

Restoring India's Secular Credentials

A THREE day National Consultation on the Theme "Secular Democracy and the Rising Challenge of Communalism in India", was organised by the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Whitefield, from April 16 to 19, 1993. The Consultation, which brought together as many as 51 participants drawn from various parts of the country and included academicians, retired diplomats, journalists, social and political activists, provided an occasion for a meaningful dialogue on a theme of critical national significance.

Delivering the inaugural address, the eminent historian, Prof. S. Gopal emphasised that the success of Indian democracy depended on the strengthening of its secular credentials. Keeping religion out of politics and public life was the core of secularism. While in western societies, secularism came to be viewed as the political counterpart of atheism, in India the term assumed a different meaning in the backdrop of the nation's historical experience and complex socio-cultural traditions. Prof. Gopal stressed that communalism in India was shallow and only skin deep as it emerged only around 150 years ago. The arrival of the British on the Indian scene, who viewed the country and its people, as a cluster of religious communities which could not coexist, contributed in a significant way to the rise of communalism. India soon fell into the trap of divide and rule that the British had so assiduously laid.

After Independence, the nation had to grapple with the task of setting aside its past experience with regard to communal animosity. Analysing the crisis that confronted the country today, Prof. Gopal asserted that the rich carnival of hate that was witnessed in the country since December 6, 1992 was triggered off by the dangerous mix of politics and religion.

The challenge of communalism could be effectively tackled if the country made a concerted effort to spread education and awareness, realise the goal of social justice and ensure sustained economic growth. The failure on the part of the government to enact a common civil code was an infringement of the citizens constitutional right to equality. Prof. Gopal concluded by stating that what the country today needed was not merely tolerance towards all religions but an attitude of positive respect. Such an attitude alone would help in strengthening the secular fabric of Indian society.

In his keynote address, Mr. N. Ram, Editor, *Frontline*, drew the attention of the participants to the spread of communal fascism in the country and the pressing need for appropriate remedial measures to tackle the situation. Secularism he stressed, implied, in the first instance, guaranteeing to citizens of all faiths, equality before the law. Justice, was the basis of secularism. Fur-

ther, secularism demanded the emphatic endorsement of the principal of separation of religion from politics. Mr. Ram viewed communalism as a political mobilisation strategy employed for the principal purpose of gaining electoral support.

He depreciated the tendency of using religion for short term political gain and demanded a ban on all political parties that were guilty of misusing religion to reap political benefits. He was extremely critical of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao for his inaction in the face of the communal outrage that the nation witnessed after the Ayodhya incidents and held him guilty of criminal dereliction of duty. Mr. Ram concluded by stressing that secularism could be strengthened through mass political education and greater public awareness.

In the Consultation, five papers were presented on different subjects related to the theme of the consultation. A panel discussion was also held on the topic 'Strengthening Secularism: Role of Minorities'.

Mr. Thomas Abraham, a retired diplomat who had served as India's High Commissioner in Sri Lanka, presented a paper on the theme 'Need and Means to Strengthen Secularism in India'. He examined, at considerable length, the evolution of the concept of secularism in Europe, in the backdrop of the conflict between the Church and the State. He opined that the secularisation of Europe should be viewed in the context of the dominance of reason and experience in social life and the relegation of dogma and doctrinaire belief to the background.

Mr. Abraham stressed that the United States of America was the first nation to attempt to separate the world of the Church from the State through constitutional means. In the Indian context, the author maintained that secularism fundamentally implied equal treatment of all religions by the State. He concluded by stating that the vast majority of the people in India were religious and valued spiritually. What the Indian people had to ensure was that religion did not enter the market-place.

Prof. Madhava Menon, Director, National Law School, University of India, Bangalore, presented a paper on the theme 'Secular Democracy and Indian Constitution'. He identified the main points of reference in the constitutional document that demonstrated the secular vision of the country. At the outset, he emphasised that Article 25 of the Indian Constitution provided for the articulation of the widest possible religious freedom. A deeper analysis of the Article would show that there was no attempt by the framers of the Constitution to confine religion exclusively to the private realm. The Constitution further guaranteed that all persons—irrespective of their religion—were

entitled to equal treatment and the State shall not discriminate between people on the grounds of religion.

