

Original Article



Debating Secularism in Nepal: Conspicuously at Crossroad between Mission or Fashion?

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Abstract

The spectrum of global debates has agendas and discourses of different dimensions ranging from power to regime to environment to terrorism to space war to religion to international relations as well and many more others. Theology had been one of globally guiding motifs behind regimes and rules for long span of time during medieval period and prior to it. No sooner had the religious dominance and dogma derailed and gradually faded out than there was commencement of the wave of Age of Reasoning and industrial revolution. However, of late, the debate on religion and validity on recently declared secularism in Nepal has been a fresh debate again. It is still a pressing question: has secularism been only fashion or indeed a mission? This write-up argues that the discourse of secularism is less rationally reviewed and assessed; rather has been engaged mere emotionally. It eventually urges that such an emotional treatment over crucially complex context should be altered into a remarkably reasonable and rational handling.

Keywords: Secularism, Nepal, Politics, Mission

Introduction

Methodology

This study is a blend of both archival and doctrinal research practices. Secondary data are surveyed and taken into care for building the argument. Qualitative analyses as well as interpretative paradigms are adopted to analyze the theses brought forth. Delphi method, the method of relying on expert's opinion along with generated evidences, has credited slightly larger weight and bigger ground in overall composition of this study. Various types of literatures i.e. books, journal articles, reports, and seminar/conference papers are cited in course of synthesizing the elaboration; and to the extent possible, latest most resources and published into valid cum valuable gateways are taken in priority.

Objectives

This research has two most foundational objectives & those are as follows: a) knowing

about status of countries and situation based on religious identity & b) to assess the gravity of existing debate on secularism in Nepal.

Background

Secularism, which is a new agenda into political landscape of Nepal for more than a decade, is repeatedly reported and remarked to have been one of cardinal achievements in course of promulgating the federal and republic constitution, lately introduced to Nepal. The then Maoist movement and people movement projected it as one of significant departures in state building procedure. The number of experts and analysts joining the same chorus was very high. Rather than acknowledging it as co-footing of all religions harmoniously being observed in nation, Holmberg (2016) regards it as 'public display of Buddhist feature as ethnic representation' then welcomes the development with a heaping praise. Forwarding a scanty and slim resent over the word

secular, Kattel (2010) presents a concern that it had to be equal regard and veneration to all religions as that had been in India. Furthermore, Cannell (2010) argues that Western history specific to Latin Christendom in regard to secularism won't make compatible sense to Nepali course of secularism. Thus, post declaration debate on the issue is always an alarming course to all.

But some of the latest developed political events and exercises have clearly posed couple of other pressing questions over this discourse. Rajendra Lingden, a lively supporter to Hinduism and engaged in politics with pro-monarchy murmur, is with noticeably visible vigour to manipulate current political equations now and ever. Since rise on the lead, his party has consistently raised an agenda of reintroducing Nepal as the Hindu state, which was assumed as one arch marker of national identity for long period of time as Letizia (2013) has claimed. In addition, Mulmi (2011) stands sufficiently skeptical about Hindutwa without monarchy thus denies the possibility of reviving the first sans latter. As neighboring nation is triggering massive uproar against secularism and unleashing utmost and utter efforts to usher politicians in course of Hindu state, eventually that may entail reintroducing Monarch as well, as many scholars guess the course of future politics in Nepal. Deeply doubting on desired transformation from either of one or another existing political parties and policies, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai recently opened a fresh but a frail, fringe and less mobile political party. He is intermittently said of opining on possibility of re-restating Nepal similarly. Sometimes, heavy-weight leaders of major other parties too make an indirect hint about it. Then, this question becomes naturally on front that: will Nepal, any sooner, revive into Hinduism again? Quite a long series of unendingly cross-cutting arguments and counter-arguments are on show, now. But, largely, those debates have been much of fancy fashion than any modest mission.

Discussion and Analysis

In the world, based on projection of worldpress.com (2023), approximately 80 countries with varying locations are secular; and almost identical is the figure of religiously introduced nations. Conceptualizing secularism,

Chowdhury & Islam (2023) regard it an attempt of religious equality and rising trend in South Asian Coastla region.

