Introduction

Religion, which can be a contributive factor in forming the basis of relationship between the human and the divine, between humans and humans, and between humans and other parts of the whole universe, has been misused and abused for political gains. India, the largest democracy in the world, has gone a long way in working out a harmony between religious values and secular democratic ideals. What we have achieved during the sixty-two years of our independent national life are too precious to be lost and destroyed. This paper is a brief look at how abuse of religion has tested to the core the fabric of Indian nation which is democratic and secular.

1. Secular India

Though the term “secular” was inserted in the preamble to the Constitution of India by the 42nd Amendment as late as 1976, it is clear that the founding fathers of the constitution of independent India were determined to build a secular India. The meaning of secularism as applied to India is, however, different from its implications in the western countries where it is understood as an orientation which is against religiosity. In India, secularism means recognition of the existence of religions and religious freedom. Indian secularism, therefore, implies that: (a) the state does not have official religion; (b) the state does not draw its legitimacy from religion; (c) the state is neutral to religions; (d) the state is non-religious but not irreligious or anti-religious; (e) the state treats all religions equally; (f) the state is not bound to follow religious dictates and principles in running the government. The application of secularism with these connotations is necessary on account of the societal realities of India. All the world’s major religions are well established in the Indian soil, but none of them can exclusively claim that it is the only Indian religion, and thus has the legitimacy to be the state religion. India is not a Godless state, but a land where many forms of worship co-exist. Majority of the people are religious minded that places of worship are found everywhere, yet the state being a political entity which exists for the welfare of all the citizens, needs to be neutral in matters of religion. This necessitates India to be a secular state.

2. The place of religion in the Constitution

The existence of religions in the Indian society and the need to recognize their hold on the minds, ethos and culture of the people is a stark reality. The state is non-religious or neutral to religions. The balance between the religiosity of the society and the secularity

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of the state has been struck by giving a proper place to religion in the Constitution. According to Article 25: “Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion.” The Constitution also provides, thus, “Subject to public order, morality and health, every religious denomination or any section thereof shall have the right-

(a) to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes;
(b) to manage its own affairs in matters of religion;
(c) to own and acquire movable and immovable property; and
(d) to administer such property in accordance with law.”

The Constitution thus clearly guarantees freedom of religion not only for every individual but also for “every religious denomination or any section thereof.” However, such freedom is not absolute as it is subjected to public order, morality, health and law.

3. Communalism

The process of secularization of politics has faced problems on account of the religious cleavages of the Indian society. The reality of religious cleavages gives rise to sectarianism and communal politics. Independent India has witnessed numerous communal riots. Godhra (2002) and Kandhamal (2007-08) and the continued persecution of religious minority communities in some states, are glaring instances of Indian secularism being trampled upon. They have made blots on the Indian secularism. These will remain in the minds of all well-meaning citizens of this great country.

According to Partha Pratim Basu, Communal politics refers to sectarian exploitation of religio-cultural traditions as a medium of political mobilization directed towards sustaining and promoting insidiously the interests of entrenched social groups. The idea that religious communities are integrated and coherent social entities is largely the product of political sophistry engaged in by the self-seeking leaders of various communities. However, the communal traits ingrained in the attitude and behaviour of the ordinary people also contribute in no small measure to the fabrication and sustenance of the communalist ideology.

This observation clearly points out the fact that communalism arises when two major factors are present, namely, self-seeking leaders who are given to fomenting communal feeling for their own image-building and the unquestioningly receptive communal-minded ordinary, and in many cases ignorant, people who are easily swayed by the political ploys of such communal leaders. Indian society is too fertile for such

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1 Clause (1) of Article 25 of Constitution of India
2 Article 26 of the Constitution of India
3 Hindu-Muslim riots took place after a railway coach caught fire at the outskirt of Godhra in Gujarat state
4 Hindu fanatics started harassing tribal Christians from Christmas of 2007. Blaming Christians for the murder of Swami Laksmanananda Saraswati on the night of 23 August 2008, Hindu mobs killed many Christians, molested Christian nuns and tortured pastors, burnt many Christian homes and rendered thousands of Christians homeless. This was the worst communal violence against Christians in secular India.
communal assertions and articulation of sectarian interests. When such communal politics becomes a mass movement characterized with religious fundamentalism, it poses a danger to the social fabric and the basic constitutional objectives.

