not discovered till then that it could use everywhere religious divisions between Hindu and Muslims. For this lapse they were censured by a loyal official and future educationist, Syed Ahmed Khan, when he wrote his book *Asbab-e-Bagawat-e-Hind* (causes of the Indian rebellion), in which he argued that it was a mistake for the British government to put both Hindu and Muslim sepoys in the same regiments and companies, for when they shed their blood together, they became closer than brothers to each other, and could no longer be used against each other. Soldiers of this modern army, which had very little to do with the Indian ruling classes of older days, and which was perhaps the most numerous modern element in Indian society of that time, had thus evolved two important features. It was very highly caste sensitive, and yet it was not communal.¹¹ It was stated repeatedly on the floor of the British parliament that both the Talukders and the Hindu-Muslim peasants of Oudh had joined hands in the rebellion against the British government and the tie was strengthened by the proclamation of the Mughal prince Firoz Shah (25th August 1857) the pundits, fakirs, and learned men, both Hindu and Muslim, would be given lands, provided they declare in favour of the rebels. Starting out as a revolt of the sepoys-it was soon accompanied by a rebellion of the civil population, particularly in the North Western Provinces and Oudh. The masses gave vent to their opposition to British rule by attacking government buildings and prisons. They raided the "treasury", charged on barracks and court houses, and threw open the prison gates. The civil rebellion had a broad social base, embracing all sections of society - the territorial magnates, peasants, artisans, religious mendicants and priests, civil servants, shopkeepers and boatmen. For several months after the uprising began in Meerut on May 10, 1857, British rule ceased to exist in the northern plains of India. Muslim and Hindu rulers alike joined the rebelling soldiers and militant peasants, and other nationalist fighters. Among the most prominent leaders of the uprising were Nana Sahib, Tantia Tope, Bakht Khan, Azimullah Khan, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Kunwar Singh, Maulvi Ahmadullah, Bahadur Khan and Rao Tula Ram. Former rulers had their own grievances against the British, including the notorious law on succession, which gave the British the right to annex any princely state if it lacked "legitimate male heirs". The rebels established a Court of Administration consisting of ten members - six from the army and four from the civilians with equal representation of Hindus and Muslims. The rebel government abolished taxes on articles of common consumption, and penalized hoarding. Amongst the provisions of its charter was the liquidation of the hated 'Zamindari' system imposed by the British and a call for land to the tiller.¹² The support from the kings is good evidence of non communal attitude of the rulers as for example Nana Sahib's world view was not clouded by religious prejudices and the Rani of Jhansi, some of whose most determined fighters were Muslim gunners and Pathan guards. On the supposedly Muslim side, the way the standard of jihad was removed from the Jama Masjid in May 1857 at Delhi, lest it be apprehended as being directed against the Hindus, and all cow and buffalo slaughter was banned at the Muslim Idus zuha festival in July, it showed the rebels' determination to prevent all religious disputation. At Bareilly, Bahadur Khan, the principal rebel leader, printed an appeal to Hindu chiefs to join the struggle against the British, detailing the attacks on Hindu customs and taboos by the British and offering, on behalf of Muslims, to utterly abjure cow slaughter and the eating of beef.

Rajat kanta Ray has very comprehensively dealt with the attitude of mind of the various sections of the rebels.¹³ He particularly underlines the fact that in the rebellion of 1857, in the minds of most of the participants, even when they were not sepoys, but civilians, the sense of religious differences receded to a surprising degree. Hindu contingents would elect Muslims as their representatives; Muslims contingents would accept a Hindu subedar major as their head. Among the Muslims who voluntarily joined the rebellion, under the impulse of joining a righteous war or jihad there was the same acceptance of the need for Hindus and Muslims coming together to fight for a common cause; the target was the British alone. The author argues that the concept of nation hood, although defined by the modernity, is nevertheless likely to be rooted in older feelings and ideas. Watershed events such as the uprising of 1857 and the wars that replaced the Mughal empire with British rule, along with the general evolution of sub continental identity over centuries, engendered a common emotional experience that formed the psychic foundation of the later nationalist movement.¹⁴

The famous rebel leader and theologian Ahmadullah Shah repeatedly appealed to both Hindus and Muslims to fight unitedly to defend their respective faiths against their English oppressors.¹⁵ During the period of 1857 one rebel leader Bahadur Khan was moving through Bareilly with two banners, one the banner of Islam, a green one and another large banner or the 'Holy Dhvaj'.¹⁶ A similar ceremony had been undertaken by Nana Saheb at Kanpur. On 11th may, 1857 the sepoys of the Meerut regiment captured Delhi and proclaimed the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar as their undisputed leader. The Delhi proclamation also exhorts that 'all Hindus and Mahommedans should be of one mind in this struggle'.¹⁷ A few instances of conflict between members of Hindu and Muslim communities occurred among the civil population. These were reported by spies employed by the English and their veracity has been questioned by competent historians like Mahdi Husain.¹⁸ The reports on battles fought by the rebels consistently show that Hindu and Muslim soldiers and officers fought side by side. A striking feature of the proclamations from the leaders of the rebellion is the oft repeated emphasis on the unity of the Hindus and Muslims in a common struggle. Almost every agenda making public documents on the rebels' side reflected the desire of the leaders of the rebellion to keep their Hindu and Muslim followers united, while denouncing Christians or firangis equal to English. This call for unity, among the Muslims and Hindus, is perhaps to be interpreted in the light of the rebel leaders' perception of secularity. Though a kind of religious fundamentalism had been the inspiration behind the rebellion, the idea of Hindu- Muslim unity was no less strong. The 1857 revolt, which had forged an unshakable unity amongst Hindus and Muslims alike, was an important milestone in our freedom struggle - providing hope and inspiration for greater unity among the Hindus and the Muslims. However, the aftermath of the 1857 revolt brought about dramatic changes in colonial rule. After the defeat of the 1857 national revolt, the British government embarked on a furious policy of "Divide and Rule", fomenting religious hatred between the two as seen never before. Resorting to rumors and falsehoods, they deliberately recast Indian history in highly communal colors and practised pernicious communal politics to divide the Indian masses. That legacy continues to plague the sub-continent even today. However, if

more people become aware of the colonial roots of this divisive communal gulf, it is possible that some of the damage done to Hindu-Muslim unity can be repaired. If Hindus and Muslims can join hand together and collaborate in the spirit of 1857, the sub-continent may yet be able to unshackle itself from it's colonial clutch of the past.

Notes and References

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16. A *Dhvaj* is the sacred flag or banner of the *God*, or a hero, or a royal house. It symbolizes Hindu culture.
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