

Secularism In Nepal: Consequence of Postcolonial Consciousness

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Abstract- *In this article my claim is that Nepal is declared a secular country as a result of postcolonial consciousness of the Nepali people. In Nepal, non-Hindus were feeling that they were colonized by the Hindu religion. Secularity and postcoloniality are interrelated ideals in this context. As a balancing principle, secularism can, to a great extent, harmonize and reconcile various religions and cultures in Nepal. This article focuses to discuss on the advent of secularism; the hypothesis is that the shift from Hinduism to secularism in Nepal is a result of postcolonial awareness. I develop key concepts, conduct interview with some scholars from different religious groups, study the ideas of freelancers published in printed media and analyze their ideas testing my hypothesis and draw a conclusion. Both postcoloniality and secularism harmonize the hybrid cultures, and incorporate various religious groups and ethnicities maintaining equal status in the political system. Secularism, thus, can be a balancing principle and can create religious tolerance as well as religious and social harmony among the people of diverse groups.*

Keywords- secularism, postcolonial consciousness, religion, tolerance, multicultural

I. SECULARISM AND POSTCOLONIALITY: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

Secularism is a belief that any religion or religious body should have no part in political or civic affairs. From postcolonial viewpoint, it is a kind of challenge to modernity, nationalism and religious fundamentalism. There is no discrimination on the basis of religion in a secular state.

Secularism is a social ideology. In Jose Casanova's words, one of the features of secularism is "the separation of religion from politics, economy and science" (qtd. in Veer 14). A widely understood fact is that secular state protects freedom of religion and freedom from religion. Secularism is involved in the promotion of sciences, reason and naturalistic thinking. It does not mean that secularism equates to atheism. Many secularists count themselves among the religion.

Secularization is the process by which cultural and social institutions become independent of religious domination

and relatively autonomous in relation to each other and every individual gains more freedom in choosing his/her religious systems. Education systems are expected to be unrelated to religious or political ideology. The final goal of the secularization of all spheres of life is to bring all spheres of existence under human control freeing people from fear of supernaturalism. Moreover, secularism focuses on the changed relationship between believers and their religious beliefs. In the modern world, the public world is divorced from the religious world. Modern societies are marked by religious pluralism. Thus, religion is reduced to the realm of individual meaning and becomes privatized. Secular societies are marked by patterns of religious tolerance and people are expected to commit themselves to forms of government and law based on rational rather than religious principles. Secularization frees human inquiry and activity from the constraints of religion. A particular religion is an interference of rationality and development. Bryan Wilson claims that when Britain and other western societies became secular they entered the age of affluence. He says:

Industrial societies no longer need religion to explain the meaning of life. They have science and logic, rationality and bureaucracy. God and the church are no longer the centerpiece of society's values and lifestyle. Traditional ways of thinking are an obstacle, not an aid of solving modern social problems. (179)

"Postcolonialism is a portmanteau word – an umbrella thrown up over many heads against a great deal of rain" (Slemon 104). Outwardly, post-colonialism is the social, political, economic and cultural practices which arise in response and opposition to colonialism. Ashis Nandi, talking on secularism says: "Secularism is essentially a religious ideology Even many believing citizens described themselves as secular to keep up with the times and because secularism sounded like something vaguely good" (110).

Multicultural or hybridity is a postcolonial subject. Postcoloniality signifies development of anti colonial subjectivity and concepts of an alternative society. Plurality of culture and religion flourishes in postcolonialism. Relating the culture with postcolonialism, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths

and Helen Tiffin argue "The term 'postcolonial' should be seen as a covering all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (qtd. in Bennett and Royle 205).

II. SECULARISM IN NEPAL: CRITICAL STUDY

Nepal is religiously a mixed country. The major religious groups in Nepal are Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christians. Talking on the positive side of secularism some writers argue that secularization becomes effective to cool down the tension between various different religious groups.

