

Secularism in India: Why is it Imperiled?

By

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The author is University Professor, Economics and Law, at Columbia University and Senior Fellow in International Economics at the Council on Foreign Relations. This short paper is written in an informal style, and is intended mainly to advance a few ideas, rather than a full-blooded scholarly analysis, that might illuminate the current state of secularism in India. Some of what I write is of interest, however, beyond India. My thanks are due to Bruce Ackerman, Padma Desai, Sumit Ganguly, Jack Hawley, Tapan Raychaudhuri, T.N.Srinivasan and Ashutosh Varshney for helpful conversations. The paper will appear in a volume on Secularism being edited by T.N.Srinivasan and published by Oxford University Press.

Introduction

Secularism in India is widely considered to be under threat. The razing of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya led to riots and killings by Muslims and by Hindus. The recent massacres of innocent Hindus in Godhra, presumably ignited by smouldering Muslim resentments against the Hindutva proponents over Ayodhya, touched off a larger massacre of equally innocent Muslims in tit-for-tat killings that undermined yet further the amity under which these religious communities had lived earlier in Gujerat State in an atmosphere of secularism.

And we have had unspeakable atrocities against the Sikhs in Delhi after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; and an occasional slaying of proselytizing Christian missionaries: a matter that has personal salience and poignancy for me as I was educated at the Catholic St. Xavier's School in Mumbai with religious tolerance and indulgence --- I was allowed to spend all my Book Prize moneys each year on the writings of Swami Vivekananda and none of us who were not Christians had to attend Bible classes but were instructed in Good Manners and Morals instead--- which stand in contrast to the fanatical stereotypes of forced conversions that agitate the extreme fringe among the Hindus.

Does this resurfacing of communal strife, which is disturbing even though it pales in comparison to the horrendous post-partition violence in both India and Pakistan and, I suspect, owes a great deal to the festering memories of those

events, suggest that we are at the edge of a precipice? Or can we draw comfort from the fact that, just as India's democracy has survived for over half a century while nearly all other nations liberated from colonialism succumbed to civil strife and often to military takeovers and military dictatorships --- four times, with General Ayub Khan, General Yahya Khan, then General Zia and now General Musharraf, in Pakistan --- India will be able to survive the threat to its equally important other pillar of civic virtue, secularism? Must India land on its feet here too, even as communal turbulence threatens to throw her off balance? Perhaps; but none of us can afford to be complacent.

What I propose to do here therefore is to analyze the factors contributing to these disturbing trends, and then to offer policy and institutional correctives. I shall divide the analysis into factors that operate at home, and the external factors: though, they do interact at times, for sure.

At Home

Why are Hindus agitated? It is a cliché by now that Hindu revivalism is characterized by the paradox that a sizeable number in the majority community, constituted by Hindus who are nearly 82% of the population, act as if Hindus were a minority. The reactionary, activist fringe among the Hindus feels that the rights of the Hindus are set back by the secular state while the rights of the religious minorities, especially the Muslims, are advanced.

I have little doubt that this sense has come to prevail in India, increasingly in the post-Independence years, because of an explosive combination of three elements:

(1) The Nehruvian secularists (among whom I counted myself, having been educated at Cambridge and Oxford) founded their secularism on an equal contempt for all religions. Religion was, in the famous formulation at the time, the opium of the masses (creating the bon mot where, asked as to what the opium of the Chinese masses was, the wit replies: opium). Secularism, as an element of modernity, required therefore a non-discriminatory rejection of all religions and all religiosity from public, as distinct from private, affirmation.

(2) Aside from the fact that such an attitude is unrealistic when religion plays an immense role in society, just as it does in the United States (where Presidents of both Parties visibly affirm their Christian faith, whether real or simulated and politically stimulated, by going to church on Sundays, for instance), it posed a compelling problem for the majority religion. For, while this denial of religiosity could be carried through for the Hindus, it was not possible to do so for the Muslims because another principle intervened: the Muslims were a minority and their religious practices had to be respected and were not to be interfered with except in the manner, and at the pace, at which the community's leadership itself defined.

