CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

There is hardly any ideological uniformity among social scientists regarding the definition content and nature of the term ‘secularism’. Different societies have developed different perceptions about the characteristics of a secular state. While some countries strictly adhere to disestablishment (separation between matters religious and political) principle as an essential hallmark of their secular vision of the state, others, unable to make any such strict dichotomy either pursue a policy of ‘equidistance’ from and to all religions or what is being termed as ‘principled neutrality’ or ‘non-preferential treatment’ extended to all the people by the state irrespective of their religious beliefs. The latter version of secularism is what is being followed in India though the features of the former are also found in its constitution.

The essence of secularism can well be presumed as the separation between religion and State for the sake of civic peace, religious liberty, equality, and free
citizenship. But for an average person secularism and communalism are antithetical to each other and the rise of one would necessarily entail the decline of the other. Here secularism is valued and merited in inverse proportion, i.e. if a society is free from communal violence and clashes, that society is considered to be more secular and vice verse.

As a concept, the term ‘secularism’ has been variously interpreted in different countries according to their social and political condition. Often it is contrasted with matters sacred or spiritual. This likely anti-religious connotation that the term ‘secularism’ carries with it makes it one of the most contentious topics in modern times. An objective evaluation of the content and meaning of the term ‘secularism’ would reveal that it developed as a natural corollary of modernization as well as an inevitable consequence of economic advancement in any society whether democratic or non-democratic, primitive or modern, situated in the west or in the east.

A careful analysis of the concept of secularism would reveal that it does not, in any way, contradict matters of religious or spiritual significance. However, it must be
admitted that secularism, as understood and practised in western societies, is concerned only about ‘this worldly’ matters and does not do anything with the ‘other worldly’ or the supernatural, which exclusively comes under the domain of faith. In effect, it stands for separation – separation of the religious from mundane, each confining itself only to the areas which it deduces to be present at and taken care of.

Secularism, with all its modern characteristics such as the separation of matters of political from religious, equality before law and equal protection of law for all people, etc., originated in the west in the aftermath of the Renaissance and scientific discoveries which disproved the teachings of the Church especially with regard to the origin of life and the human species. The roots of secularism in the west can well be traced to the Renaissance, Reformation and French Enlightenment. Liberalism, which gathered momentum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as after effects of the Glorious Revolution (1688), American War of Independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) speeded up the process of secularization of society. Though the spirit of
accommodation and religious tolerance were substantially present in the Indian culture, a true secular state based on the principles of individualism began to evolve only with the introduction of judicial and administrative systems by the British, based on their common law system. For instance, the judicial and administrative systems of Lord Cornwallis equally entitled all the British Indian subjects to have the same civil rights and to have them enforced even against government through the courts of law. People, under the British rule, were subjected to the impact of the same laws, the same institutions and the same administrative and judicial procedures. It was something hitherto unknown to the people of India, whose social conduct and relation with the state were largely determined by the hierarchical status of their caste or religion in the society.

But it is an undeniable fact that the British were neither liberal nor did they observe the principles of equality in their dealings with the Indian subjects. In fact, their administration in India was as absolute as any of the old administrations of ancient or medieval India. Their administrative ruthlessness
was well-known that it came in for severe criticism of the media, even in the west. However, the absolutism of the British system was different from that of the indigenous system. It was an absolutism based on law that defined its authority as well as the civil rights of the people living under its authority. The kind of administration introduced by them based on the common law system was innovative and revolutionary in a society where people rigidly adhered to their respective religions and age-old customs.

The ancient and medieval administrations, though attributed to be having many features of a liberal society, were regulated and controlled by the religious or caste laws. The influence of the clergy was predominant in all spheres of social life including politics. People of India, by and large, are religious at core and they have no significance apart from the social collectivity which they belong to or associate with. Primacy to the individual and his rights, an essential attribute of a liberal society apart from the social collectivity which he belongs to, was conspicuously absent in India. The introduction of English education in India was really a breakthrough
and even its protagonists, the British, had never thought that, in future, it would become the chief instrument in organizing people against their own administration which eventually led to their own expulsion from India.

To convert a tradition-bound society into a modern, vibrant and forward looking one was a stupendous task before the British who, in this effort, were very much helped by the Indian middle class. Certainly this middle class became the real torchbearers of progressive ideas in modern India and secularism, of course, was one of them. The ideals of liberty, equality, affinity to the principles of parliamentary democracy and the notion of nation-state, in fact, prompted them to form a political party- the Indian National Congress (INC) - for the whole country, transcending parochial considerations. The confluence of people from different castes and religions under the banner of a political party on the basis of certain political ideology, in fact, was revolutionary in a country where most of the people were under the shackles of primordial sentiments. Thus the establishment of INC was the first sign of modernity, and it was the first secular (political) organization with a
national vision in modern India.