4. Issues and instances of politics of religion

According to Paul R. Brass, three ideologies have been in contest for power in India since the late nineteenth century. These ideologies are Hindu nationalism, Muslim separatism and Secularism. Secularism seeks to unite India by doing away with religion from the centre of Indian politics. Hindu nationalism, attacking Secularism as only favourable to minorities, seeks to unite the largest chunk of the population who share common Hindu history in the pre-colonial period. Muslim separatism seeks recognition of two separate communities who can live together only as equals. Indian Muslims find that Secularism alone is not enough to protect their lives, language, property and even their mosques. There is now a search for a new state ideology that recognizes religious pluralism, importance of faith in people’s lives and religious tolerance, rather than secular neutrality. Apart from the contest between these ideologies, secular India has witnessed other instances of communal flare-ups as the consequences of mixing religion and politics.

4.1 Muslim politics

Muslim communalism was low and Muslim community generally voted for the Indian National Congress till 1962, because they had confidence in the party to safeguard their interests as it professed to uphold the secular and democratic ideals of the Constitution. But, when they lost hope in the Congress party from the early 1960’s Muslim communal organizations including Muslim League were revived. They made demands for revision of textbooks which had “Hindu bias”, proportional representation, protection of Muslim Personal Law, recognition of Urdu as second language in north Indian states and preservation of the minority character of the Aligarh Muslim University. They were further estranged from the Congress party during the Emergency period (1975-76). They largely voted against the Congress party and took side with the Janata party, but their relations became strained soon. The revival of Hindu nationalism in its extreme form contributed to the Hindu-Muslim antagonism, which resulted in riots. The Hindu tinge in the Congress party’s electoral strategies further alienated the Muslim population. “This set the stage for Muslim organizations to explore alternative means for channelling their discontent. This process culminated in the consolidation of an extremist communal leadership within the community and the massive conservative Muslim upsurge against the Supreme Court’s verdict in the Shah Bano case in the mid-1980s.”

4.2 The Sikh Communalism and Militancy

The Sikhs became politically more organized through the gurdwara reform movement of the 1920s. As a result, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) was

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7 Partha Pratim Basu, *op. cit.*, 314. Shah Bano was a Muslim divorcee. The Supreme Court ruled that her former husband should pay money for her support. The Muslims protested this alleging that this Court ruling infringed on the Muslim Personal Law.
born to have control over all the places of Sikh worship and the huge resources attached to them. The Akali Dal which led the gurdwara reform movement became the principal political organization of the Sikhs in Punjab before and after Indian independence. The reorganization of Punjab into three states, Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, in 1966 was in response to the Akali Dal’s demand for a separate state where Punjabi speaking populace will be predominant. After the creation of the three states, the issues of shared state capital, distribution of inter-state river water, and the mixed Hindu-Sikh populated area led to the adoption of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution in 1973 where regional concerns were converted into religious demand by the Sikh community. The Congress(I) played the Sikh religious politics for political gain and propped Bhindranwale up to sideline the moderate Akali leadership. Bhindranwale led a group of armed Sikh extremists and carried out criminal activities, hiding themselves in the Golden Temple at Amritsar. The Congress state government of the day looked the other side. Bhindranwale and his militant group raised the secessionist demand of independent sovereign state of Khalistan and directed their attack mainly on the Hindus. This gave rise to Hindu reaction under the BJP and strengthened communal overtone of the moderate Akalis. Punjab became a state of civil war. Bhindranwale’s militant group was attacked in the Golden Temple by the Indian army, resulting in loss of many lives in June 1984. The entire Sikh population was embittered and Sikh militancy received new strength. Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards on 31 October, 1984. Massive anti-Sikh riots were carried out in various parts of north India. Rajiv Gandhi as the new Prime Minister tried to settle Punjab politics but was not very successful. Some normalcy was restored in the 1990s and later Congress party was voted to power in the state. Sikh militancy remained under some control, but Chief Minister Beant Singh was brutally murdered in 1995. Even now, traces of Sikh militancy are still there among the Sikh diaspora in UK, USA and Canada where they still keep alive the dream of Sikh homeland.

