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Pros and Cons: Declaration of the Secular Nepal

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Nepal is the originator of Hindu religion. Nepal had been a Hindu nation from ancient times until the declaration of secular Nepal by the re-instated parliament on May 18, 2006. As the 10-year old Maoist's war ended with the 12-point Agreement between Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and Maoists in New Delhi on November 22, 2005, agreeing for the establishment of a total democracy by abolishing autocratic monarchy through people's uprising in Nepal, the 19-days Jana Aandolan-II in April, 2006, following the 12-point Agreement ended on April 24, 2006 with the re-instatement of 7-year old parliament by King Gyanendra. On May 18, 2006, the re-instated parliamentary government severely stripped the King's power and, to the surprise of most Nepalese citizens, Nepal was declared a secular state. Through the amendments of interim constitution, again to the surprise of most Nepalese, the SPA and the Maoists declared Nepal a federal nation. After completing the CA election on April 10, 2008, the parliament voted against the Monarchy and declared Nepal a republican state on May 28, 2008. On June 11, 2008, King Gyanendra briefed the press and stated that he accepted the CA's decision.

In Nepal, over 90% of Nepalese population representing various ethnic and linguistic groups across the nation practice Hindu culture and traditions. Hence, Nepalese values, philosophies, ethos, and morals are clearly the products of Hindu principles and teachings. Nepal has been the "*Tapobhumi*" for countless *Rishi Munis* and sages in the past. Nepal is enriched not only with its beautiful landscape and vistas but also with its countless temples and holy places for Hindus. Historically, Nepal has been governed by many Kings representing various ancestries, while almost all of them practiced Hinduism. The capital city of Kathmandu is packed with Pagodas, Hindu arts and traditions, and famous temples such as Pashupati Nath temple, Krishna Mandir, and Budha Nilkantha. There are hundreds of Hindu temples and holy places in Kathmandu and across the nation that Hindus from all over the world wish to visit and offer prayers. It is important to understand that Buddhism is the second major religion in Nepal, and there is a strong mixture of these two religions in Nepalese society. Hindus go to Buddhist temples, and vice-versa.

Available literature suggests that more than 70 countries including England, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Bhutan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, almost all Islamic countries, and several Christian nations around the world

have a state religion. In a non-secular country, majority of its population follow a particular religion; however, other religious groups are allowed to practice their religion. Non-secular nation does not allow any religious competition. The preservation and the development of a particular religious society, culture and traditions, and arts and architects are ensured by the state. Except for communist countries, the basic reasons for a nation to adopt secularism generally include the lack of a clear majority of a religious group, republican order, federation, prevalence of serious religious conflicts, or the separation of church and the state in governance.

It is clear to the modern and scientific world that any sort of religious orthodoxy in the governance of a nation is not acceptable. However, in the name of modernization any act of a modern man that undermines or eliminates the centuries old knowledge, experience, moral, ethos, values, principles and practices, arts and architects, and a society is totally counterproductive and is objectionable. On the topic of "Religion and Science", Albert Einstein identifies feeling and longing as the two motive forces for all human efforts, then he logically deducts that these two forces have led human to develop religious thoughts and belief. From primitive man to the modern man, Albert Einstein theorizes the progression of religion, with varying degree of mixture, as the religion of fear, the God of Providence, and the moral religion. He finds the anthropomorphic conception of God as a common factor on these types of religion. Yet, above this level, he believes that there is another higher level of religious experience which he calls the Cosmic Religious feeling. Through this feeling, a man gets enlightened with the universal operation of the cause and effect relationship. Albert Einstein maintains that "...the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research." From this, it can be learned that religion basically trains people in asking questions and finding answers to these questions. This process of inquiry helps us in the advancement of our intellectual capability as well as our scientific development.