The constitution of India, which was framed immediately after the attainment of freedom, contained the noble causes which our national leaders stood for and cherished in their lives. Secularism, of course, was one of the most prominent among them. The constitution, which was the greatest contribution of our national leaders to posterity, sufficiently contains features of a real secular state. The greatness of the constitution lies in the fact that, in spite of great turmoil of communalism that the country underwent during the past Independence period, the secular character of the country remained intact. It may not be wrong to assume that all secular-minded people of modern India would think of their great national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad only with immense gratitude and adulation, for, had these people not been there India would not have become a secular state with the present dignified status.

Since the constitution is ambiguous on the content and meaning of the term secularism, judicial deliberations on it get special significance. The Supreme Court, being the final
interpreter of the constitution, strictly held on to the secular character of the state. Barring few exceptions the court, through its many-fold verdicts, by and large, strictly adhered to the relentless principles of secular state in India. However, judicial deliberations on secularism, personal laws and a uniform civil code are not without contradictions.

In Travancore we do not find any secular political organization like the Indian National Congress which was founded in 1885. Travancore and Cochin were princely states and were comparatively free from the pulls and pressures of the national movement for freedom that was gathering momentum in the provinces of British India. But the efforts among various communities for communal consolidation, keeping in mind their greater secular needs, began as early as the second half of the nineteenth century. Each community, apart from organizing its own association, joined other communities to strengthen their bargaining capacity vis-à-vis the government. The Travancore State Congress, the first secular political organization in Travancore transcending traditional loyalties, was formed in 1938. Though formed on a
communally prolific soil, the Travancore State Congress was in the forefront of fighting for civil and political rights of all people in Travancore, and, when the country became independent in 1947, power was transferred into the hands of its leaders. It is to be noted that it was none other than the Christians who took initiative in the formation of Travancore State Congress and it was often nick-named as “the Christian Congress”.

The secular culture began penetrating in to all areas of human life including politics. The emergence of political parties on the basis of secular ideologies, increased political consciousness of the people making a corresponding impact on their participation in the affairs of the state and the introduction of a democratic system of government based on equal political rights, adult franchise, etc, had a direct positive effect on the secularization of society. However, even after Independence, primeval loyalties of people towards religion and caste continued to be the principal means of political mobilization. As a counter-force to communal politics secular politics also developed during this period and the result was
the growing political segmentation of the caste/religion based communities. It was reflected in the 1957 Assembly elections and in all the subsequent elections since then, to the Assembly and the Lok Sabha, in varying degrees.

The almost even division of Kerala society into four prominent communities –Christians, Muslims, Ezhavas and Nairs - warrants an objective evaluation of the role played by each of them in the politics of the state in general and electoral politics in particular. Among them the Christians and Muslims constitute two prominent minority communities in Kerala. While Christians play a vital role in electoral politics in the central and southern parts of the state, the Muslims do the same in the northern parts of Kerala, particularly in the Malabar region. Since Independence both communities have played no less significant a role in the formation of ministries and subsequently in the formulation of governmental policies. Though no government is totally free from communal pulls and pressures, the government formed by right-wing political parties is more amenable to them compared to that formed by the left-wing political parties. While the Muslims have a
political party of their own, the Muslim League, the Christians, by and large, are divided between right-wing political parties like the congress and various fractions of the Kerala Congress. In fact the Christians, especially the Catholics, extended full support to right-wing political parties which, they thought, would defend their religious and educational freedom.

Though the Church is a spiritual organization, it has obvious political preferences. Though it does not blindly support any political party, its preferences have always been for the right-wing political parties like the Congress and various fractions of Kerala Congress. The Church’s political preference is explicitly expressed through church circulars, pastoral letters and other church communique issued by the church leadership, on the eve of elections. Though they appear to be mere election guidelines to the flocks, a careful reading would reveal that they are specific exhortations to vote in favour of certain parties or combination of parties.

