



Is Nepal a Secular State?

*Dr. Saurabh**

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.

--Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right

In the above quotation Marx said that religion's purpose was to create illusory fantasies for the poor. But, Maoists of Nepal analysed the Marxian principle of religion in the negative context by associating the religious sentiments of the Nepalese people with nationality issue only to gain narrow political mileage.

Nepal was unique in South Asia for the absence of religious tension in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural society and above all, it always practised religious tolerance and harmony. After the advent of democracy in 1990s, Nepal had its limitations to espouse one particular religion since it adopted the principle of equality, liberalism, pluralism and non-discrimination as core values of the new political disposition.

Nepal as a Hindu State

Though India and Nepal are two separate states, they share a common faith

i.e. Sanatan Dharma or Vedic tradition. People of both nations share the same customs, rituals and traditions. Hinduism is the dominant religion in Nepal. More than 80 percent of its 29.5 million population practice Hinduism. But, the projection of Nepal as the only Hindu state in the world had a two-pronged strategy. It helped Nepal not only to put itself at a distance from India but also helped to associate with the Hindu population of India for the interest of the King.

Thus, the declaration of Nepal as a Hindu State by the 1962 and 1990 Constitutions were the policy of projecting its distinct image different from secular India. The 1990 Constitution of Nepal upheld a number of features of Hindu-based Nepali nationalism including the official title of Nepal as a Hindu state. The constitutional provision for the separation of politics from ethnicity and religion, and the prohibition of cow slaughter were for safeguarding the tradition of Hinduism.

Shift from Hindu State to Secular State

Nepal was formally the world's only constitutionally declared Hindu state until early 2006 when the parliament amended the constitution to make it a secular state. On May 18, 2006, the government of Nepal announced that it would henceforth consider itself a "secular state" rather than a Hindu kingdom. All citizens, regardless of religion, would have equal rights. Contrary to the popular belief Nepal has been a Hindu state for a small part of its of existence. It was officially declared a Hindu state only in 1960 when King Mahendra dissolved the first-ever elected parliament and drafted a new constitution vesting absolute powers in the monarchy.

Again, on May 29, 2008 Nepal scripted a new chapter in history as the new Constituent Assembly abolished the 240-year-old monarchy and declared the country a "Secular, Federal Democratic Republic." The 601-member Constituent Assembly met at the Birendra International Convention Centre, Kathmandu and a motion was passed to declare the country the world's newest secular republic. After a series of meetings, the Seven Party Alliance

agreed to table the motion in the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly, dominated by Maoists. Out of 601 members of the Constituent Assembly, 572 were present during the meeting. The motion to declare the country a secular republic was moved by Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitola on behalf of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala. The motion was passed by 560 votes in favour while four members opposed it. The motion said that Nepal will be a Secular, Federal, Democratic Republic nation and the king will be reduced to a common citizen.

Secularism in Nepal implied in 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 co-existence when dealing with foreign powers of different faiths and beliefs. It was expected that secularism may move the state towards greater civilisation and democracy which denies the majority a chance to impose their will on the minority in the name of religion. Secularism would also deny the politicians the opportunity to exploit people's religious sentiments for their own benefit.

The Holy Shrine of Pashupatinath and Indian Priests

Pashupatinath, the temple listed by UNESCO as a world cultural heritage site, was built in the 6th Century and is the centre of faith for millions of Nepalese and Hindus across the world. Since 1804, the Kings of Nepal had been appointing priests from South India, a tradition established by Adi Shankaracharya, to worship the icon of the temple which is considered one of the eight holiest shrines of Hindu faith.

The selected priests should not only be the followers of Balekundru Mutt but should also complete their studies in Tirupathi, India. Since then, the Nepalese have respected this system, and most of them are not against the appointment of Indian priests. Significantly, hundreds of priests at Pashupatinath are of Nepalese origin, but, two priests, who head the temple, are of Indian origin. Nepalese priests also perform puja in Kedarnath, Badrinath, Kashi, Jagannath temple in Puri and several other temples in India

which signifies cultural and religious relationship between Nepal and India.

Maoist-government's Decesion and Intervention by the Nepal's Supreme Court

The Maoist-led government broke the age old tradition by appointing Nepali priests at the Pashupatinath temple in December 2008. But, the Supreme Court of Nepal directed the government to reinstate the South Indian priests and the matter is subjudice. Maoists had objected to the appointing of Indian priests to perform nitya puja at Pashupatinath and demanded that Nepalese priests be appointed instead, also, an independent selection committee be formed to select qualified priests through a process of an open competition.

Discontent with some signs and symbols which were associated with the Hindu state i.e., national symbols, national anthem, the use of Sanskrit language in education and media etc, had now turned into agendas of domestic politics and minority movements. The Maoists provided significant impetus to religious politics and mobilization of non-Hindu indigenous people.

The Unprovoked Attack on Indian Priests

On September 4, 2009 the attack on Indian priests was a humiliating attempt to harm the age-old harmonious relations between the two neighbours. It does not auger well for the traditional relations between India and Nepal.

It was at the behest of the Young Communist League that led the people to replace Indian priests by force from the temple premises, and this was a violation of the Stay Order of Nepal's Supreme Court, passed on January 1, 2009. The Maoists had been pressurising the temple authorities to prevent the Indian priests from conducting religious ceremonies for sometime. Apparently the message that the Maoists were conveying, was that they were unwilling to accept any issue, poltical or religious, which goes against their stand.

Reactions from Government of India and Nepal

India has viewed the attack on the Indian priests at Pashupatinath temple as unprovoked and a criminal act of violence which goes against the grain of civilised ties of friendship between the people of India and Nepal. India has also taken up the issue at the political level. Indian embassy officials visited the temple and reassured the priests about their safety.

The Nepalese government has condemned the attack and stated that the act of hindering the puja at the temple can harm Indo-Nepal relations and conveyed their regret to India at the unfortunate incident. Nepalese authorities have also assured Indian authorities of their plan to take additional steps to ensure the safety and security of Indian priests. Top officials from both sides also held a joint worship, thus exhibiting bilateral amity sending a clear message to Maoists that the relation between India and Nepal are deep rooted and based on mutual respect. Both countries believe that bringing the issue of nationality of the priests is merely a way of politicising the appointment of the priests given that the matter is in the Supreme Court.

Concluding Remarks

The attack on Indian priests is a matter of concern because religion is a factor that brings the people of India and Nepal together. Further, Maoist belief of violence can not be permitted in any civilized and peace-loving country. Religion should not be associated with politics if it is used to de-harmonise the society and secularism should not be imposed in a manner in which it leaves the majority insulted. A modern secular state is strictly separated from religion and this is what Maoists failed to understand. Maoists have tried to politicise the temple issue and appear to impose a cultural revolution that may push Nepal towards religious fundamentalism.

** Dr. Saurabh, Research Fellow, at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi-110001*

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