

Secularism or laociti

Tuesday, March 09, 2004

The partisan stance of the English language media always leaves me amazed. When Monsieur de Villepin, the French Foreign Minister, recently visited Delhi, most newspaper headlines were not about the Iraq war or a multi-polar world or a "strategic dialogue", but how the French Government should deal with its "minorities".

The editorial of a national newspaper stated: "Upon his arrival in New Delhi, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin has been deluged with protests. His Government's decision to ban all 'conspicuous' religious symbols from public schools has been controversial all through."

First, it is not the French Government which banned "ostentatious" religious signs in public schools, but the French Parliament. There is a big difference. The Indian press just forgot to mention that the bill "for the application of the principle of secularism in public schools, colleges and high schools" was passed by 494 votes against 36, with 31 abstentions. Personally, I can only trust the collective wisdom of the elected representatives of the French people who voted in the law with such overwhelming majority.

Would it be fair if the French press were to criticise Mr Yashwant Sinha, during an official visit, for a law supported by more than 90 per cent of the Members of the Indian Parliament? The French law on laociti (secularism) is, perhaps, not perfect, but how can we in India judge the genuine problems faced by French teachers?

The concept of laociti in France is rather different from the secularism that has been practiced in India under certain governments since independence. In France "secularism" means equality of all citizens in the face of law. It does not include special status for educational institutions of the minorities or different personal laws. And there is no "minority" vote bank as yet!

An important concern in France is that more than 20 per cent of the population under 25 belongs to a minority which is not always well integrated in the society. The state admits its present failure in solving this complex and thorny issue; it is the reason for the basic

principles of laociti being reiterated, as a first step. In fact, the entire debate centred around only one question: "How to achieve a greater integration?"

When he piloted the Bill, the French Prime Minister, Mr Raffarin, explained that the problem lay in religious symbols being worn ostentatiously (the definition of which is "an excessive and conscious show or display"). This "ostentatious show" could lead to a claim for a separate religious status which in turn would endanger the secularism on which the French State is built. Mr Raffarin made it clear that if he so desired, a student could wear a "discreet" sign of his religious conviction.

The law addresses itself mostly to Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps and Christian crosses. However, the tiny Sikh minority (estimated at less than 5,000) have been most vociferous about their rights to wear the turban. Their plight hogged the headlines during the visit of the Minister.

It is true that de Villepin himself provided the stick to be beaten with when Simranjit Singh Mann (now Member of Parliament) was received in the Quai d'Orsay (the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris). A spokesperson explained, "This meeting should be seen in the context of regular contacts between officials of the Ministry and a foreign personality." Even in Delhi, instead of spending more time convincing his counterpart of the need to improve the stagnating relations between France and India, de Villepin met Mr Tarlochan Singh, Chairman of the National Minority Commission, and Mr Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa, the Union Minister for Chemical and Fertilisers, both of whom who tried to convince him that the turban was inseparable from Sikh's way of life. The Minister diplomatically made it clear that true secularism was also a way of life for the people in France. The Sikh representatives were, however, assured that all efforts would be made to find a solution which would keep the French principles of laociti while respecting their faith.

South Block was, perhaps, happy enough that a considerable amount of energy had been devoted to this episode. It is probably the saddest part of the story: Relations between France and India seem to have gone downhill since 1998 when France was the only major Western nation not to condemn the Indian nuclear tests.

The trouble is South Block has recently tilted so much towards America that an agreement on the sale of the of six Scorpene submarines along with 36 SM-39 (Exocet) missiles manufactured by a European consortium has been halted despite promises made last year during Prime Minister Raffarin's visit to India. Negotiations for the sales of 126 Mirage 200-5 as well as the purchase of Airbus planes for Air India and Indian Airlines are also blocked.

Following in the same vein, the Indian press accused the French Minister of being an "anti-American poster boy" because he had dared to declare in the Security Council a year ago that there was no justification for a war with Iraq. This is truly unfair.

The extent to which South Block can go to not displease the US does appear bemusing. Washington had just given a clean sheet to General Musharraf for having taken prompt action against Dr Khan, who managed, according to them, to transfer Chinese nuclear technology to the "axis of evil" states without the knowledge of the CIA, the ISI or the Pakistani Army chief(!). While the Western press is strongly condemning the double standards of the United States, Delhi has kept quiet and accepted the American contention about Pakistan, which Bernard-Henri Levy recently described as *"the biggest rogue of all rogue states of today... What is taking form there, between Islamabad and Karachi, is a black hole compared to which Saddam Hussein's Baghdad was an obsolete weapons dump."*

In Delhi, de Villepin spoke several times of the importance of a multi-polar world. Today, India is blinded by Secularism l'Américaine (all are equal in front of the law, except partners). But is it not in its interest to create new partnerships (particularly with France and Europe) for a more balanced foreign policy?