

SEMINAR ON 25TH SAHMAT ANNIVERSARY

Secularism in Arts Comes out in Full Glare

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ON the occasion of its 25th anniversary, the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) organised a three day seminar on 'Secularism and the Arts' from September 26 to 28, 2013. This seminar, held in the Sahitya Akademi auditorium, took place at a time when communal forces are going an extra mile to polarise the Indian masses on the basis of religion and vitiate the communal harmony of the country. This explained the relevance of the seminar. The seminar saw a plethora of insightful and interesting papers being presented, throwing light on different strands of the theme. The speakers tried to analyse the close interrelationship of arts and secularism, and its relevance in today's context.

In his short welcome address, Sohail Hashmi presented an outline of SAHMAT's history and threw light on its work since it came into existence. In the light of the communal disturbances the country has witnessed in recent times, the most recent being the Muzzafar Nagar riots, he explained the relevance of organisations like SAHMAT in maintaining harmony in the present times.

WHAT SECULARISM REALLY MEANS

After the welcome address, the first session of the day saw two doyens of history, viz Irfan Habib and Romila Thapar, discussing the concept of secularism from two different perspectives. In his insightful and thought provoking presentation, Professor Irfan Habib tried to analyse the various meanings that are associated with the word secularism. He brilliantly brought forth the fact that religion and secularism have nothing to do with each other and that what secularism really meant was outright rejection of intervention of religion into the sphere of morality. He also said a state is secular as far as it is not guided by any religion. To him the French revolutionary state was a secular state in true sense of the word. He further argued that even though the word secularism was added in Indian constitution in 1976, it is sad to see that in today's scenario this word has got corrupted in the everyday parlance. Today it means respect for and tolerance towards all religions. But yet there is no legal foundation for the view that a secular republic must respect the religions. He argued that even a non-tolerant state can be secular. The Supreme Court too, it was argued, played a role in corrupting the concept of secularism. Going back in history we see that religious tolerance has always been an important part of Indian history— be it the reign of the Ashoka, where perhaps for the first time the concept of religious tolerance was mentioned explicitly in Rock Edict 12; or the national movement where this idea was invoked repeatedly. For Habib, 'neutrality towards religions' should better be used instead of the phrase 'respect for religions.'

Habib also underlined that in India we see religious influences in certain spheres of everyday life. For instance, there is detailed mention of hostility towards cow slaughter in article 12 of our constitution. Similarly, there is a mention of the uniform civil code in article 44. Habib spent a good amount of time in discussing this issue and, expressing surprise at this notion, he asked how one could speak of uniform civil code when the same laws do not say anywhere that both men and women are equal partners as far as inheritance laws are concerned. We cannot talk about the former without the latter.

In this context he spoke about the Hindu code bill which, according to him, was a landmark development as it showed that in two years period the ages old *dharmasastras* were overthrown by the parliament, which marked a complete transformation of the civil code. However, he expressed displeasure that such landmark changes were not seen in other religions. He further argued that India may be secular in other respects but Indian state is certainly not secular as far as personal laws are concerned. What we see is that idea of religious tolerance is often in clash with the notion of secularism. With regard to personal laws, he forcefully stressed that these are not sacrosanct and their negative aspects must be opposed.

PROVISIONS OF SECULARISM WEAKENED

As for secularism in the realm of education, it is sad that the concerned provisions have got weakened. Our constitution clearly says no religious education would be imparted in any educational institution, but in reality we see this notion repeatedly violated. An example is of the NCERT school textbooks controversy under the tenure of the BJP led government. Surprisingly, even though newspaper reports of the day rubbished the BJP move, the apex court did not oppose it; instead, it supported by citing the saints who, according to the court, were the source of all religious and morality based education.

As for *madrasa* education, we see state subsidies directed towards several *madrasas* operating through the length and breadth of the country. This, it was argued, is a clear violation of article 28 of our constitution. Habib expressed surprise that the Sachar committee recommended this move, instead of opposing it; nor did any political party oppose it. Explaining the politics behind *madrasa* education, he argued that there are hardly any girl students in *madrasas*. Further, it is wrong to believe that Muslim children do not want to go to public (government) schools; it is just that there are no

public schools in most of the “Muslim areas,” and thus a majority of these children do not have easy access to public school education. Also, as Hindu children do not go to these *madrasas*, there is hardly any interaction between Muslim and Hindu boys, which is disastrous.

The speaker also put forward some ideas that could help to change this situation. One solution is that public schools should be set up in Muslim areas. The movements promoting legislation favouring secularism, such as the one associated with giving leverage to the secular content in school textbooks, must be encouraged by all means. Wherever the Left is dominant, it should oppose attempts made by divisive forces to construe the meaning of secularism in a wrong way. The notion of secularism must apply to all institutions and groups irrespective of their being majority or minority ones.

ON RIGHT WING MOBILISATION

After Professor Irfan Habib’s presentation, that of Teesta Setalvad was equally enriching, and in many ways an eye-opener. Discussing the issue of secularism from a legal perspective, she went back a little bit into history and argued that there was a compromise insofar as abolition of the caste system was concerned. Instead of completely eradicating the system for once and all, the custodians of the country at that time preferred to chicken out of the issue and were instead satisfied only with the abolition of untouchability.