Approximately two dozen countries are not in any plot yet. Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Madagascar are currently religious nations nevertheless they were secular once. This may be source of misleading satisfaction to those who assume, aspire and opt for restoration of Hindu state in Nepal. KC (2022) regards this as 'centerpiece of the sociology of religion in recent years' across the globe. As cosmopolitan culture and diversities, to qualify for nominating as president of USA, being Christian and Protestant is obligatory for any aspirant. Queen of UK is honoured patronage to Catholics. Australia, inter alia, calls self as Christian state and many other nations are robustly Islamic. Despite having variations on priorities and national obligations, Copson (2017) deems secularism as: 1) separation of religious institutions from the institutions of state, and no domination of the political sphere by religious institutions; 2) freedom of thought, conscience and religion for all, with everyone free to change their beliefs, and manifest their beliefs, within the limits of public order and the rights of others; and 3) no discrimination against anyone, on the grounds of their religion or non-religious worldview, with everyone receiving equal treatment on these grounds; and Shook (2017) also agrees on the propositions. Visvanathan (2016) considers secularism as a discipline and conduct that successfully creates a dialogue between myth and history, science and religion, democracy and pluralism (page: 16). Torri (2019) regards it largely helping Buddhist religious group to have rapid rise and revival, marking a cascading effect to have surge of sturdy support for empowerment of all religious ethnicities in Nepal.

Thus, religion, by far and large, seems being a firm and solid identity to the nations. Any emotional and inebriated shuffling or shambling move is always likely to breed a toxic pandemonium and unfettered bedlam. Gekker et al (2016) decrypt it as new form of ethnic identity where as Khadka (2015) remains alarmed as well since it may germinate fear and confusion among religious minorities. A balanced treatment and prudent procedure not to wreck bond is must.

As a standard principle, state of secularism is believed to erode as well as eradicate religious fundamentalism, which seem rife in some lands-of late- and to groom hobnobbing then compound clemency among all of the clans. Iyer (2016) & Voas & Chaves (2016) also infer in the same front. Even another scholar, Letizia (2016) traces the support of Theravad Monks in case of espousing in introducing it. Nonetheless, a research piece by Inglehart and Wayne (2000) related to Secularization in America reversely concludes that secularism brands people robustly religious, stymies the symphony sustained ab-initio in society, and breaks the bond built for long-time. In secularism, graphs of daunting debates rise; compass of competitive feelings germinate countless among well-tuned inter and intra-societal dissimilar religious clutches and clusters. Benson (2013) deems it as 'denial of belief' thus invokes an exclusionist attitude than equalizing them whereas Farris & De Jong (2013) conclude that secularism has ensued in compounding of theological orthodoxy in lieu of piety. The public psychology of substantively strengthening communal culture as of other groups and collective input unleashed for the same ignites colossal but confrontational competitions.

Once adopted the secularism in place, things especially like societal culture moves beyond the usual juridical and political theoretical debates as Ferrari & Pastorelli (2013) infer basing their studies vis a vis Burqa affairs which brought a mild tension across Europe. To be specific in Nepal, feelings like fairly extravagant Christmas over Dashain and visibly posy and ritzy Idul-Fitar than Buddha Jayanti as well as many more bundles of binaries boost to sensitize people at a new front. Deadly debates like 'why only Hindus at Pashupati', 'Why not mummies nearby Aaryghat' emerge evidently and enmesh people into endless but egregious verbal battles. People commence sensing an inherent identity and rising risk on religion then become overtly conscious and limitlessly suspicious to others than being cooperative. Following the suit of secularism, it is always certain that fundamentalism and fanatics can prevail in name of preserving religion. Ivanescu (2013) feels that it fuels the religious dogma through religious pluralism; but, interculturalism should be the general thesis of secularism as Jansen (2013) argues. With

secularism on rise, Merry (2013) regards the rise of counter public space for inherent social issues and concerns.