4.3 Hindutva, revival of Hindu fundamentalism

There is an ample number of scholarly works on Hindutva, its agenda and Christian response. Among them mention may be made of M.T. Cherian’s Hindutva Agenda and Minority Rights, and of Hindutva: An Indian Christian Response, edited by J.Mattam, S.J. and P.Arockiadoss, S.J. The term Hindutva literally means Hindu-ness. It is broader than Hinduism which only refers to the religious system of the Hindus. Hindutva is more comprehensive as it includes the cultural, social, political and linguistic aspects of the Hindus. It is an ideology which seeks to interpret everything Indian including the Indian state, society, culture and language as Hindu. According to this ideology, every Indian is a Hindu. An Indian Muslim is a “Hindu” Muslim and an Indian Christian is a “Hindu” Christian, which definition is absurd, as Indian-ness is understood as an identification mark which is broader than Hindu-ness. The proponents of Hindutva

8 Partha Pratim Basu, op.cit. 315-6
9 M.T. Cherian, Hindutva Agenda and Minority Rights, (Bangalore, Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2007) gives an elaborate account of the historical background, ideological foundation and ramifications of Hindutva.
11 See footnote 67 in M.T. Cherian, op.cit. 178
are not satisfied with the mere existence of Hinduism as one of the many religions of India, but want to Hindu-ize every aspect of the Indian society. They aim at making all Indians become Hindu, speak Hindi and India Hindustan, and any Indian who does not want to be a Hindu is anti-national. In other words, Hindutva is an ideological expression of the Hindu fundamentalist nationalism. According to M.T.Cherian, “the missionary work of both Christian and Islamic missionaries, and fundamentalism of the Christian missionaries, the religious consciousness provided by the work of the orientalists, the number of membership which came to be known through the census and the separate electorates all contributed to the emergence of a mentality to defend their religion among the Hindus which eventually became embodied in the form of Hindu fundamentalism giving rise to several movements.” While this view may be true in some respects, yet Hindu fundamentalism does not seem to be just a defensive measure on the part of the Hindu majority for fear of losing out to other faiths. Members of Islamic and Christian faiths in India do not even add up to 20 percent of the Indian population and the reason of fear of losing adherents on the part of the Hindus who constitute 80 percent of India’s population is a misplaced perception. The claim that the growth of Muslim population is a threat to the majority Hindu population seems to be just an item in the propaganda to arouse the Hindu sentiments against the Muslims. Hindu fundamentalist nationalism has been present, including its reformatory elements, in the minds of various prominent Hindu leaders as found in the instances of the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha organizations and movements. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) founded in 1925 is outwardly a cultural organization but it has called for the establishment of Hindu state and militarization of the Hindus to achieve the goal.

The revival of the Hindu communal force has taken place during the last two decades. The RSS has considerably strengthened itself. It had 11,000 branches in 1977 which figure shot up to 39,301 in 1998. The RSS outfits (associated organizations) are reported to have experienced a rapid growth in membership when they recently distance themselves from the BJP and its politics. The question remains, however, whether this so-called distancing from the political wing (BJP) of the Sangh Parivar is a time-taking manoeuvre to gain popular support to be used later for political gain in the Hindutva programme. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed in 1980, which is the political front of Hindutva had two MPs only in 1984 but got 118 in 1991. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal, “the ideological storm troopers of the RSS-BJP combine, are also making their presence increasingly and perniciously felt all around.” The political ideology of this combine, the so-called Sangh Parivar is essentially anti-Muslim. They discard the Indian secularism and talk about positive secularism which simply is not secularism but a Hindu dictated socio-political ideology. According to M.T.Cherian, “Thus positive secularism of the BJP and Sangh Parivar is based on majority protection and domination. It does not help the minority communities but keeps the minority communities at the mercy of the majority.” It may be added here that the positive secularism advertised by the proponents of Hindutva is only a deception. It

12 M.T.Cherian, op.cit. 163
13 Source: Outlook, April 27,1998 cited by Partha Pratim Basu, op.cit. 317
14 The Telegraph, Calcutta Saturday 17 October 2009, 5
15 Partha Pratim Basu, ibid
16 M.T.Cherian, op.cit. 241
cannot be secularism as it does not recognize religious minority communities as equal to the majority community. The religious bias of Hindutva movement is seen in many instances, such as re-interpretation of Indian history, saffronization (hinduization) of textbooks and education, drastic change of the Indian secular constitution (which it attempted but was not successful during the BJP dominance), removal of the rights of the minorities, particularly Articles 25 (freedom of religion), 30 (minority rights), 370 (special provision for Jammu & Kashmir), 371A (special provision for Nagaland), 371G (special provision for Mizoram) of the Constitution. According to Partha Pratim Basu, “The militant Hindu revivalism has two sides: an unprecedented effort to bring different-even antagonistic—sections of the Hindu society together, and reconstruction of Hindu identity that is exclusivist vis-à-vis Muslims.”