Setalvad further argued that a close relationship exists between communalism and the growth of right wing groups. As far back as 1951, we see B R Ambedkar resigning from the first ministry of independent India on the issue of Hindu code bill. On the eve of the succeeding election, Ambedkar formulated a manifesto titled ‘Charter of Dalits’ in which he criticised the right wing politics and argued that if there was anything untouchable, it was this sort of politics. Today the irony is that dalits are being used for the right wing politics. The success of Bajrang Dal is contrary to what Ambedkar stood for in 1951. One can also cite the example of Babu Jagjivan Ram who did not become the prime minister precisely because he was a dalit. The fact is that dalits are still a marginalised section.

Setalvad’s paper also delved into the issue of hate speech that has always played a vital role in vitiating the environment and promoting communal hatred. Every communal disturbance is invariably preceded by a string of hate speeches and rumours before it reaches the stage of actual violence. In this regard one can recall the distribution of *trishuls* during the NDA government in 1999. Lately, a similar phenomenon was seen in Muzzafar Nagar; here *mahapanchayats* were allowed to be organised where hate speeches against a particular community were openly delivered and where people gathered with illegal weapons.

Before concluding, she drew attention to two important issues. First, it would be disastrous if we are selective in our narratives of the national movement. We must refrain from the practice of including certain aspects and completely ignoring other, equally important aspects of the national movement. Secondly, there is a tendency among many of us to loosely use terms such as pseudo-secularism (a term which BJP has been using); we have to refrain from it.

Nor should we compartmentalise the idea of secularism and democracy, or emphasise only one --- electoral --- aspect of it. Secularism, equality and non-discrimination are three concepts which need to be looked together. The speaker also pointed out that the Sachar committee, which was formed in 2005, completely ignored the issue of security of the Muslims. It is noteworthy that the term minority was completely removed from article 16 of the constitution, which again was a compromise.

RELIGION CAN’T HAVE PRIMACY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The last paper of the morning session was that of Professor Romila Thapar who delved into the issue of secularisation of Indian society. Secularism has got restricted, unfortunately, to a mere slogan. She also said our concept of secularism has been derived from Europe. Co-existence of all religions is a noble idea but it certainly does not denote the real meaning of secularism. This concept came about with the rise of communalism in India in the 1920s. Thus the ideology of secularism has a historical context, and there is a link between secularism and nationalism, which has not been investigated.

Professor Thapar argued that secular does not deny religion, but at the same time it does not give it any sort of primacy in everyday life. She stressed that state should stop patronising the institutions which have religious affiliations. To her, religion promotes the idea of dominant and subordinate people or groups. One may also note that it is the caste distinctions that have almost always decided the functioning of religious groups and there are also instances when people have formed their own religion, as in the example of Lingayats.

Before concluding, Professor Thapar argued that today, whether we like it or not, social networking sites like Facebook have come to occupy an important position in society. Divisive forces are making use of these sites to promote their agenda and we also have to use the same media to fight them effectively. The Muzzafar Nagar riots have shown the dangerous role played by such sites. Presenting a somewhat frightening picture, she also argued that we should be prepared for more communal disturbances in near future, especially in Muslim majority areas.

The session concluded with some useful and insightful remarks made by Professor Prabhat Patnaik who chaired the first session. He emphasised that secular must also be seen as the reducing role of religion even in the personal sphere.

BHAKTI TRADITION AND SECULARISM

The evening session saw four more, equally rejuvenating papers being presented. In this session chaired by M K Raina, Malini Bhattacharya, Madhu Trivedi, Vidya Shah and Madan Gopal Singh shared their ideas of the close association of secularism with arts. Bhattacharya in her presentation discussed the notion of secularism from the perspective of literature and folklore. She referred to Rabindranth Tagore's *Gora* and tried to analyse the way the issue of secularism was dealt with in this work.

She further talked about the emergence of various sects in Bengal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and also the important role women played in promoting the folk traditions in this period. The *baol* tradition of Bengal was a rare tradition that was able to break all sorts of societal barriers. But these sects got narrowed down due to what she called cultural inbreeding. In the end, she observed that while religious tolerance and intolerance exist side by side, it is the duty of the state to protect the secular space. She ended with the plea that struggle to protect the secular space is no less important than the struggle to protect land.

While Madhu Trivedi's paper discussed the concept of secularism purely from a historical point of view, Vidya Shah in her presentation began by recalling her childhood years and how she was not allowed to participate in the recitation of ritualistic chants like those from *Yajurveda* only because she was a girl; she naturally felt marginalised. However, the presence of feminism in several of these recitations is very important.

Shah's presentation was accompanied by recitation of various sorts including those from Bulle Shah, Andal and Kabir. In conclusion she raised a pertinent point by asking as to what happened to a woman *bhakta* in the *bhakti* movement. For her feminism is in fact deeply rooted in the concept of secularism.