The citizen too, could not be compelled by the State to pay any tax for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious institution. The Cultural and Educational Rights conferred as part of the Fundamental Rights was specifically meant to safeguard the interests of the minorities. Prof. Menon also drew the attention of the participants to Sections 153 A and 153 B of the Indian Penal Code, which empower the State to prosecute those who attempt to create communal disharmony in the name of religion and attribute anti-national characteristics to those belonging to any particular religion.

Prof. Bhaskaran Nair, Professor of Political Science, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, presented a paper on the 'Emerging Challenges of Communalism and Indian Politics'. He made out a case for approaching communalism from a holistic perspective. The character of the Indian society had to be assessed in detail to facilitate an indepth analysis of the challenge of communalism. The context in which the communal forces had come to dominate social relationships was clear proof of the inter-play of a host of factors. Prof. Nair underscored the vital role played by economic forces in strengthening the hands of communalism.

He marshalled statistics to show that wealth was concentrated in the hands of a very small percentage of the population in the country. The highly inequitable nature of Indian society was, in his view, a critical element that encouraged the growth of communal forces. To combat communalism, the system would have to necessarily concentrate on scaling down the wide economic disparities existing in society.

Dr. R. L. M. Patil, Reader, Department of Political Science, Bangalore University, Bangalore, also presented a paper on the theme 'Emerging Challenges of Communalism and Indian Politics'. At the outset, he stressed on the need for conceptual clarity. The words, secularism and communalism had come to assume a variety of meanings depending upon the context in which it was used and the individual who was employing the term. He drew attention to the fact that our national leadership too, appeared not too keen to give an exact or precise meaning to these terms and preferred to adopt an approach of ambivalence. The challenge of communalism could be effectively countered only when the term came to be clearly defined and understood. He further argued that debate on the need to separate religion from politics should not continue at a superficial level but should involve a practical assessment of the fact as to whether such a

separation was possible and desirable.

The last paper was presented by Dr. Sandeep Shastri, Lecturer in Political Science, Bangalore University, Bangalore on the theme 'Towards a New Definition of Secularism and a Secular Vision for India'. In the paper, an attempt was made to emphasise that a new definition of secularism should emerge as a result of an open dialogue in the society as to what the term should imply. The present crisis with regard to secularism has been caused by the fact that the term was sought to be applied to the Indian situation without making any serious attempt to define it in the Indian context. It was also asserted that the secular discourse, over the last four decades, made a conscious attempt to distance itself from religion in the belief that religion as it was practised was the principal factor responsible for social stagnation and decay. Mr. Shastri argued in favour of including within the secular discourse the ethical and moral context of religion. He also opined that the separate spaces argument with regard to politics and religion posed the danger of making religion a 'potentially useful resource for political challenge'.

In the Panel discussion on 'Strengthening Secularism: Role of Minorities', Mr. Peter Sinai—a former diplomat who served as India's Ambassador to Australia, Prof. Bashir Hussain—former Principal, University Law College, Bangalore, Prof. K. S. Sodhi—Professor of English, Guru Nanak Dev College, Ludhiana and Mr. Ninan Koshy—former Associate Director, Ecumenical Christian Centre participated. Mr. Sinai asserted that the fading of the secular vision for India was largely responsible for the appeal of the alternative vision being projected by the communal forces. He emphasised that restoring the secular vision would involve changes in a variety of other spheres including the electoral laws and the development thrust. Prof. Bashir Hussain stressed on the need for building bridges of understanding between the various communities. He also spoke of the sense of insecurity among the minorities in recent times and spoke of the role of the state in this regard.