If not brought into any limelight or debated strongly for mere public consumption, religious robustness, sooner or later, auto fades out and vanishes from almost every society following the flow and trend of the modernization. Even, of late, neither are the people in Hinduism quite fundamental or apparently confrontational towards others, at present. Citing the example of China, Zuo'an (2013) says that harmony within and between individual religions go automated and further cemented. Harmony without uniformity ensues the situation so. Hinduism was and even is only an appealing but luxurious public identity to the mass populace. Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, is the very place where from, once in short past, Rajendra Lingden's party, which is Hindu religion's arch advocate and determined to restore Hinduism in Nepal as eventual resort of political struggle, secured the highest popular votes though people here excitedly celebrate X-mas and English New Year and many other non-Hindu ceremonies and functions in high passion even than Dashain and Tihar. Thus, Hinduism is assumed as mere a token feature and tool of psychological satisfaction on people rather than any decisive marker of culture and living characteristics. Once forcefully and stealthily secularized, then mutually co-existing people are deeply alarmed. Ghimire (2016) remarks this latest secular effort and intention as diffusion of phenomenon whereas it proposes a mix of Santism, Buddhism and New Age religion, including a portion of ethnic traditions; and Gaenzle (2016) considers it as synergetic religious movement. Feeling heavily risked, more people are in line to unfold additional interest and added input to preserve and promote inherited religion. Had not been signaled and initiated any input or effort in this front, religious predilection and inclination obviously would have faded from fathom or nadir in some years; and people would remain absolutely oblivious about it. But now, it is substantially cemented and apparently augmented. Alam (2016) thinks "diversity is the Devine law, Divine grace to be grateful for, the law of the times, something that is commonplace, a must, a nation integrity, which must be accepted as a positive reality and does not need to be deplored,

and be used as a force that should be maintained for unity of the nation (P :278)". Among many students surveyed at Kathmandu School of Law (a renowned and world-ranked Law School in Nepal & only 'QAA certified Law school' in Nepal), barely anyone is found to have religious rigidity as 93% had mix culture; and 7 percent, who had presented mono culture, were never and nowhere disgraceful or hostile to the rest.

Industries and institutions working and willing to inject a series of an unending confrontation among citizens and install the erosion on civilian unity at the top in Nepal deliberately devised then brought forth the issues of secularism stealthily and secretly. Making it further clear, Timilsina (2020) writes, "secularism seems to have been introduced in Nepal with an intention to denounce each other despite of empowering the existing religious harmony" (Page: 29) and Adhikari (2017) also tags it as a step of vested political aim.

Owing to relishing re-introduction of democracy, backed with massive people movement in 2046, casual confrontation and additional altercation among people especially in grass root and base level were visibly high; and that was adjudicated and judged on political difference. Differences on political engagement and party membership or alignment were counted as first qualifying or desirable reference on wedding, funeral, other nexus and relations and social get-togethers as well. Now people consider difference in political faith and voting choices as a normal case and mere an electoral purpose. Cacophonies and fracas on such differences are not usual and ultra-tropical alike in the past. And to propel the series of chaos and confrontation, the divide through debate of secularism has been injected as an instrumental tool. To underpin the underlying intent, Toffin (2016) deems it as ethnicization of politics alike Sax & Basu (2015) had proclaimed in the same way.

The brusquely introduced secularism is assumed as a deliberate tool and intentional instrument to fragment and divide people into numerous and countless plots prone to confrontation and decay the harmony and sound symphony that people in Nepal are manifesting markedly. Letizia (2015) believes that many people might have deliberately but unwillingly accepted the secular tide on fear

of being seen as monarchist. Further, Nath (2016) argues that the concern and worries of pro-Hindu people is on rapid rise regarding number of churches and upsurge graph of proselytization than thwarting secular itself. So, many people might have negotiated it with various compulsions however are not in mood to willingly nourish and nurture it ahead.

Unlike other modes and traits, cultural transformations and changes are not pretty easy; the input on mere drafting and promulgating laws seldom ascertains and guarantees it. Religion is a private affair of each of the individuals, in which others and even the state cannot and should not interfere at all (page: 2), Pandey (2013) stresses the argument.

Forceful friction and coercive changes are barely possible and definitely don't not take place. Even top leadership of all the parties in nation is accused of having hefty pecuniary gains and many other mysterious hanky-panky bonanzas in this issue through hush-hush consultation with foreign sides and anti-national interest. It is frequently said that the secularism never was even an issue of the latest mounted mass movement, nation-wide demonstration and assumed accruing democratization. Even that significantly large quarter of people had fairly and candidly advised to set Nepal as Hindu state during the phase of 'suggestion collection' campaign over the preliminary draft, before promulgation, of the constitution. To unfold the fact, Letizia, (2015) writes, the Constitution Recommendation Commission of that period also received many suggestions not to declare Nepal as a secular state (P: 71). Nonetheless, a tiny quarter of citizens and pool of activists were in demand of it. Letizia, in her research *Shaping Secularism in Nepal*, writes that the demand for the declaration of secular state also came from the communists who believed in secularism and also from Buddhists and practitioners of other religions who thought that their respective religious beliefs and practices would be better protected if the state was declared secular. Janajati activists, liberal intellectuals and politicians who had been influential in the regime change of 1990 AD were also in favour of declaring Nepal as a secular state as Onta (2015, p. 6) believes.