4.4 Babari Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi (Ayodhya) Issue

The Ayodhya issue seems to be outstanding as an example, in the political history of independent secular India, of the use of religious sentiments for communal political gain. A site in Ayodhya is claimed to have been a place where Ram Temple stood, which the Muslim ruler Babur destroyed and had a mosque built in its place. The dispute became prominent as a symbolic focus of communal resurgence since 1980s. The long dormant dispute was resurrected and transformed into a vital issue affecting the faiths and requiring the solidarity of the two communities-Hindu and Muslim.

The Hindu argument may be summarized as follows: The Muslim invaders had a common practice of destroying Hindu temples and constructing mosques in their places. In Ayodhya also, the generals of Babur destroyed in the 16th century a temple of Ram and constructed a mosque on top of it which was known as Babari Masjid. The platform sacred to the Hindus as the birthplace of Ram remained beside the mosque. Dispute during the 19th century led to putting a railing between the mosque and the platform (chabutra) as per the ruling of a Hindu sub-judge and an English Judge who refused to grant the Hindus’ application to build a temple at the site of the platform.

After independence, 50-60 Hindus took over and installed idols on the mosque premises. Muslims demanded removal of the idols. On December 29, 1949 a district court attached the buildings and kept them under lock. In 1950, a suit was instituted by the Muslims, which has been kept pending ever since. In 1986, VHP with the support of RSS and BJP agitated to demand restoration of the place for Hindu worship. Established in 1964 the VHP had goals of restoration of former Hindu temples which were allegedly destroyed. Their list included Ayodhya, Mathura (where it was alleged that a mosque was built over the birthplace of Krishna), and Kashi Viswanath in Banaras. The movement is a clear search for Hindu unity by emphasizing the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. A writ petition was made by the Hindus simultaneously with the starting of the Ayodhya agitation. The Hindu Judge took up the petition within a week and ordered the unlocking of the site and granted Hindu worship there. This was a clear bias in handling legal matters because no attention was paid to the 36 year pending petition of the Muslims. The Muslims submitted another petition in February 1986, which again was neglected and kept pending ever since. Babari Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi became a...

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17 Partha Pratim Basu, op.cit. 317
18 My main source for this part of the paper is Paul R. Brass, The Politics of India Since Independence, op.cit., 239-247
national controversy since then. The Muslims continued to demand restoration of the site as a mosque. The Hindus continued their campaign for the restoration of the site for Hindus and for reconstruction of a grand temple to Ram, mobilizing public action to rebuild the temple with consecrated bricks brought to the site by the Hindu faithful by means of “shilan” march. Courts of Uttar Pradesh could do nothing. The Congress party had now moved away from its long standing alliance with the Muslims. BJP support base increased as seen in the 1989 election results.

V.P.Singh’s Mandal policy of reservations for backward castes appeared to undermine the BJP’s drive to consolidate its hold in the country. It made building of Ram temple at Ayodhya its election objective. It was in this spirit that L.K. Advani, leader of the BJP undertook his “rath yatra” from Somnath temple in Gujarat on September 25, 1990 to Ayodhya on October 30, taking a circuitous road through the Hindi heartland concluding the yatra in Bihar and UP. The BJP, VHP, RSS and Bajrang Dal combine of militant Hindus left a trail of communal antagonism, riots and deaths along the places covered by the rath yatra.

Advani was arrested at Samastipur on October 23. BJP withdrew its support to the coalition government of V.P.Singh. Chandrasekhar became Prime Minister. BJP prepared for fresh elections which were held in May-June 1991. Anti-Muslim hostilities were inculcated in the minds of the higher caste Hindus. Riots occurred before and after the elections. BJP emerged as the second largest party though it lost in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. It formed government in UP. The Congress came to power with a weak majority at the Centre and was reduced to third position in UP.