This principle had been partly inherited from the colonial times. The British had not imposed a uniform common law on all communities. Each community was to be subject to its own religious customs and laws as practiced traditionally. When Independence came, this situation continued. Each community was left with reforming its ways. When it came to Hinduism, the Hindu reformers managed to get changes in objectionable pre-modern practices

implemented in legislation such as the Hindu Code Bill. But, by contrast, the Muslim reformers were less effective for several reasons, so that the reforms in Muslim religious practices as they bear on civil life fell behind the progress achieved by the Hindu reformers. But this then appeared to the regressive Hindu elements to be a bias by the secular forces in favour of the Muslims and against the Hindus.

In some cases, the provocative thoughtlessness of the secularists in this regard was quite gratuitous. I recall that, when my father, who had retired from the Supreme Court, was the Vice Chancellor of the Benares Hindu University, which was one of the few central universities, he was suddenly confronted by the consequences of a governmental attempt to drop the word “Hindu” from the name of the University while, for the obvious reason that Muslims were to be protected against such a “reform” since few Muslims would have tolerated this, the word “Muslim” was not to be removed from the Aligarh Muslim University which too was a central university. This asymmetry fueled more outraged and protracted outbursts and violence on the Benares campus than would have been the case if this asymmetry of treatment was not present. Instead of cutting and running, as many today do, my father (who had done a great deal for the Independence movement by encouraging his many sons to take active part in the Independence struggle, with my eldest brother, later the Chief Justice of India and a great human rights activist, having to go underground in view of a British warrant for his arrest and being caught up in a lathi charge which destroyed some of his front teeth) stuck it out but it destroyed his health. And what was the point

of the measure in any event, except to indulge anti-religiosity, and that too in a silly act of symbolism since the university would have continued offering courses in Hindu texts, traditions etc. much the way Brandeis and Yeshiva universities do for Jewish culture and traditions in the United States, for instance?

(3) But the resulting feeling among the Hindu traditionalists that Hindus were subject to discriminatory treatment, to a kind of “reverse discrimination” if you like, because of the asymmetric treatment of the two religions, was further reinforced by the appropriate affirmative action in favour of the Muslim minority in many other ways.

The Congress Party, during Independence struggle, had done the same unsuccessfully with a view to wooing Muslims away from the demands by Jinnah for Pakistan, offering to a rejectionist Jinnah a hugely disproportionately higher representation for Muslims in the provisional governments, for instance, as the great secularist Muslim leader Maulana Azad has written with great passion in his celebrated Autobiography. In similar vein, the Haj travel to Mecca was widely believed to be subsidized whereas the travel for the Kumbha Mela was presumably not. Again, Muslims were noticeably and quite properly represented deliberately in the cabinet, in the courts and in the bureaucracy. All this might have been accepted in other contexts as appropriate. But, set in the context of asymmetric treatment of the two religions in the manner outlined earlier and the active reforms being legislated against unacceptable Hindu practices, it was perceived as inappropriate and as more of the unjustified bias against Hindus, the

overwhelming majority in the country, and of the contrasting “pampering” of the Muslim minority.¹

This constellation of factors, acting in concert to produce the backlash among the anti-modern traditionalist Hindus many of whom have now rallied behind Hindutva, induces me to suggest, if only tentatively, that the correction of one or more of these factors might have produced greater harmony and might have moderated, if not avoided, the current incendiary situation. It is possible that a Gandhian approach to secularism, based instead on equal respect for all religions in the public sphere (an approach that I discuss in the next Section titled “Abroad”), and a more deliberate and decisive attempt early on in the life of our nation (in concert with progressive Muslims like the actress Shabna Azami and her celebrated poet husband, and several remarkable intellectuals in public life like former Ambassador Abid Husain and the late Professor Khusro) to bring non-fundamentalist Hindu and Muslim leadership together to converge on common civil laws, would have helped.

Abroad

But let me also add two external reasons one familiar and the other novel, which have also fueled the threat to secularism today.