However, religion is, nowhere, neither a measurement of success; nor any religion is intentionally prioritized by the nation. Sanskrit was preserved for sometimes, ab-initio, not only for being the language used and brought into practice by the Aryas. Many of valuable treatises, books and archives on oriental philosophies and civilizations are documented in Sanskrit. Pali language, on which many of famous and well revered Buddhist discourses are documented, is too being equally preserved by the government and state. Germany is said to have a huge number of Sanskrit universities in the world. A landmark reference, *Economics* by Kautilya, an ancient and redoubtable philosopher & prolific author cum promising diplomat, was written in Sanskrit vernacular. Most of the foundational books and references on classical occidental philosophies are in Hebrew, Latin and Greek languages; and western governments in various respective nations have actively preserved those languages. Nation's investments and immediate care on some specific languages are not on ground of religion, rather on rationality those bear. We are incorrectly interpreting such needful and necessitated action of the state to reserve and preserve the saga of history. Shah (2017) believes that society never remains static; and dialogue between democracy and pluralism as shared by Visvanathan (2016, p. 16) is always a regular manifest. Thus, the secularism should also be debated in terms of its intent and implication.

Being only an officially accepted Hindu state over the globe, Nepal had an intimate concern and a boundless love from all Hindus over the world. There was no any egregious and detrimental religious confrontation. Healthy consternations over minor contretemps were on scene and site sometimes. Outer respect, love and gratitude were always high and at the peak. KC (2022) believes that Hinduism and Hindu religion based divinities were one of the major identities of Nepal as that time; and Bullivant & Lee (2016), and Shook (2017) also have similarly argued in their works as well.

Now the external respect and valued veneration has faded; and, internal cacophony and confrontation are rife as well as taking a rapid rise on various bases. Parties deliberately willing to enervate and emasculate Nepal have remarkably received more than of wishes from single agenda

of secularism. In past too, there was no sign of religious fundamentalism and neither any discrepancy was exercised. Jayshwal (2015) too traces an unshakable theological harmony among various sects in Nepal. Nonetheless, applying purportedly additional alertness more than needed or perceived breeds and brings doubts sometimes. Secularism has been similar sketch.

Rational choices and popular choices are absolutely not the same lenses and angles in the politics. Not sure that each decision goes equally mature and weighty all the time. Barkovic et al (2015) & Chapman (2002) also differentiate between these two choices. Many agendas once purportedly regarded heavily popular thus people were pleaded accordingly have turned to be suicidal to parties and provoked people profoundly with tectonic reversal result and reward to the country. Baseless notion of ethnical provinces from Maoists and bogus misinterpretation on the Constitution from Madhesh based parties are burning examples. In future, ruffle on religion is certain to turn as the same; and, it becomes a suicidal luxury and painful pondering san any immediate panacea to recover. It plunges nation into more of suffocation and damage than any success and dignity. Series of live examples are on sight; more are to appear in front.

Conclusion

Thus, ruffle on religion might be seriously suicidal against of the expected unity, fraternity and elegant prosperity of the nation. Now, it is the time to think whether to go divided for others and united for self. Neither conversion to secularism was well-judged nor was the rationality of it justifiably presented and approved. It was mere brusquely brought discretion of the leaders which seems to be ephemeral for umpteen valid reasons and utterly non-pro-pubic sentiment. The on-going debates over the discourse seems heavily loose, deviated and digressed a lot and taking distressing drive than real core which has to be considered capaciously. The debate on secularism (from introducing to probability of restating as Hindu State again) has been mere a fashion than any strong mission at both fronts either to sustain or switch. Best critical minds are to be solicited to develop a balanced reasoning and mature mission

about secularism than mere to enjoy on ongoing fashionable flush of debates.

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