

WHITHER GOES “INDIAN SECULARISM”?

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Indian secularism has often been suggested as an alien category of ordering. Was the Indian secular ethos born out of self-reflexive processes of decolonization or the reciprocal identity formation which entailed reformist inquiries into religion? This essay will explore the contested history of Indian secularism, challenge the myth of a uniquely tolerant Indian model, and argue that what has been called ‘secularism’ in India is in fact a form of Hindu Brahmanical pluralism that has stalled true secularisation.

The Karachi Resolution of 1931 made a unique attempt at secularisation at a superstructural level. That “the State shall observe neutrality in regard to all religions” was enshrined in it. It was unique because in the Karachi Resolution, ‘neutrality’, secularisation of the state was made a part of the modern project of nation building, despite the then competing political projects, including the Congress’ own, espousing religio-identitarian models. This is markedly different from the later attempt at the time of the birthing of the republic, to link secularism with supposed historical approaches towards celebrating those aspects of religion which could be brought to work for the modern state. This would include using Ashoka’s or Akbar’s model of statecraft in multireligious society, tapping into subsequent reciprocal identity formation or reformist inquiries into religion. These in turn informed the academic attempts at reconciling the secular and the sacral, suggestive of attempts at cohabitation. The mavericks of 1930s and the status quoists of the 1950s were the same people. There wasn’t much of a difference, except India in the 1930s was a nation in the making, which two decades later had become a nation in the waiting, ungainly and restless to emerge and get its house in order at all costs.

But secularism never had a linear, uniform progress, into being accepted as a notion within most juridical structures around the world. The Holyoke-Bradlaugh paradigm that guided English secularism makes it evident even in the initial stages. With the National Reformer and subsequently the National Secular Society, Bradlaugh had stood constantly opposed to the conservatism of Holyoke, the one who

had coined the term secularism in 1851.

Why were secular ideas never as pervasive within the geo-cultural specificity of South Asia? What constitutes the secular ethos in the disparate terrains of modernity? What about the fundamentalist forces which have survived since the nineteenth century and have only found renewed vigour in recent times? Isn't the very principle of identifying citizens with their religious identity fraught with the dangers of encroachment in everyday existence, especially in multi-religious societies? In trying to answer some of these questions, I will argue in favour of the potentialities of secularization in India, beyond the vestiges of its post-modern critique and the tolerance of religious secularists. The potentiality, I believe, lies in tracing the stream of secular thought making and unencumbered questioning of religion from Young Bengal to a Govind Pansare in continuity. This alone establishes an alternative narrative of secularization, until now hidden under the strain of the state sponsored 'tolerance' doctrine, propped up by its academic lackeys and cultural czars.

It is time we categorically call Indian pluralism for what it is, that is Hindu Brahmanical tolerance, couched in pluralism. Irrespective of the somersaults we have witnessed since Independence, when all sorts of academics, policy makers have enabled and peddled the state myth of an "Indian variety of secularism" - this very brand of Hindu pluralistic tolerance, it is time we accept the irrefutable historical evidence that India was always a land where precolonial society was fraught with communal animosity alongside intercommunal camaraderie.

For years this peddling of Hindu tolerance as a specific Indian brand of secularism has brought us to this precipice where the Indira Gandhi govt could enshrine secularism in the Indian constitution, while removing it from its etymological context herself. Rajiv Gandhi then made a farce out of this already watered-down label of Indian secularism. The Supreme Court has in its wisdom given 2.77 acres of the land to Ram Lalla Virajman in 2019, accepting him as a juridical entity. Whether this was done to satisfy the supposed collective conscience of the majority or bowing to the pressure of popular sovereignty as opposed to rule of law, is anybody's guess.

The evidence also did not heavily weigh in the favour of any one side, except that the demolishers could be easily identified. That aside let us look at how we reached this precipice, keeping the judgement and the resolution aside, to try and

Whither Goes “Indian Secularism”?

understand the correctives for historical method as practiced in India. Applied history is a newfound praxis-based methodology in the West. In India, applied history entails reflexivity about the historical method. It requires historians to engage in public history, inform policy decisions, see the uses of history as a tool for conflict resolution, mediation, arbitration, while steering clear of both statist myths and popular perceptions of the past. It should have begun with a careful look at the Indian freedom struggle, evidence from colonial India, Independent Indian state formation, post independent challenges, all of which would have revealed there wasn't scope for the acrobatics that went into claiming what was practiced in India was secularism, even a third world or Indian variant of it.