For the Church, its institutional interests are of paramount concern. Any attempt on the part of the government to rein in
its unimpeded enjoyment of conventional rights and privileges, particularly in education, might create a tense situation making vulnerable even the very existence of the government. The first encounter, after independence, between the Church and the government was in 1957 when the latter brought about some reforms in the education sector. The church, in collaboration with other aggrieved communities especially the Nair Service Society (NSS), took a course against the then E M S Namboodiripad’s government which became a historical event, and the government was ousted by the central government on 31st July 1959. The second major tussle was in 1972 when the government headed by C. Achuta Menon tried to unify the tuition fees of government and private colleges. The third major melee was in 2006, when the government took steps to control the self-financing colleges by passing the Kerala Self-financing Colleges Act, 2006. The confrontation between the Church and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, which started on Self-financing Colleges Act and continued along the revision of Kerala Educational Acts and Rules (KEAR) and school text books, reached up in the introduction of the
Single Window System for higher secondary school admissions (11th & 12th classes). The present tussle once again vindicates that the Church still maintains its hold over the flocks, and its appeal to the religious sentiments of people is still capable of evoking equivalent response from them.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research study is unique in more than one respect. A brief but precise analysis of Indian secularism takes us to the root of secularism in modern India. It highlights the splendid contributions of our national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru towards making modern India truly a secular state. The study circumspectly examines the secular content of the Indian constitution and establishes the fact that it sturdily supports a secular state in India. Paradoxically, communal loyalties of the people were mainly instrumental in bringing about a secular mind-set and they contributed considerably to the secularization process in Kerala society. The thesis particularly concentrates on the role of minority communities like Christians and Muslims in shaping and directing the political process in Kerala. It reveals that the
pressure these minority communities exert on the government, at the time of decision making, influences the output of the political system. The nub of the study lies in the analysis of the significant role Christians and the Church play in the politics of the state in general and electoral politics in particular. Moreover, the role of the Church as the most potent educational pressure group in the state also forms a significant part of the study. The virulence with which the Church articulates its interests as an input agency in the political system of Kerala is something unique in the entire history of humankind.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The following are the major objectives of the study.

1. **To trace the roots of secularism in modern India.**

   A country where primordial loyalties of the people get precedence over modern loyalties and religious laws over secular laws, there is hardly any scope for secular nationalism. Religion wielded such an influence in public life that the state administration in ancient and medieval India was largely regulated by the principles of the official state religion. Also the conduct of the people was religious at core and they could not
even think of a social life event surpassing religion. However, it is not an odd thing that people unhesitatingly trace the root of Indian secularism to ancient and medieval periods in Indian history according to their personal and primordial loyalties. Some historians even attribute a ‘golden period’ image to the reign of certain rulers in ancient and medieval periods. Being primordial at heart the society had not developed a secular ethos transcending religious sentiments. But the spread of western education and the establishment of the British administration based on common law system, equal citizenship rights, separation of matters divine and mundane, etc, were responsible for laying the foundation of secularism in modern India.

2. To examine the constitutional dimensions of the concept secularism.

Among the provisions of the constitution which support a secular state in India Part-III stands prominent. It gives to all the people of India, irrespective of their religious affiliation, certain fundamental freedoms which are enforceable through a court of law. Though the original (unamended) constitution did not contain the term secular, it was, for all practical
purposes, a secular document capable of making future India truly a secular nation. It is to be admitted that certain provisions of the constitution might infringe the basic tenets of a secular state. Of course, the provisions of the constitution which grant a good measure of freedom to union and state governments to interfere in the religious life of the people and the special social rights guaranteed to certain communities might appear as contravening the secular character of the Indian state. But a careful examination of the deliberations in the Constituent Assembly reveals the fact that the constitution makers were steadfast and determined to make future India a secular nation comparable to any modern secular state in the west. Constitutional experts have even commented that some of the provisions included in part-III of the constitution, to erect a secular state in India, even surpass similar provisions in the constitution of the United States of America, which is considered to be a model secular nation in the entire world.

3. To prove and establish that religious minorities like the Christians and Muslims play a significant role in the political system of Kerala.
The demographic constitution of the state gives a unique position to the religious minorities, particularly the Christians and the Muslims, in the society and politics of the state. The educational and economic advancement of Christians brought forth in them an equivalent political and civic consciousness which led to their active involvement in the political process of the state. They, by their hard work; aptitude and intuition in agriculture, trade, and commerce; advancement in general and professional education; sense of modernity and secular mindedness; adaptability, adjustment and the spirit of adventurism, enjoy a position of pre-eminence in society. It is a fact that the Christians do not have a political party of their own and Christian votes are divided mainly between right-wing political parties like the Congress and various factions of the Kerala Congress. They have been consistently supporting the Congress and the UDF, in all elections to the Lok Sabha and the Assembly till 2004. The Muslim League, which enjoys exclusive support of the Muslims, is a political force to be reckoned with in the northern parts of Kerala, particularly in the Malabar region. It has been supporting the UDF since
its formation in the eighties and has never weaned away from it. It could even contribute the chief executive of the state, though only for a short period of time.

