

Cultural Nationalism or Secular Democracy?

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After going through the turmoil created by Advani's 'Secular Jinnah' statement, its controller, RSS decided to get rid of him and finally appointed Rajnath Singh, a regional leader, as the President of BJP. Rajnath Singh was not much known in the broader circles and the views he held were practically not much known barring the fact of his tenure as the UP chief minister, which had nothing much to write home about. Now with his pronouncements coming one can understand why he has been chosen as the President sidetracking others who are much more popular in the political arena. Mr. Singh holds on to hard core Hindutva, which its progenitor Lal Krishna Advani had to tone down in the light of BJP electoral debacle and compulsions of electoral calculations. Singh in contrast holds to those even now. In one of the functions recently he went on to give the outline of his understanding about his political ideology. He reaffirmed his belief in cultural nationalism, and said that, culture is the main driving force of the nation, and that India is not a politico-territorial state but geo-cultural state. He also compared India with Israel. While the belief in cultural nationalism is not new, we have been hearing about it from last two decades and more, his comparison of India with Israel was a new dimension to the ideology held by Sangh.

In contrast to the values of India's freedom movement and the principles of Indian constitution, India as a secular democracy, the Sangh combine projected that India is a Hindu Rashtra. It also brought forward the notion of cultural nationalism, the earlier version of which was Hindi, Hindu Hindustan. In contrast the Muslim communal version of, Urdu-Muslim-Pakistan. These are both parallel but opposite concepts, mutually boosting each other. Cultural nationalism was contrasted to the notion of India as a nation state, as a geo political phenomenon, and carried the saffron flag as a symbol and Ram Gita and Acharyas as the central rallying cultural (religious) points. For this politics the religion became the sole marker of culture. The rich concept of culture as the set of

aspects of social and political life got reduced to the values derived from the Brahminic version of Hinduism.

Religion, its particular elitist version, as the central repository of culture is the hallmark of narrow sectarian politics based either on race or religion. Hitler in his heydays did usurp democracy from within by bringing forward the notions of cultural superiority of Aryans. Interestingly he and Mussolini both brought forward the concept of integral humanism for their political agenda. Just to recount these twin markers of fascist politics led their countries to the path of suicide. In Germany the process of unleashing the agenda of cultural nationalism led to the massacre of 120 lakh people, half of them being the Jews. It is not a mere coincidence that he came for praise from the ideologue of Hindutva, M.S. Golwalkar, "...to keep up the purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races, the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well neigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in India to learn and profit by. (We or Our Nationhood Defined, p.27)". It is no wonder that Hitler found/finds a place of honor in the schools text book of BJP ruled Gujarat.

Modern nation states have come in the geopolitical zones, with the common pasts and divergent social groups mingling with each other. Geo political regions are the base of nation states. Culture has too many more aspects than one stream of a particular religion. Religion does matter but only as one of the components of culture. Again the country has many cultures, within the same political boundaries. In the democratic polity these cultures supplement each other in providing the richness to the life and ethos of the country.

Interestingly for the proponents of cultural nationalism the problems related to the lives of people, related to their existence hold a secondary place, if at all. Despite their using them for electoral purposes here and there, the running thread of their politics is around religious assertion, identity based politics, at the cost of economic and social issues. In particular, the social reform and the concept of rights of the marginalized, exploited,

deprived sections are pushed to the backdrop and the ones' related to dress code for women, the respect for clergy and god men, the promotion of religiosity and rituals comes to the fore. It is true that at times earthly issues are also talked about, but in political sphere it is the emphasis that matters. For the politics based on cultural nationalism the issues of bread, butter, housing, education, employment and health are non issues. Be it Taliban, or Hitler, Sudarshan or- Rajnath Singh, the emphasis is on the religious identity related matters. And in a way this is a conscious ploy to undermine the needs of poorer sections of society, their rights and their welfare.

During freedom movement the peddlers of cultural nationalism, Hindu or Muslims, were not supported by the vast sections of Indian people. They had a narrow base in the elite sections of society which slightly broadened due to the communal propaganda over a period of time. A tiny section of middle class intellectuals joined the Landlord-Kings and produced the ideology of Hindutva and Islamism which drew some more borderline segments of society and could mobilize some downtrodden. Despite that, it remained marginal phenomenon but was potent enough to cause the violence in the name religion. This politics with the ideology of cultural nationalism (Muslim and Hindu both) played in the hands of British policy of divide and rule resulting in partition of the country. In Pakistan, the upholders of communal politics, the practitioners of this 'cultural nationalism' were in power most of the time and their politics led to the spilt, further partition of Pakistan into Pakistan and Bangla Desh. In Sri Lanka similar politics played a crucial role in oppressing the Tamils leading to the rise of LTTE. In India it has come up in stronger fashion from the decade of 1980s resulting in the horrific violence against the minorities geared around the Ram Temple issue. To reemphasize, the word used by Mr. Singh, 'integral humanism', which incidentally is very popular in Sangh combine, was also used by the fascist regimes of Germany and Italy to unleash internal repression against minorities and to launch aggression against the neighboring countries.

In a way Mr. Singh is right when he says that for Sangh combine, his concept of India is the one like that of Israel. Israel came in to play a crucial role for the imperialist designs of controlling the oil rich zone and has been operating on the principles of Zionism, again a concept serving the elite Jews in

today's times. It was presented as the Jewish homeland but it had support of just a small section of Jews, the affluent ones'. Israel's aggression against Palestinians runs parallel to the internally repressive state. No wonder Mr. Singh sees it fit to compare his notion of Hindu Rashtra, cultural nationalism, as an ideal to be pursued.

Incidentally there are various contradictory phenomena around the concept of nationalism doing rounds at the same time. They are struggling against each other simultaneously. On one hand we have the process of Globalization breaking the barriers between nations at economic level, though it is highly loaded in favor of the rich nations. At the same time in different states the sectarian concepts of nationalism are coming up in a serious way. Even in U.S. the Nation is being identified as an Anglo Protestant English speaking country. Samuel Huntington the one to give ideological veneer to the US imperialist designs, has come out with a book, 'Who are we'? And quite like M.S. Golwalkar he too identifies elite section of US as the defining axis of US, an Anglo Protestant English speaking nation. The similarities between the sectarian ideologies cutting across different nations is not just incidental. It articulates the ideology of affluent who claim to own the country because of religion, caste or creed. One does not know whether Huntington, the ideologue of "Clash of Civilizations", 'backward' Islam versus advanced West, has read Golwalkar or not, but surely he will be 'delighted' to see the similar wave length of the thought process. No wonder Huntington happens to be favorite of the Hindu right!

The boundaries of nations states should be breaking and paving way for a borderless human society. The sectarian but powerful sections, who strengthen each other, are seeing the dangers of pluralism, boundary less world and so the narrow sectarian concepts of Nationalism, appealing to the orthodox-upholders of status quo, are being projected far and wide. It seems the progressive ideologies, the one's standing for the interests of poor and deprived sections of World have to give a deeper thought to enhance the rights of every living human being, to come back to ideas and movements which can actualize the U.N. Charter of Human Rights, to be able to march towards a more humane society, looking at all human beings as equal irrespective of their religion, language, caste, gender or creed.

P.S.

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