To understand this, I propose a two-pronged approach. Either we can look at the popular practices and belief systems to understand whether India was a land where the secular ethos had found place or we could take the top down statist approach to understand vide the practices of the state whether there was an attempt at even the Indian sarva dharma sambhava variant to flourish, and a similar proliferation of secularization at the grassroots mediated via state policy. In both approaches the evidence is overwhelmingly against the general canonical view of secularism being deeply embedded in the Indian consciousness. From Aligarh and Jabalpur in 1961, Gujarat in 1969, Moradabad in 1980, Nellie in 1983, Bhiwandi in 1984, Gujarat in 2002, to Delhi, Nuh and Haldwani in recent years, the Indian psyche has not just internalised the intergenerational trauma of communal conflict but perpetuated it. More than 10000 lives have been lost and a substantial portion of our population has participated in it actively, offered community support or remained bystanders. The solution was not for social scientists to wish it away or provide counterfactuals, but to acknowledge it as a social malaise before it metastasized. For years this evidence was ignored and a statist view of secularism being the Indian way of life, was canonized by social scientists of all hues.

If 1950, was supposed to be about rupture, it ended up being more about continuity, due to the revivalist strands of our Freedom Movement, the unfinished social reform movements and the yearning for an idyllic past. This led to the complacency that pluralism was the best India could do under then circumstances, and a Jeffersonian wall of separation or an irreligious state would lead to further alienation rather than embalming wounded masses. This however, left the space open for transgenerational trauma to provide fertile ground for multitude of religio-fundamentalist tendencies, both from amidst majoritarian and minority groupings. An agnostic Nehru with his sangam snans or bhoomi pujans state

turned the state into a site of religious spectacle caving in to personal religious beliefs of the leader elect, even as he walked the tightrope, taming inter-religious suspicion and othering.

Today, in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's third term, liberals and the urban elite are ruing the decimation of the secular project, the idea of India, and the battle which was being touted as the battle for the heart and soul of India. Many are now disparaging the regions which voted for Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister, while Kerala and Tamil Nadu is being celebrated as the bastion of progressive educated forces. The same Kerala that voted Indira Gandhi back to power post her emergency days, where the UDF routinely sides with parties with a professed goal of preservation sectarian religious interest, not entirely different from the BJP's. The same Tamil Nadu which set an example for the entire country through the Periyarist self-respect movement, the Dravidian movement and the fight against Hindi Imperialism, then went and voted a lady to power, who offered a backdoor for the BJP to find a toehold in the state. There is no doubt that the BJP is a communal party and is backed by the world's largest religio-political formation with an obvious xenophobic ideology. So are the people who steered clear of the BJP the cleverest in India? Not by any stretch of imagination. Whether the ones who voted for and aided the Modi juggernaut are 'secular' or not, one thing is for certain, they were not fooled by the liberal claims that Congress is a secular alternative. Maybe if the liberals had looked beyond this two-party binary, they would have found mainstream political parties in India which espouse secularism like the Left or the DMK. But to suggest the Congress is secular is not only an attempt at taking the voting populace of this country for a ride but spreading counterfactual narratives or something that is in vogue nowadays, misinformation.

Even then there is a silver lining in all this. Indian democracy remains robust. While a Presidential style polarity can damage it in the long run, it will continue to throw up challenges Modi's way. But there is a greater concern. Even if the BJP loses in 2024 or 2029, the Sangh won't. This is where the silver lining lies. A majority of the people look at the Congress as simply a watered-down version of the BJP, since a majority of the BJP's poll promises have been brought by Congress led governments in the state's such as cow protection acts. In January, earlier this year, it was the Congress run Municipal council in Damoh, Madhya Pradesh, that had called for demolition of Muslim homes, in the aftermath of a ruckus over possession of beef (Article 14, 2024).

Whither Goes “Indian Secularism”?

The Sangh, which has only grown from strength to strength since the 1920s, and has been helped towards its centennial by not just the BJP but a litany of non-BJP parties, including Congress units in states. Their support to the emergency aside, their role in the 1984 Sikh riots have been documented by Gautam Navlakha and others.

Formal versions of Indian History produced under the shroud of state patronage and historians liaising with political institutions, have served as a tool of legitimizing one or the other political narrative. Since the Indian National Congress served as major political organization in the twentieth century its narrative was promulgated as canonical. This is not to say that the scholars who produced such historical works were inept. On the contrary they were some of the most brilliant minds of Independent India. Through their writing’s Indian pluralism, the idea of the tolerant upper caste Hindu and its lived reality, was reimaged as Indian secularism or the variant of secularism which evolved in India organically. Counterfactual or Historical erasures - call it what you may, but this ignored the similarity of this idea with that of the Sangh’s narrative. Which is why even the NCERT textbook series which emphasised the importance of unmediated reception and open-ended questions, rather than ‘informing’ or ‘telling’ the readers are directly under attack.