One is, of course, the fact that Pakistan, ruled for half its life by military dictators who have exiled civilian political leaders and even hanged a former

¹ In this context, I cannot but remark that the attempt by some of the secularist intellectuals to dismiss the Godhra massacre of the Hindus as an “incident” or to downplay it as an “alleged” atrocity by Muslim extremists while they correctly condemn the later and greater massacres of the Muslims, only adds to this incendiary sense of asymmetric attitudes towards the Hindu and the Muslim fundamentalists. All atrocities, even those involving a single life, must be denounced; playing favourites in one’s moral outrage is morally deplorable and, besides, can only encourage further atrocities.

Prime Minister, has had the usual vested interest in externalizing its domestic problems of governance.² Three successive defeats at the hands of India, and especially the ignominious surrender to the Indian army in East Pakistan, have fueled the desire for revenge by going after India's soft spots. These certainly include Kashmir, where the Muslim card is played cynically, and another is India's Muslims who are treated as pawns in the game of playing up their sentiments as "imagined" victims of the "Hindu state". This is obviously not the entire story of Indo-Pakistan differences, but if it is not the Prince in Hamlet, it certainly has an important part in the play. It clearly exacerbates Muslim discontent and encourages Hindu-Muslim divisiveness. While the recent dialogue between General Musharraf and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh carries the BJP initiatives of Prime Minister Vajpayee a step further in the right direction, surely the restoration of democracy in Pakistan is critical to reaching an enduring solution to the problems between the two countries and, in its wake, strengthening the amity, and weakening the strife, between Hindus and Muslims in India. There are signs today that the military dictatorship's Kashmir-baiting, and use of Indian Muslims as pawns in conflict with India, has fewer sympathizers in Pakistan's population; and democracy would only strengthen the forces for accommodation in the same way that NGOs willing to negotiate a solution to Kashmir, for instance, flourish under democratic conditions in India.

But one more external factor, operating instead on the Hindus, needs to be appreciated. It turns out that a substantial fraction of the Indian diaspora,

² The specialists on Pakistan also argue that, even under civilian rule, the heavy hand of the army has never been absent.

especially in the United States, also shares the Hindu revivalist sentiments. Why do they get so hot under the collar, to the point of supporting financially and otherwise these revivalist notions? I believe there are two principal reasons, one political-philosophical and capable of heroic correction and the other cultural-sociological.

(i) The former lies in the fact that there is an interesting, partial parallel at the international level with the feeling within India among Hindu anti-modernists. While these Hindus feel that Hinduism is being discriminated against in India and other religions favoured in a discriminatory fashion, a large number of Indian abroad feel the same way about the situation in which Hinduism finds itself internationally. They look around the world and what do they find? Every major religion has nation states embracing them and playing for them, whether they profess to be secular or a theocracy. Look at Israel; it plays for the Jews, of course. The United States is clearly a Christian country, and now a Judeo-Christian country (with Clintons going to church and George W. Bush professing to be twice-born) The Vatican, the church of the Catholics, even has status at the UN and receives Ambassadors from countries worldwide in a manner that no other religious order does. The Muslim states not merely profess theocracy and embrace Islamic constitutions; they even band together in foreign policy through institutions such as the Arab League and others. It is natural therefore for Hindus abroad to ask: who plays for Hinduism? Hinduism has over a billion adherents; but it is predominantly in one country, India. And they see India embracing secularism since Independence; and they get upset. It is what I call, in the spirit

of E.H.Carr on the problem of “socialism in one state”, the problem of “secularism in one state”.

So these Hindus, among whom there are many professionals, object to the secularist demands to treat what they see as benign Hindu cultural forms as malign anti-secularism. Therefore, they ask noisily for Hindu prayers at Indian functions; they send their children to Sunday schools like the Jewish Saturday schools to learn Sanskrit, Bharatanatyam and the Gita; and, most provocatively, they send moneys to RSS schools where they feel that Hindu religion and culture will be taught.