Nepal is a multicultural country. Nepal is well-known for diversity in culture, religion, language and other nation-making notions. Since the birth of modern Nepal in the late 18th century, political power had largely been in the hands of Hindu rulers who claimed Hinduism as an official self-image, national identity, strength and unity. Before the proclamation of secular state through the *Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007*, Nepal was the only Hindu kingdom in the world where the king was symbolically regarded as the Vishnu - God of Hindu religion – known as the protector of this land. The relationship between Hindus and non-Hindus or upper caste people and lower caste people was like the relationship between colonizers and colonized; this dichotomy divided people of Nepal in diverse groups. Hinduism was colonial law with patriarchal power, which had a significant role in the construction of state law. In very powerful ways, the Hindu books like *Vedas* and *Upanishads* have focused on the emergence of Hinduism with caste hierarchy; this is one of the unique identities of this religion. To fight the political and economic domination of the high-caste Hindus, the minority religious groups such as Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and other ethnic and untouchables, non-Hindus demanded that Nepal should become a secular state. Secularism is an opposition to Hindu colonialism and a process of decolonization from Hindu coloniality. Colonialism is not only a system of political power but it is also a system of religious power under which one religion suppresses other religions. Secularism refers to a belief that human activities and decisions, should be based on the basis of evidence but not on religious influence. It is neutral regarding the matters of belief and religions. Secular law is based upon reasons and facts. Secularists believe that all activities, except private ones, should be secular, not religious. Any public society or state law should not be based on scripture and should not be determined giving it to religious color. This unbiased concept helps democracy by protecting the rights of religious minorities and atheists as well. In a secular society, religion does not dictate political decisions; religious discussions are not given space in main stream politics.

Caste system is a social system in which a social hierarchy is maintained generation after generation. "The religious explanation, of course, is that the Brahmins proceeded from the mouth of Brahmin, the creator, the Kshetriya from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet" (Abraham 122). This system is often applied to the hierarchical hereditary divisions established among the Hindus on the Indian subcontinent. "*The Vedas, The Mahabharata* and *The Bhagabata Gita* are the self-declared authoritative canons which came off with the endorsement of caste system by which persons were born to particular social groups and could not alter this status, however they might strive" (Weeramantry 22). According to the *Rig Veda*, "The task of Brahman is to relate knowledge. Next in order in rank are the Kshetriyas- the warriors. The third in rank is Vaishyas - the farmers and merchants. Then comes the fourth - the Sudras- the laborers, born to be servants to the other three castes" (Sharma 2005).

After the *Janaandolan II*, occurred in 2006 made very conscious to the non-Hindu people about their condition. Nepalese parliament put an end to King's title as the descendent of Hindu God. The concept of secularism grew in Nepal. More and more groups demanded Nepal to be declared a secular country. There was an internal conflict between the colonizer group and colonized groups in religion. The domination of a particular religion is a threat to freedom of thought and expression. Individuals and minorities started to raise voice against religious issues. In Nepal where there are diverse societies, cultures and ethnic groups, the legality of the government depends on participation of citizens in different issues. The legitimacy of the rules made by the majority even after the establishment of *Loktantra* - complete democracy - was in challenge to bring a radical change in religious condition in the country. In such a situation, the alternative of Hinduism was only secularism in Nepal because Nepal is a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, multireligious and multicaste's independent country. It needs to be liberal in order to tolerate and harmonize its diversity. In this respect philosopher Charles Taylor argues, "Secularism in some form is a necessity for the democratic life of religiously diverse societies" (qtd. in Veer 19).