Our "***Woohile Ka Kura Khuile***" attitude as well as the lack of understandings and the appreciation of the Hindu philosophy and scriptures is a major limitation to the preservation and the development of our Hindu society. The false understanding of Hinduism by relating it to *sati*, caste system, poverty, various rituals, and other wrong practices is another factor for deterioration of a Hindu society. Hinduism is the oldest religion and Hindu scriptures present knowledge and wisdom accumulated during the past 12,000 years. Our Hindu scriptures such as Vedas, Bhagabat Gita, Mahabharat, Ramayan, Charksamhita, Purans, etc. are extremely rich on knowledge, philosophy, morals, ethics, and wisdom, which are critical for the development of traditions and societies. It is our responsibility to understand and apply this knowledge and wisdom for the betterment of our society and the nation.

The hasty declaration of secularism in Nepal by the re-instated parliament had caught almost all Nepalese with a big surprise. And, obviously many Nepalese are raising several questions now in relation to this declaration. What was the problem of having a Hindu nation where over 90% of its population practice Hindu culture and traditions? What inspired our re-instated parliament and the political leaders for a hurried declaration of a secular Nepal? Why there were not any general public discussions and debate prior to the obliteration of a Hindu society? What is the status of secularism in other countries? There might be many more similar questions.

In this context, it is important to identify and analyze various factors and situations that were responsible for the declaration of secularism in Nepal. The two major factors are identified as follows:

1. Abolishing the institution of monarchy - As mentioned above, in addition to the election of Constituent Assembly and the formation of a government, the end of the autocratic monarchy (not the constitutional monarchy) and the establishment of democracy were the two major agendas of the 12-point agreement between the SPA and the Maoists. The questions in most Nepalese minds today are: How the agendas of Republicanism, Secularism, and the Federalism developed? Where they come from? And, why they were implemented in haste? Why common people were deprived of any chances for discussions and debate on these important issues? From the observation of the political development following the 12-point agreement, which was reached in New Delhi, it is not hard to understand that there was a complete plan with the SPA and the Maoists for abolishing the institution of monarchy along with its two pillars on which the institution had rested: the Hindu nation and the Unitary System of governance. The declaration followed the order of secularism, federalism, and republicanism.

2. Communist ideology – It is conceivable that the communist ideology certainly played a major role in the declaration of Nepal as a secular nation. Including CPN (Maoists) and UML, the largest and the third largest political parties in the Constituent Assembly, respectively, there are several other communist parties in Nepal, which obviously would opt for a secular nation. However, most voters to any of those communist parties were Hindus. They voted these communist leaders with the hope of development, corruption control, availability of basic facilities and services, and restoration of peace, security and law and order in the nation. None of these communist parties had brought the issue of secularism while they asked people for their votes. While Nepalese Hindus trusted the communists for socio-economic development of the nation, the communists, in return, declared Nepal as a secular state, without bothering any public debate and discussion.

Future consequences

1. Loss of identity

It is important to note that Nepal was the only Hindu nation in the world. While preservation and the development of national identity has been a major challenge for Nepal over the past 60 years, the declaration of secularism is certainly a huge setback on Nepal's identity. The identity issue becomes even more important when you are out from your country. I am sure almost every Nepalese living abroad often use words such as *Hindu nation, Budha, Monarchy, Himalaya, Gurkha, Sherpa, Triangular Flag, Khukuri, Mountains, and Mt. Everest* when foreign people did not know about the country of Nepal. We often may have to resort to a sentence "a nation in between India and China" for further clarification.

2. Destruction of Hinduism – In secularism, a state treats every religion equally. This is certainly in favor of minorities, as there will be an equal promotion of every religion by the state. Without state's formal support, will it be possible for the preservation and the development of our century's old Hindu society, Hindu arts and architects, and Hindu philosophies and teachings in a secular Nepal?

3. Foreign intervention – As Nepal has been constantly experiencing tremendous foreign interventions in its internal affairs, the declaration of secularism may further invite unwanted foreign concerns and pressures on Nepal’s internal matters.

It will be extremely difficult for Nepal to survive as a nation if it is caught into religious conflicts and disorders. The time has come for all Hindus in Nepal to unite and think about this very critical issue of Hinduism and Secularism in Nepal.

Remember, the declaration of secularism, federalism, and republicanism, apparently, came on a package!