(ii) Compounding the problem of “secularism in one state” is a different issue that afflicts some of the diaspora Indians. Coming from a different culture where the women do not enjoy equality --- and this is particularly true of immigrant East African Indians whose isolation from modernity has frozen them at gender attitudes that are a century behind the curve --- , they react to the greater freedom and independence of their women folk by voting for Rama Rajya. What they are really looking for is Rajya over Sita. This also drives them into the arms of the RSS-type fundamentalists among the Hindus. When I offered this hypothesis to my colleague, Jack Hawley who has done much distinguished work on Religions and particulrally on Hinduism, he agreed and led me to the insightful volume that he has recently edited on Fundamentalism and Gender (Oxford, 1994) ,where he writes in a related and complementary vein of the link between fundamentalism and a conservative ideology of gender that cuts across most religions:

“Why, in 1979, did the leaders of the Islamic revolution in Iran insist that women be covered in public, and why did militant Muslims demanding an independent Kashmir do the same thing ten years later? Why, in 1981, did the Akali Dal, the most influential Sikh party, demand a personal law that would bar Sikh women from using cosmetics, jewelry, or clothing that exposed their bodies? Think also of Vishwa Hindu Parishad --- the group primarily responsible for the bloody agitations aimed at building a temple to Rama to mark his supposed birthplace, on a site where a mosque stood until Hindu militants destroyed it in 1992. Why did the VHP’s general secretary, in 1989, list three points of Hindu honor that he held to be non-negotiable: the building of the temple, to be sure; but also the veneration of woman and the defense of “mother cow”? Why has women’s wearing of the sari, not Western dresses or pants, recently become an aspect of Vishwa Hindu Parishad teaching? Is there a connection between demands like these and the behavior of Hasidic Jews who in the same year stoned a group of women who were defying tradition by carrying the Torah as they went to pray at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem?”³

In focusing on why the diaspora of educated Indians abroad seeks this link, I provide the explanation that it is the threat to their views on gender roles and the threat to them posed by migration to America that provides the fuel for their support of the RSS, VHP et.al. from abroad.

But if this link can be explained but not remedied, this is not true of the problem posed by “secularism in one state”. To see how this might be remedied, one needs to focus on the fact that the problem arises, not from the refusal to allow Hindus freedom to practice their religion but from the fact that the public displays and affirmation of it assign to it a discriminatory and inferior status. We

³ Hawley attempts explanations of these gender links with conservatism in different religions.

need to consider frontally therefore the important question of what we mean by religious freedom, a cornerstone of our fundamental political beliefs. The conventional Western view of religious freedom considers it to be what I might call, borrowing philosophical terminology in the debates on liberty, negative religious freedom: that we permit the free exercise of religion. But, we also need to consider what should be called positive religious freedom: that no religion be favored in public space, effectively dominating and marginalizing other religions. While theocracies typically elevate the dominant religion to a status that compromises positive religious freedom, there is no excuse for self-described non-theocratic societies to do so. Consider the United States: because of historical reasons dating back to virtually mono-religious composition of the voting population, affirmation through public displays of the dominant religion, Christianity, is what hits the eye. Even in the quasi-public space, such as university convocations, one typically sees Christian ministers delivering benedictions, with an occasional rabbi thrown in: where are the Hindu and Buddhist priests and invocations? President Bush now makes an occasional nod to Islam: but that is a transparently political response to the need to demonstrate that we are not anti-Muslim as Islamic fundamentalists scream otherwise in the turbulent Middle East.

Perhaps the best example that the US can learn from is the practice of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the greatest figures of the last century, in this regard. He began his public meetings, given his own and the nation's religiosity, with prayers drawing on the sacred texts of India's principal religions, among them the

Bhagawad Gita, the Koran, the Old and the New Testament, and the Granth Sahib of the Sikhs. He is known to have borrowed civil disobedience from Thoreau. It is time for Thoreau's country now to borrow from him.⁴

Perhaps that will moderate the sense in the Indian diaspora that Hinduism is suffering from the discrimination resulting from "secularism in one state".

⁴ See my discussion of the issue of positive freedom of religion in the context of two cases on public religious displays pending before the US Supreme Court, in The Financial Times, titled "Multi-Faith America is no Theocracy", April 15, 2005.