In Nepal, Hinduism was a colonial law practiced by the Hindu elites. "The colonial policy of 'divide and rule' has had some of its deepest consequences for Hinduism" (Viswanathan 32). The upper caste Brahmins are practitioners of this law. Traditionally, people from the top two castes in the Hindu hierarchy - Brahmins and Chhetriyas – have shared power with king. Even when Nepal exercised limited democracy for 12 years after 1990, most of the elected prime ministers were Brahmins. The parliament as well as the

bureaucracy has an overwhelming majority of Brahmins and Chhetriyas. The majority of Maoist rebels, who have waged a violent war for the past 10 years, belong to ethnic minorities with almost no representation in the state's decision making bodies. Thus, the majority of Nepali people, Hindu or non-Hindu, resisted the colonial construction of Hinduism. They demanded religious historiography to modernize the traditional religion. They wanted to exclude the rooted caste hierarchy which had been easier to the kings of Nepal to colonize the people with 'divide and rule' strategy. They required a balancing principle and religious tolerance to erase the line of majority and minority concept in democratic stance. Many reasons compel to shift from Hinduism to secularism in Nepal. Some of them are (i) refusal to king's colonial rule (ii) the rise of political parties in a democratic setting (iii) the important contributions of feminist scholarship to a reexamination of Hinduism and patriarchy (iv) the political rise of various ethnic groups, non-Hindus and 'dalits' or non-caste groups known as 'untouchable' (v) the minorities' desire for space in every decision making bodies and (vi) the effect of globalization. These effects have had a powerful effect on the deconstruction of Hinduism. Therefore, Nepali government has involved rewriting and deconstructing the religious historicity with relation to king.

Postcolonial consciousness causes the move from Hinduism to secularism. On 18 May 2006, the newly resurged House of Representatives unanimously declared Nepal a secular state. It was mentioned in the interim constitution of Nepal. In Article 4 (i) of the *Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990*, it is stated, "Nepal is a multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and constitutional monarchical kingdom" (2) whereas in the same number of Article of the *Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007*, there is a strong modification. It says, "Nepal is an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive and complete democratic state" (2).

In the declaration of secularism, Hindus have strong reservations but Buddhist, Muslim, Kirat, Jain, Christian and other minority groups welcomed that. But those who most spoke in welcoming the change are the ethnic minorities. They believe that the declaration has given the minorities a feeling of ownership of the state.

Surya P. Subedi, an expert of international law, in his article "secularism in Hinduism" published in *The Kathmandu Post* (June 1, 2006) states, "Secularism is the conduct of the domestic affairs of the state universalism in the human approach to the outside world, and adherence to the principle of peaceful coexistence when dealing with foreign powers of different faiths and beliefs are some of the key elements

deeply rooted in the ancient Hindus thinking." Shedding light on the importance of secularization of a state to create and maintain harmony among people of various religious groups Subedi says, "Kautilya's *Arthashastra* itself constitutes a divorce of politics (both internal and external) from religion. Indeed, a logical consequence of this separation of state power from religion during antiquity was the secularization of the state functions." Subedi, here, emphasizes on the significance of separation of politics from religion. Further, he says, "... religion should be a private matter. It should be divorced from politics and the state." According to him divorce of religion from politics is one of the ways of moving towards greater secularization and democracy.

Declaration of Nepal as a secular state, opines Subedi, has not "diminished" Hinduism in Nepal but it has opened a space for all the people to celebrating their religious festivals in the way they wish and keep their cultural tradition alive. Subedi's saying, "The modern concept of democracy and the ancient notion of a Hindu Kingdom do not seem to go together," indicates that secularism is the demand of the time in this twenty first century. To make Nepal strong and great the state has the only way to promote equality for which secularism is the best way.

Khagendra N. Sharma's article "Secular Nepal: Need of the day" published in *The Kathmandu Post* (May 29, 2006) says that there is not any alternative of secularity in Nepal for its peace, prosperity and progress as expressed in the popular movement of 2006. Till the day of declaration of the House of Representative, Nepal, as a Hindu kingdom, was subsidizing the Hindu religion. Hindu religion was considered as the guiding principle for the formation of the state law. Highlighting the significance of secularism, Sharma says, "Religion and politics are two fundamentally different aspects of human life." Sharma's attempt to prove the need of secularity in Nepal is acceptable for many reasons. He says, "A theocratic state is the thing of the past." According to him, "Secularism ... has now become the doctrine of a modern civilized state," "The state," he states, "has no religion and it should neither promote nor repress any religion." In a secular state the people have absolute freedom to choose any religion they have faith in. Absolution of discrimination of any religion and celebration of equality among various different religions is possible in a secular state. In a secular form of polity no religious group is considered superior to other minority, religious groups. "In a secular state," Sharma argues, "all religions are equal in the eyes of the law."