4. To make clear that the Christian community and Church hierarchy play a crucial and positive role in the electoral politics of the state.

   Christians, particularly the Catholics, by and large, are supporters of right wing political parties like the Congress and various factions of Kerala Congress. The pastoral letters and church circulars issued on the eve of the elections by the hierarchy indicate their political preference. Though they appear as general guidelines, a thorough examination of the wording would reveal that they are clear exhortations to vote in favour of certain political parties or formations of parties. The Church’s outright interference in electoral politics has been evident in some elections in the form of demands for a certain number of seats for its nominees, suggesting of candidates for certain constituencies where the community has a sizeable presence, insistence on certain seats exclusively for community members, and so on and so forth. An objective analysis of the
election results would reveal the fact that the church leadership’s poll-eve stand has a clear impact on the outcome of the elections. However, there were also instances where the hierarchical dictates made only a marginal impact whenever it went against the general feeling of the society.

5. To explore the fact that the Church acts as the most assertive pressure group in education.

Education has always been an area of great concern for the church and any attempt on the part of the government to rein in the traditional powers and privileges of private managements would elicit strong protest from the community and the Church hierarchy. For the Church, education and faith are inextricably intertwined. So, whenever government interferes with the conventional educational rights of private managements, especially of the Church-run educational institutions, the hierarchy resorts to all means available including an appeal to the religious sentiments of the people, which in turn, creates a war-like situation in the state. Unless provoked, the Church would like to remain in the backdrop taking care of its many-fold activities, particularly in education and other
service sectors. During times of peace the Church wishes to maintain good relations with those in power as it knows well that proximity to centres of power would serve its interests the best way possible.

**HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY**

The following are the major hypotheses of the study.

i. The secular system in India, with all its modern characteristic features, had its origin during the reign of the British, though some common features were explicitly present in the ancient and medieval administrations in the country.

ii. Communalism posed the main threat to secularism in India, both in pre-Independent and post-Independent periods.

iii. Communal mobilization of people for secular needs such as the sanctioning of more educational institutions, adequate representation in legislative bodies, more share in government jobs, etc., have greatly contributed to the general secularization of society often at the subliminal level.
iv. The Constitution of India contains sufficient provisions to make modern India a truly secular state comparable to any known politically secular nation in the west.

v. Two prominent religious minorities in Kerala, the Christians and the Muslims, exercise decisive influence on the political system, and often its outturns are the result of the pressure exerted by them at the time of decision-making.

vi. In electoral politics, the Church wields tremendous influence and often it becomes the centre of attention of the election propaganda by political parties.

vii. Though fundamentally a spiritual organization, the Church has obvious political preferences which are expressed through pastoral letters and various church circulars issued at the time of polls.

viii. Usually the election results in Kerala have direct correlation with the stand taken by the communal leadership, in favour or against a party or formation of parties, during the run up to elections.
ix. In Kerala, the Church is a formidable pressure group in education to be reckoned with the political parties and the government, and there have been instances of the government being forced to take or not to take recourse to certain policies and courses of action concerning education due to its stiff resistance.

AREA OF THE STUDY

This research work comprises a general analysis of secularism in India tracing its origin and growth; constitutional debates concerning secularism and significant provisions in the constitution supporting it. In Kerala, communal mobilization for secular needs indirectly contributed to general secularization of the society. The role played by Christians and Muslims, the two prominent religious minorities in Kerala, in the society in general and politics in particular has been elaborately analyzed. Between these two the Christians, more advanced educationally and economically, play a significant role in the development of society in general and the political process in particular. The Church, the official spiritual hierarchy, having been in possession of majority of the educa-
tional institutions in the state, is the most dominant educational pressure group in Kerala.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are only a limited number of books available on secularism in India and, as far as Kerala is concerned, there is hardly any book directly dealing with the topic secularism. Of course, there are a couple of books available today which only indirectly touch the topic secularism. Excepting a journal on secularism— the Indian Journal of Secularism— there is hardly any periodical or magazine on secularism as such available in India. Secularism in India itself has constituted the subject-matter of many theses and its analysis cannot be limited to one or two chapters in a thesis. Many of its diverse aspects cannot be tested empirically and the very concept ‘secularism’ itself is a complex phenomenon. In a country where most of the people are religious at heart the term secularism becomes the most sensitive topic and the concept of secularism has been more misunderstood than understood. However, few research studies have been conducted on the role of the Church in Kerala politics. Since no book has been
written and no research work conducted on ‘secularism and the politics of religious minorities in Kerala’ there is no previous literature to refer to and it was difficult to have any previous knowledge on the topic before undertaking this study.

**FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The following are the major findings of the study.

i. The roots of a secular state in modern India, with all its fundamental features such as civil equality of people transcending religion and caste, common citizenship, separation between matters religious and political, etc., can rightly be traced to the establishment of British administration in India about the middle of the eighteenth century.

ii. The Constitution of India contains adequate provisions to make India a truly secular nation.

iii. Minorities in Kerala exercise considerable and decisive influence on the social and political processes in the state, and their role is evidently visible in ministry formation and in the subsequent policy formulation of the government.
iv. An objective evaluation of electoral politics in Kerala reveals the fact that the political stand adopted by communal leadership towards the political parties or their alliances, during the run up to elections to the Lok Sabha and the state Legislative Assembly, has a direct bearing on their outcome.

v. The Church, especially the Catholic Church, being managers of the largest number of educational institutions in the state, right from pre-primary to higher education sector, acts as the most potent educational pressure group in Kerala.

vi. The peculiar organizational set up of the Church makes the conduct of demonstrations or protest meetings against the government easy. Its organizational strength has dismayed the people in authority and even forced them to mend their rigid stand against the Church and make peace with it.

vii. The Church has vehemently opposed any attempt on the part of the government to curtail the traditional powers and privileges enjoyed by it in the field of education.
viii. The Church does not mind going for an open and direct confrontation with the government, if the latter pursues educational policies contrary to its interest.

CHAPTERISATION

CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

It gives us a brief picture of what the thesis contains in detail in the coming chapters including the last chapter which gives us a brief sketch of the major findings of the study.

CHAPTER II - INDIAN SECULARISM: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SURVEY

This chapter provides a brief but systematic analysis of the origin and growth of secularism in modern India. A careful analysis of ancient and medieval administrations penetrates into some of the hidden facts that highlight their negative and positive impact on the secularization of Indian society. The system of administration introduced by the British based on common law marks the beginning of the formation of a secular state in India.
CHAPTER III - SECULARISM: THE CONSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

This chapter systematically examines how far the constitution of India supports the creation of a secular state in India. Besides making a clause by clause analysis of the vital provisions of the constitution that support a secular state in India, the chapter, particularly concentrates on judicial deliberations on secularism, personal laws, and uniform civil code. The constitution of India contains all the noble ideals which our national leaders stood for, and secularism, of course, is one of them. So the constitution acts as the greatest bulwark of a secular state in modern India.

CHAPTER IV - POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES: THE KERALA SCENARIO

This chapter makes a general survey of the origin and growth of religious minorities in Kerala. Apart form giving a detailed account of the two prominent religious minorities, Christians and Muslims, a brief historical sketch is also made of the other religious minorities such as the Jains, Buddhists and Jews. The chapter particularly highlights the role the
religious minorities especially Christians and Muslims, have in the society in general and the political system in particular.

CHAPTER V - ELECTORAL POLITICS AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

This chapter explores the role and influence of the Christian community in the electoral politics of the state. Though the Church is primarily a spiritual organization, it has had a clear political stance expressed through various church circulars and pastoral letters issued at the time of elections. The stand taken by the Church leadership towards political parties or their formations, during the run up to elections, has a direct impact on the election outcome.

CHAPTER VI - THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AS A PRESSURE GROUP

The chapter analyses the stance maintained by the Church, particularly the Catholic Church, as the most influential and powerful educational pressure group, in the political system of Kerala. Being managers of the largest number of private educational institutions from pre-primary to higher education,
the Church has been alert and vigilant against any attempt on the part of the government to make changes in the existing system in education by curtailing the traditional rights and privileges of private managements. The chapter also makes a detailed analysis of the major confrontations between the Church and the government starting from pre-independent years to 2007.

CHAPTER VII - CONCLUSION

It contains a brief summary of the major findings of the study carried out in the preceding chapters.