

## 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**