When Nepal was a Hindu kingdom, as opined by various critics, Hindus, under the banner of Hindu religion dominated other religious groups, since the state law was in

favor of Hindus. Not only people of other religious faiths but also some Hindus were sufferers in the Hindu kingdom. In secular polity people are free to change their religion, whereas when Nepal was the Hindu kingdom change of religion was punishable. Since Nepali population is composed of several ethnic groups, imposition of Hindu religion as a state religion is not acceptable to the non-Hindus. "A secular state," Sharma expresses "is the abode of a wide variety of religions." Suppression of the Hindus to the minority religious groups (non-Hindus) became an inspiration to make the non-Hindus think about making a quest for their religious identity.

Ideas of four Nepali scholars of four dominant religions regarding secularism in Nepal help understand the response of secularism in Nepal.

A Hindu scholar – Swami Prapannacharya –states, "For national and cultural integration and harmony the need and active role of the king is much more important in this changed context. Only the Hindu religion and the monarchy can work as national unity and integrity of Nepal. The interim parliament that declared Nepal as a secular state has not got people's mandate; therefore it is illegal. This declaration invites conflict among various religious groups. Moreover, this brings conflict even within the Hindus." Prapannacharya, argues that Hindu king, an incarnation of lord Vishnu, can give unique leadership to Nepal and Hindu religion; the king can be a real protector of all religions in Nepal. King is the icon of not only of Hindu religion but of integrity, harmony and peace. People of all religious faith can feel pride and dignity in the king's good leadership of Hinduism and Nepal. Prapannacharya views: "In the context of Nepal secularism can be lethal. For several religious conflicts in various countries in the world secularism has been the main cause of religious conflict rather than harmonizing and reconciling various religious groups." Prapannacharya, further says: "Secularism never can be a balancing principle. It ruins the harmonious relationship among different cultures and religious groups and creates hostile relation. Thus, secularism is a curse for both Nepal and Nepali people not only for Hinduism and kingship." [Based on an interview with Swami Prapannacharya]

A Buddhist scholar Vikshyu Ananda says: "We should be clear first that Hinduism did not remain a dominant religion of modern Nepal but made forcibly by political suppression and oppression. After so called historic "unification of Nepal," Nepal was geographically unified but not psychologically. . . . Hence, Nepalese social structure is designed with these basic religious guidelines. This resulted in one society high and low, touchable and untouchable, rich and poor, superior and inferior class. This created an outcry to

stand against this religious biasness. People were divided due to the caste, class, and creed. Even the government favored only Hinduism as "one and only Hindu-state" in the world. The other religions were bypassed by the state in the matter of provisions, facilities, and equal rights to preach, and practice in the country. Thus, one of the major causes for the setback and downfall of Nepal, in social, economic and cultural dimensions was Hindu-dominant policy in the country. Nepal needed for long to be freed from this Hindu dominant policy and bring equal right and equal status to all the other religions in the country. Ananda, further opines: "Religion is purely practice for spiritual advancement to attain such a state of supreme bliss where human being is totally freed from all sorts of physical and mental sufferings and problems. . . it brings biased regulation in the country which may cause split among the people. Hence Religion should be kept apart from politics and other civic affair." Ananda assumes: "Secularism, if truly and honestly practiced with the help of law and order in the country, will develop and guarantee harmony, peace and reconcile religions and cultures in the construction of new Nepal. Because non-secularism guarantees only one religion's rights and security and ignores other religions in the country which results disharmony, disunity and division among different religious groups." Ananda points out: "First, each and every citizen must be guaranteed the equal right to follow their particular religion by constitution. . . . then there would less possibility to plunge into conflicts, violence and demonstrations." [Based on an interview with Vikshyu Ananda]