Madan Gopal Singh recited several verses which were written as far back as the 16th century and through these recitations he explained how a close relationship always existed between secularism and arts. He argued that the aspect of secularism has always been present throughout history, though it has been visualised differently at different points of time. The accompanying recitations by Shah and Singh were like an icing on the cake and made the session a memorable experience.

SECULARISM IN VISUAL ARTS

The morning session on the second day saw well known painter Gulammohammed Sheikh, Pushpamala N and Ram Rahman making power-point presentations to discuss the intricate association of arts and secularism. In his presentation Sheikh explained how secularism got reflected in literary traditions throughout the course of Indian history. With the help of various slides and pictures, he drove home the point that secularism has always been an integral part in the making as well as visual execution of literary traditions.

Various arts including sculpture have played a pivotal role in assimilating the lower caste groups into the cultural belief systems of upper caste groups. Arts thus allowed a broadening of the belief system and at the same time also allowed upward mobility in our society.

Pushpamala N, in her interesting presentation, tried to analyse the theme of secularism from the perspective of artistic representation. She tries to see how secularism is played about in the popular artistic representations such as those of Raja Ravi Verma and others.

Ram Rahman's paper was a lesson in the history of SAHMAT. With the help of several visuals he tried to make everyone present aware of the work done by the organisation since the time of its inception. He threw light on the positive role played by SAHMAT in bringing about people from different walks of life in an attempt to raise voice against the divisive politics carried out by certain vested interests. In the years prior to and immediately after the Babri Masjid demolition, the SAHMAT ran important campaigns to keep communal hatred at bay and bring back the confidence of the minorities, which was severely affected by the demolition of the mosque. The speaker also visually highlighted how, while running its campaigns, SAHMAT itself came under attack more than once.

The session chaired by S Kalidas witnessed some highly emotional and at the same time interesting interventions by some of those present.

In the evening session, Subhash Kapoor, director of two critically acclaimed movies, viz *Phas Gaye Re Obama* and *Jolly LLB*, and renowned art critic Sadanand Menon were the speakers. The session was moderated by Sashi Kumar. The two speakers discussed the manner in which secularism has been dealt with in Indian cinema. While Kapoor chose to discuss it mainly from the perspective of the mainstream Bollywood cinema, Menon tried to trace the trajectory of secularism in Indian cinema from a general perspective and also the way it was reflected in the cinema of the south.

Kapoor argued that a sort of irony exists as far as secularism and its depiction in most of the movies is concerned. He raised several points such as the manner in which certain sections of society, e.g. Muslims, are depicted in the movies. Today the title of the movies is shown only in Hindi and English and not in Urdu. Also, producers hesitate to invest in movies which try to take the issue of communalism head on. He provided several interesting examples to highlight these issues which worried him.

Menon traced the growth of communalism from the time it emerged in the post-1857 period up to the present time. He also discussed at length some movies like *Roja* and *Bombay*, which tried to deal with the issue of religious differences and secularism.

DEVELOPMENTS IN HINDI & URDU

The concluding day was devoted to the issues of language and literature, and their close proximity with the theme of secularism. While the morning session was dedicated to the Urdu literary traditions and how one can see secularism embedded in a majority of the works written in this language, the evening session analysed this concept in the context of Hindi literary tradition. Ramesh Dixit, Naresh Nadeem, Khurshid Akram and Salil Misra carried out the morning proceedings, with Ali Javed in chair. The session saw the participants reciting poetries and couplets from Meer, Sauda, Ghalib, Nazeer Akbarabadi, Akbar Allahabadi and Faiz, among others, from time to time to enrich their respective presentations.

In his passionate talk, Ramesh Dixit made it clear that, as compared to Hindi poetry, compositions in Urdu were more strongly opposed to imperialism, colonialism, communalism and feudalism. Urdu poetry is poetry of resistance by its very nature.

Naresh Nadeem made a poignant point when he said that there was a clear-cut difference between the ways Hindi and Urdu poets took note of the country's independence. While the former were celebrating the independence in various forms, the latter was weeping due to the fact that the country had been partitioned. Not just communist but also non-communist writers and poets felt a deep sense of sadness. Nadeem also attempted to trace how the Hindi literary tradition got a tinge of communalism as an enmity against Urdu developed here.

Khurshid Akram tried to show how secularism was reflected in the short stories written in Urdu language throughout the period.

Salil Misra's tried to locate the aspect of secularism in the works of Nazeer Akbarabadi and Akbar Allahabadi.

In the second session chaired by Chanchal Chauhan, Manmohan and Jawarimal Parekh tried to study how secularism got reflected in various works written in the long history of Hindi literary tradition. It was argued in this session that, instead of making it an issue of one-upmanship, we should rather realise that secular elements are present in both the literary traditions but that we fail to see this point since there is little interaction between the two traditions as a result of a division made by the British way back in the 19th century.

It is unfortunate that the development of Hindi in the modern period bypassed the secular route and went through the path of communalism. There is, however, an element of secularism in a number of Hindi works and it is for us to take note of it and promote this aspect of our literary tradition.

The extremely enriching and memorable three-day seminar came to a conclusion with Sohail Hashmi delivering the vote of thanks. He also informed those present about the coming programmes of SAHMAT to celebrate its twenty five years in existence.