

Identity Crisis in India

The intense and growing identity crisis of India has its beginning at its partition in 1947. Before that, India existed under Britain and Muslims, to varying extents, over a thousand years, with its identity not being a serious concern.

The word Hindu is a corruption of the Sanskrit word Sindhu, meaning a reservoir of water, which was the name of the river Indus, in north-western India. Persians, in a corrupted form, called the inhabitants of Sindhu river area and beyond as Hindus. Thus Hindu was a geographic-ethnic name of a people. Its usage was meant to differentiate the majority of the people of the Indian subcontinent bearing a certain culture and religious thinking from Buddhists, Jains, Muslims, and others living there. But Sanatana Dharma is the authentic name of the beliefs and cultures of these people.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, an Indian independence movement activist in the 1920s, sought to disassociate the term Hindu from Hinduism. He, in his writing *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* defined a Hindu as one who was born of Hindu parents and regarded India as his motherland and a holy land. The Hindutva ideology believes in the ancient identity of the majority of the people living in India, and the areas adjoining it, based on their culture and beliefs, but not necessarily based on all the tenets and practices of Hinduism. It also believes in the banning of the cow slaughter.

Since the partition there has been a pressure on Indians to identify their nation as a Hindu nation, different from Savarkar's Hindutva concept. But the problem lies in their constitution's affirmation of secularism. This is a classic conflict between people's present innate leanings and the policy of governance of their nation their leaders chose some time back. Pakistan does not have such a problem as its leaders chose it to be an Islamic state.

Through the long experience of history human beings have learned that religion and governance should be kept separate. Religion should be a private domain of faith of the citizens of a nation, protected by its laws, but the government should not have the power to promote one religion over the other. In effect, the government should be religion-blind, but people should be free to choose their faith. This lesson of history has been learned after several hundred millions of people have been killed through the religious persecutions and wars.

Indian independence movement leadership believed in secularism not only because of its spiritual value but also because on a practical plane how would it fight the British Empire if the historically long fermented religious acrimony between Hindus and Muslims were let to show its ugly fangs. In spite of Indian independence movement's secularism policy things became out of control at partition with the massacre of some half to one million people, injuring of millions, and rendering of fourteen million refugees.

Through 68 years of its independence India has been governed as a secular nation but now there is a tremendous pressure on it to be run as a Hindu nation. But that change can only be done through a change of its constitution. But is that feasible? I would say no. It is because the die of secularism was forged in earnestness, keeping India's best long range interests in mind.

A revisionist history of India has been in making since 70's by the Hindus zealots. They see that the epic tragedy of India lies in its policy of secularism. They believe India to be an ancient Hindu nation, so its treatment of other religions in India as equal to Hinduism as a monumental aberration, especially of Islam.

The ferment of Hindu India movement is so intense that it considers independence leaders Gandhi, Nehru, and others to have been injurious to the Indian ethos and political life. That is, it believes that India would have been better off without them. Their case in point is the soft treatment of Muslim

unpatriotic behavior by these leaders. Also, their having been anglicized.

The irony is that before the partition quite a large number of Indians wanted that Hindus and Muslims live under one nation after the independence. But Muslim League, especially under the unrelenting influence of its leader, Jinnah, wanted to have its own nation, Pakistan.

While India is going through the teething problems of maturing into a full and healthy democracy, the election of Narendra Modi as its prime minister last year has cast some anxieties in some people's mind on the infant's health. He and his party, BJP, are perceived to use the religion card to establish their stamp on the nation.

Take the case of the ongoing Sahitya Akademi imbroglio. Some of both the Hindus and Muslims were lynched over the prohibition of the use of beef. But while the government is processing the cases many well-known writers, artists, film makers, etc. took it upon themselves to jump into the fray to predispose them. Their best defense would be that they do not trust the Modi government. Returning the awards they had been previously given by the prestigious academy is their right, an expression of their freedom of expression, but clearly they imagine that India's secularism, established in their country's constitution, is at stake.

We do not know how India's identity problem will resolve itself and after how long.

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