

“The State of our conception must be a secular, democratic state.”

Mahatma Gandhi, 31 August 1947

(sixteen days after India became independent)

The struggle for freedom and independence from colonialism, which began roughly in the last quarter of the 19th Century and came to a culmination in 1947, evolved an ideological discourse which provided the foundational ideas to the young nation after independence. These ideas were absorbed by the people in the form of values. Perhaps the most important elements of this discourse were anti-imperialist nationalism, sovereignty, self-reliance and independent economic development, democracy, secularism, and a pro-poor orientation or equity. During the long course of the struggle, these ideas permeated to and were absorbed by the Indian people, and in this process they became values that were cherished as ideals.

In this presentation, we focus on the ideas of democracy and secularism, and discuss how they became the foundational values and principles of the Indian people. How did democracy take roots and thrive in the habitat of ‘Homo Heirarchicus’? What kind of audacity prompted an economically backward, largely illiterate, ‘traditional’ country, which had been just divided on the basis of religion, and had an average life-expectancy of around 30 years, to adopt a constitution which granted representative government based on elections, adult franchise, complete equality before the law to all citizens regardless of race, religion, caste or gender, rule of law, civil liberties, freedom of expression, rights to form trade unions, protection to minorities, and much else? The sheer survival of democracy (and secularism) in India for over six decades, whatever be the opinions about its substance, makes it imperative that we ask this question and try to provide some answers. As a historian, I thus go back to the period of the freedom struggle, ‘the epic struggle’, as it has been called because, like all great revolutions, it had a larger than life character.

It was first and foremost the political practice of the movement that reached these ideas to the people in various ways, such as writings in the press, pamphlets, speeches, posters, songs, theatre, by the holding of elections in the Congress party, in peasant and trade unions, student unions and other professional associations, through deciding important national issues by open voting in Congress annual sessions, by tolerating and encouraging dissent, etc. The strategy of struggle, based on making imperative the active participation of the mass of the people in non-violent ‘satyagraha’ or civil disobedience movements, perhaps was most instrumental in internalizing democracy among the people by involving them in protest demonstrations, strikes, hartals, sit-ins, hunger-strikes, courting arrest by breaking a law – the real processes of democracy being enacted in the streets of numerous towns and villages of India. The movement was also based on innovation, creativity, and autonomous activity at the local levels, and this too built the habit of democracy.

The leadership of the national movement also had a deep commitment to civil liberties, not only because they believed them to be necessary for a vibrant society but because they had constantly struggled and sacrificed to wrest civil liberties from the British colonial administration. Democracy was thus seen as an absolute value, on which there could be no compromise.

On secularism, I will give examples from people representing different political strands within the national movement to show how the idea of secularism was articulated. The founding fathers of Indian nationalism who constructed the basic economic critique of colonialism on which Indian nationalism was based, were not only themselves completely secular, but by ensuring that the foundations of Indian nationalism were laid on the ground of political economy, saved it from the perils of being based on race, religion, colour, culture. Later trends, including the Extremists, and even Vivekananda, an important Hindu religious reformer and ideologue, remained within a secular framework.

The value of secularism was also ingrained in the people not only or primarily through propaganda, but via the struggle against communalism (politics based on religious sectarianism). The high point of this was Gandhiji's brave battle against spreading communal violence in 1946-7, in the villages of Noakhali in Bengal, in Bihar, in Calcutta, in Delhi, for which he paid the price with his life when he was assassinated by a Hindu communal fanatic on 30 January 1948.

It was these foundations which gave Jawaharlal Nehru the courage and the conviction as Prime Minister to lead the Indian people after independence on the arduous yet exciting path of building 'a secular, democratic state' of Gandhiji's conception.

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