To understand the failure of the brand of secularism conjured by the Nehruvian state for its own legitimacy and how it has serviced the Indian Right one must understand that the Sangh today has come a long way from Moonje- Golwalkar days and has repeatedly professed their idea of tolerance being the guiding principle of Sanatan Dharma/Hindutva/Hindu Dharma (often used interchangeably), with acceptance of minority religions as key to their rebuilding of Hindu Rashtra. Through careful fading of the distinction between the ideal and the extant, use of postmodern critiques of any universalist understanding of the secular and the sacral, imaginative retellings of the freedom struggle, and formulation of intellectual histories and political thoughts, and theories completely severed from contemporary practices of political agents, the Indian state and everyday lived realities, an understanding of Indian secularism was propounded, suggesting this was remarkably different from that of the Sangh. In effect this never was remarkably different.

During the Bengal Renaissance, Raja Rammohun Roy’s was the strongest critique against Hindu and Muslim orthodoxy; then came Derozio and Young Bengal, who

launched a thorough offensive against religion. Thus, secularisation was a process which came to rest alongside many religio-revivalist movements of shuddhikaran, and setting up of religious associations (samajs, sabhas) such as the Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj and others interested in reifying religion, shorn of those elements which were often the target of the most virulent criticism. The Brahmo Samaj went through great pains and in different phases asserted themselves as being similar to Christian monotheism, and at times came closer to the traditions from which they were born. To sum it up, the Indian freedom struggle never gave centerstage to sarva dharma sambhava, nor did the other strands of secularism challenging canonical religion itself, die out, as formal history would have us believe. Instead, the Congress's journey from the party of the national bourgeoisie to a pan Indian party cutting across classes, did make its version of pluralism the canonical one. It, therefore, became the guiding force of our constitution. The founding fathers were clearer in their understanding, that the liberal pluralist idea they were enshrining in the constitution had nothing to do with secularism. It wasn't until Indira Gandhi, that the word 'secularism', now championed by a section of the academe, found its way into the Indian constitution.

Indira Gandhi as leader of Congress (R) had used the image of a cow and a suckling calf as her election symbol. Those inclined to think that this represented her concern for the agrarian sector (India's largest employer) and the rural community, would be mistaken. In fact, throughout twentieth century the Congress was the torchbearer of cow protection laws and violence around the same. This was not even done to placate upper caste Hindus in its fold, rather this was the Congress' core ideology. Occasional murmurs around secularism were floated to placate the secular minority in its ranks. Which is why the Swaraj Party, Socialist Party, the Swatantrata Party left the Congress fold; P.C.Joshi, the first General Secretary of the Communist Party, was castigated for espousing a line of alliance with the Congress in building a National Front.

It is time that historians dedicated to their craft excavate the idea of secularism from the liberals. Secularism cannot be diluted to mean Hindu tolerance/soft Hindutva/religio-identitarianism (currying favours with all religious groups, often understood in common parlance as minority appeasement). Secularism has always meant an irreligious state, which does not feign to understand religion and couldn't care less about religious customs and traditions. A state which gives complete freedom to religious practices but holds the contract of citizenship above all other contracts and identities, and in times of conflict between protecting religious

Whither Goes “Indian Secularism”?

rights and civil liberties should always vouch for the later. The Congress’ variant of pluralism, which is quite close to the Sangh variant, with minor difference in optics, needs to be dismantled and not even be categorized as ‘secularism’. India was never ‘secular’ or ‘socialistic’, Indira Gandhi’s amendments notwithstanding. Ours was a journey towards secularization, of not only the body politic, but every aspect of life in India. This journey was stalled because the citizenry, and those not entrenched in some or the other religious ideal, came to believe that the Congress propagates secularism, and India is a secular state, therefore, the movement towards secularisation at the grassroots was unnecessary. A movement which has seen proponents like Pansares and Dabholkars in recent times. The disillusionment with this very brand of pluralism, masquerading as secularism, meant that many individuals for whom religion was an important factor in their cultural paradigm, opted for the party with no pretence of secularism. The others for whom religion mattered little in the construction of their self/identity, increasingly became disillusioned with the soft-Hindutva and at times the religio-identitarianism of the Congress. This secular vote was scattered. Many kept relying on the Congress as the only alternative, while others have since moved beyond this binary and vote for some or the regional parties.

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