Rajendra Kumar Rongong - a Christian scholar-makes similar response to Ananda and Quayium. He says, "It depends on the meaning attached to the word secular. There can be extremes. Secularism, on the one hand, may mean 'a system of political or social philosophy that rejects religious faith and worship.' . . . Nepalese are religious people, and because there are many religions I would go for Nepal as being secular with the second type of connotation." Rongong argues: "I believe religion in general provides a basis for building, what I believe, the inner man which in its turn influences the nature and the personality of a person. Politics requires strong and honest people. Hence in this sense I believe religion does influence politics." Rongong asserts, "This depends on whether religion uses us or, we use religion. Religion can be a horrible tool in the misuse of politics. In order to be in harmony we need to accept each other as we are." Rongong's idea is: " 'Harmonious relationship' we so often talk about was superficial. . . . All religions should be treated as equal. Freedom of conscience should be one of our very important fundamental rights." [Based on an interview with Rajendra Kumar Rongong]

Abdul Quayyum- a Muslim scholar- argues: "There is no question of opposing secularism as a principle. Like all people, having democratic and liberal attitude I hail the decision of the framers of the interim constitution. Secularism has enhanced the image of Nepal as a real democratic state in the international politics and global community. Secularism will develop the feeling of security in the people of religious minority in the enjoyment of equal political and social rights." Quayyum feels: ". . . State must respect the religious sentiments of all the communities equally. No law should be made and enforced which is against the religious faith of any community, whether majority or minority state must not be anti-religious, but at the same time it should not be guided by the principles of any particular religion." Quayyum believes: "Muslims minority might be the target of such elements . . . it certainly be helpful in the construction of new Nepal." Quayyum says: "The Hindu fundamentalists are active to make secularism an issue, which might be diverted against the Muslim community. The only solution of this possible threat is the development and strengthening secular political culture. . . ." [Based on an interview with Abdul Quayyum]

III. CONCLUSION

From the ideas of Prapannacharya it has been clear that he is against secularism. According to him secularism cannot be a balancing principle. It does not tolerate other religious groups. Only Hinduism can integrate different caste and ethnic groups as well as non-caste groups in Nepal because it is the Nepalese culture.

Bhikshyu Ananda points out that the declaration of secularism has brought Hindu domination to an end and provided equal status and rights to all religions. He affirms that if practiced fairly, secularism abolishes division, disunity and disharmony among different religious groups. Ananda believes that secularism, a long demanded desire of people, has been achieved as a result of their consciousness.

Abdul Quayyum, thinks that only secularism can be the balancing principle in order to unite different cultures, religions and bring harmony among them. He says that secularism enhances Nepal's image as a truly democratic state in the international arena. Quayyum advocates that only secularism helps create a situation of celebration of unity in diversity. According to him, secularism is an overarching umbrella which encompasses all sects of people and it may be a blessing for the construction of 'New' Nepal. He emphasizes on the importance of true secularism guided by moral and ethical canons.

Rongong states that respect to all religions, equal treatment and acceptance' of everyone's identity and faith is possible only in a secular country. Rongong, very critically and positively rephrases that, various movements in Nepal including *Janaandolan II* are the result of people's consciousness. Nonetheless, he assumes that the movements to some degree, have been manipulated by various groups of people for their vested interest.

Thus, the shift from Hinduism to secularism is a consequence of postcolonial consciousness in Nepal. In fact, secularism is the concept that believes in a process of reasoning rather than religious belief that should govern societies. The formal and direct influence of Hindu religion to the government and a kind of informal domination to other religious groups came to the end with the appearance of secularism. Secularism here is one form of response and resistance against internal colonial partiality and control. In postcolonial discourse, the alternative of Hinduism in a liberal democratic country like Nepal is secularism in which even the people belonging to the minority religious groups can feel celebrated and encouraged in the social structure of multiculturalism.

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