

A proponent of a multicultural nation

Introduction

- The practice of Indian secularism, despite its pitfalls, has distinguished the country from many of its neighbours.
- India is the nation with the third-highest number of Muslims in the world.
- Its ability to consolidate democracy amidst unprecedented diversity could teach a lesson or two even to advanced industrial economies that have operated along the lines of a classic monocultural nation.
- The country's secular ideals have their roots in its Constitution, promulgated by its people, a majority of whom are Hindus.
- Indian secularism has always attempted, however imperfectly, to respect the **doctrine of Sarva dharma sama bhava** (all religions lead to the same goal), which translates to equal respect for all religions.
- However, the early-day Hindu nationalists were clearly at odds with the idea. This was the reason Nathuram Godse assassinated one of its strongest proponents, Mahatma Gandhi.

Why is there a development of Hindu nationalism today?

- For the likes of Godse, a corollary of the two-nation theory was that independent India was primarily a land for Hindus.
- More than 70 years after Independence, this notion has gained prominence as never before in India's post-colonial history.
- This is evident when the Central government says it will consider all Hindus in neighbouring countries as potential Indian citizens.
- The most recent example of this is the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority State, into two Union Territories, with all special provisions taken away from the erstwhile State's residents.
- Not only were Kashmiris not consulted, they were made to suffer an information blackout.

What questions does this event raise?

- Does this kind of Hindu nationalism align with the cosmopolitan nature of India's millennial traditions?
- Is it fair to appropriate Swami Vivekananda, another follower of the sarva dharma sama bhava philosophy whom Prime Minister keeps citing, as a

Hindutva icon?

- Here, it is necessary to understand what Vivekananda's life and world view said about Indian nationalism.

When it all did begin?

- His Chicago lectures (1893) marked the beginning of a mission that would interpret India's millennial tradition in order to reform it and he later spent about two years in New York, establishing the first Vedanta Society in 1894.
- He travelled widely across Europe and engaged Indologists such as Max Mueller and Paul Deussen.
- He even debated with eminent scientists such as Nicola Tesla before embarking on his reformist mission in India.

What is one of the key elements of his message?

- It is that based on the experiments of his spiritual mentor Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was that all religions lead to the same goal.
- Paramahansa is unique in the annals of mysticism as one whose spiritual practices reflect the belief that the ideas of a personal god and that of an impersonal god as well as spiritual practices in Christianity and in Islam all lead to the same realisation.

What did Vivekananda stressed as novel facets of Hindu life?

- Indian tradition believed "not only in toleration" but in acceptance of "all religions as true".
- No uncertain terms that Hinduism was incomplete without Buddhism, and vice versa.
- He proclaimed "If anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not fight'; 'Assimilation and not destruction', and 'Harmony and peace and not dissension'.

Religion and rationality

- Vivekananda's interpretation of India's past was radical.
- When he returned from the West, he had with him a large number of American and European followers who stood behind his project of establishing the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897.
- Vivekananda emphasised that India needed to trade Indian spirituality for the West's material and modern culture and was firmly behind India's scientific modernisation.

- He supported Jagadish Chandra Bose's scientific projects. Vivekananda's American disciple Sara Bull helped patent Bose's discoveries in the U.S.
- He also invited Irish teacher Margaret Noble, whom he rechristened 'Sister Nivedita', to help uplift the condition of Indian women.
- When she inaugurated a girls' school in Calcutta, Vivekananda even requested his friends to send their girls to this school.
- Vivekananda also inspired Jamsetji Tata to establish the Indian Institute of Science and the Tata Iron and Steel Company.
- India needed a secular monastery from where scientific and technological development would uplift India's material conditions, for which his ideals provided a source of inspiration.

Influence on Gandhi, Nehru

- Vivekananda made a remarkable impact on the makers of modern India, who later challenged the two-nation theory, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose.
- He used the term 'Daridra Narayan' to imply that 'service to the poor is service to god', many years before Gandhiji addressed the socially oppressed as 'Harijan' (children of god).
- The Mahatma in fact opined that his love for India grew thousandfold after reading Vivekananda.
- Vivekananda has survived many an invasion and endured to teach the world both toleration and universal acceptance.
- Hindu nationalism shouldn't take his name and also shouldn't forget his fiery modern spirit that rediscovered and reformed India's past.
- India's secular nationalism should also acknowledge its deeply spiritual roots in the beliefs of pioneers like the reformer.

Source: The Hindu