Public moves were made in UP under the leadership of Hindu politicians to cause the construction of Ram temple at Ayodhya. The VHP was prepared to acquire all the land surrounding the place. Voluntary Work (kar seva) was organized in November-December, 1991. In November 1991, UP government issued a notification for acquisition of a 2.77 acre land in the disputed site adjacent to the site of the mosque, and the VHP and Bajrang Dal activists started the kar seva, clearing the land and structures immediately around the mosque. The Muslim leaders anticipated that the land would be transferred to VHP and they obtained High Court injunction against such possible transfer. The Supreme Court reaffirmed the UP High Court order on November 15, 1991.

The UP government transferred 42-acre land of the State Park to VHP on March 21, 1992, which is near the mosque. VHP workers started construction activity. Kar seva was intensified. The foundation of the temple was laid on one side of the mosque in August 1992. The Prime Minister made long series of negotiations with the Hindu and Muslim leaders but there could be no agreed conclusion, and it ended on November 6, 1992. Ashok Singhal, the then General Secretary of the VHP announced kar seva would resume on December 6. The UP government pleaded “singing of hymns on the disputed land” was allowed and the Supreme Court accepted that but sent a Special Judge to ensure there were no violations of Court order against “any construction activity.” The Government of India sent 160 companies of para-military forces. BJP leaders arranged in such a way that kar sevaks carrying demolition equipments entered the area. The UP Chief Minister’s office issued orders preventing the intervention of any state security forces. Thousands of Hindu militants joined together and entered the place. According to Paul Brass, “The magnification and intensification of the struggle over the Babari Masjid/Ram Janmabhumi site convey two images which have recurred in the modern
history of India, that is, especially for the past 200 years. These images are, first, that there are two well-defined religious communities in India, Hindus and Muslims, and the second that they are not only utterly separate but antagonistic to each other.”¹⁹ This has happened while there is an intermingling of the two communities at various local levels, the question of Ram’s identity and birthplace is not taken seriously by many Hindus especially in the South, even in the North, people at Ayodhya are not feeling hurt over the alleged destruction of Hindu temple in the past. So, Ayodhya is a clear case of making a religious ground, magnifying that to a national controversy, and using it for political mobilization. It is a deliberate creation of political elites to arouse Hindu consciousness and feelings, to promote the Hindu-Muslim antagonism for political purpose and to define Hindu community as a political entity.²⁰ The whole purpose of raising the Babari Masjid/Ram Janmabhumi issue at the national level is commented by Nilofar Suhrawardy thus, “If there was no reason for Hindus to question the existence of Babari Masjid at the particular site in Ayodhya, there was no need for Muslims to ponder over the formers’ attitude towards the mosque.”²¹ The reason is not just religious, but an attempt to foment religious frenzy with the ulterior motive of making political gain on the part of the Hindu political leaders.

5. Conclusion

While India is constitutionally secular, the reality of communal divisions among the people of India has encouraged political forces to attempt capitalization of religion to achieve their political ends, particularly to win elections. India is a country of diverse culture, numerous languages, multiple races and regional and economic disparities. To try to unite India on a mono-religio-cultural model is a futile attempt. Number-game relating to religious followings is irrelevant, as the sustenance of a civil society does not depend upon which religion dominates. Whether a country is Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or Islamic is not a relevant question as there are more urgent and pertinent socio-economic questions that need to be addressed and tackled with all the resources available to our nation. Truly religious people are not supposed to fight against each other, whatever be their religious affiliations. Rather, they are to use the universal values in their respective religions for the good of the nation, for peace and harmony among the heterogeneous groups which constitute the whole nation. Any religious fundamentalism, especially its use in politics, should be condemned by all the Indian citizens, for it directly negates and attacks the core value of unity in diversity, which makes India great, beautiful and proud. The results of the Parliamentary Elections of 2009 and recent elections in some states has clearly re-affirmed that Indian democracy and secularism hold true, despite the pressure exerted on them by communal antagonisms inspired by religious fundamentalism.

¹⁹ Paul R. Brass, *op.cit.* , 246
²⁰ *Ibid.* 247
²¹ Nilofar Suhrawardy, *Ayodhya without the Communal Stamp: In the name of Indian Secularism*, (New Delhi, Manak Publications. Pvt.Ltd.,2006), 2