Prof. K. S. Sodhi traced the process of the alienation of minorities from the mainstream and spoke of the role of two important developments in this regard—the entry of the army into the Golden Temple and the demolition of the Babri Masjid. He opined that confined building measures where the need of the hour.

Mr. Ninan Koshy asserted that all sections of society must come together to fight communalism. He was of the view that much of the efforts of the state to strengthen secularism appeared to be hollow and lacked conviction.

The consultation concluded with the participants adopting a statement that gave expression to their concern with regard to the grave dangers facing the country as a result of the challenge posed by communal forces. The statement gave a call for the

launching of a positive dynamic movement to strengthen secularism to ensure the

growth and sustenance of a forward looking for plural society — Sandeep Shastri □

STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION ON SECULAR DEMOCRACY AND THE RISING CHALLENGE OF COMMUNALISM IN INDIA

The Crisis — Our Consultation was held under the shadow of the most profound crisis in post-independent India. Unless the present trends on the national scene are arrested and reversed the future of the country is bleak.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 and the events that have followed have dealt a grievous blow not only to the secular character of the state, but the fundamental principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution and the nation's development. Agony and anguish have been caused by a mindset which derives the essence and substance of secularism and threatens democracy and the rule of law. Unfortunately the trends that culminated in the tragedy at Ayodhya have been developing for a long time.

The actions by the government of India during and after the Ayodhya tragedy raise serious doubts about its commitment and competence to uphold secularism. Rather than boldly confronting the rising tide of militant communalism and its fascist manifestations the ruling party's indecision and lack of direction led to total chaos. The Muslim community has been the special target of violence leading to the loss of large number of lives. The tragedy at Ayodhya and explosions in Bombay and Calcutta are warning of further instability.

The Challenge — That has been raised by those who assiduously mobilise vast sections of people in the name of religion for political ends is in the form of an attempt to change the nature of the Indian polity, distorts the basis of Indian nationalism and instil fear and insecurity among the minorities. It has been done deliberately to divert the attention of the nation from the burning issues—political, economic, and social, that affect the lives of the millions of the down trodden and disprivileged in the country.

In 1959 Jawaharlal Nehru declared "The government of a country like India with many religions that have secured great and devoted followings for generations can never function satisfactorily in the modern age except as a secular state".

India cannot afford not to be secular. The time has come for all those who believe in secular democracy as enshrined in the Constitution to unite and mobilise people through political action that defeats obscurantism and communalism. Communal politics has to be branded as illegitimate.

The reasons for the growth of communal politics in India are many. The compromises that all political parties have made with communal parties for electoral gains, the general weakening of the vital institutions and processes of democracy, the erosion of values and ideologies, the decline in the quality of political leadership, rampant political corruption—all made the ground fertile for fascist forces which have clear-cut objectives of capturing political power by exploiting the religious sentiments of the people.

Rather than encouraging religions to provide the moral and ethical values for the wider society, religion is sought to be organised for political ends and misused by political leadership.

Our Task Today — There is a need to redefine the concept and content of secularism and an ardent effort has to be made for regaining the secular vision for India's nationhood.

It is indeed imperative that we make renew our commitment to secularism and rebuild it on solid grounds. As a first step in this direction we must expunge religious dogmatism from political processes. A positive dynamic movement to strengthen secularism must be encouraged to ensure the growth and sustenance of a forward looking pluralist society.

A mass contact programme should be launched. In a country like India secularism, democracy, social and economic justice all have to be preserved together. If one falls the other two also collapse. Justice for the Dalits and other down-trodden should remain as an important component of secular democracy.

There is an urgent task at the level of ideas in promoting secularism. The abuse and distortions of history have to be exposed. Intellectuals have a major role in combatting communalism and promoting secularism.

We need to develop our cultural resources that animate and bring people together through an intrinsic respect for differences. This demands a major educational effort and communication campaign to enlist the support of all sections of society.

We are duty bound to maintain a truly national outlook and strengthen the human amity in India to make the country a flourishing secular force, so that it becomes genuinely democratic and ensures justice for all.