

New India needs a secularism embedded in institutional commitments

For those who care about secularism, the politics of who can be labelled secular is a puzzle. Secularism sometimes seems to be reduced to an ineffable quality of the heart. Secularism as a personal virtue is the idea that the individual does not harbour invidious prejudice against particular communities for being who they are.

This is an important virtue. But in India this personal virtue has been such an unreliable guide to the institutional practice of secularism. This is what deepens the puzzle. How do people come to be marked as secular in political terms? If people make the transition from being allegedly non-secular to acceptably secular in political terms, like L.K. Advani apparently has but Narendra Modi has not, what are the markers of this transition?

This question is complicated. Religiosity has never been a marker of secularism in India. Some deeply religious people can be good political secularists; many non-religious characters have been perfect charlatans on secularism. Being secular used to be identified with a historical orientation: subscribe to one single Congress-Left narrative of Indian history.

Our secularisms by Pratap Bhanu Mehta

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This was a paradoxical position. It recognised that avoiding religious strife was an important political task. But it went about this task by disavowing the idea that there could have been genuine religious difference and conflict in the past. It sanitised, almost as if to say that the truth of Indian secularism needed the lie of Indian history.

Where secularism lost out was that both secularists and non-secularists were fighting on the terrain of the past. It was something of a liberation when some finally recognised that let history be history, and let it be argued out as such. Crafting a forward-looking community of fate, bound by common values, would be ill served by the narrow interpretations of the Left or the fanatical ones of the right. And so the irony that the Indian political system did not know what to do when figures like Advani and Jaswant Singh took a rather more complicated view of Jinnah. At first, it made them anti-national, then it seemed to have shored up their secular credentials.

The third marker might be institutional behaviour. But here the story gets puzzling. Rajiv Gandhi's regime, in a short span, took more anti-secular decisions than any government had in living memory, achieving the rare feat of making every community feel targeted. You might ask the question: which government has gone by its rajdharma in the face of imminent riots?

Even the redoubtable Tarun Gogoi seems to have a difficult time preventing the largest internal displacement of Muslims. Here the record turns out to be mixed. The Congress's legendary inaction for four days during the Mumbai riots, documented by the Srikrishna Commission, is up there in the abdication of rajdharma. And how can we certify that Narayan Rane or Chhagan Bhujbal's change of heart was more genuine than that of any other lapsed secularist who professes now to be secular? Are Muslims less likely to be targeted for being who they are in terrorist investigations or riots in Congress-ruled states? The evidence from Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan suggests not.

Then there is the question of how close you have to be to communal forces to vitiate your secular

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credentials. Why does the fact that NDA allies did not pressure Vajpayee more forcefully to act against Modi not count against them on the secular question?

There is a nauseating use of the 1984-2002 pair in public argument. One side says, since 1984 happened don't ask questions about 2002. The other responds by saying Rajiv Gandhi has passed away, while Narendra Modi is a live political issue. But here is the problem. What do you make of a government that appoints a CBI director who gives Tytler a clean chit as governor? You don't have to prejudge Tytler's case. But the appearances are damaging to justice and erode trust. You have to wonder why this act of messing with institutions does not warrant the communal tag. You have to wonder why clamping down on art in Baroda University is communal, but clamping down on free exchange of ideas on the Jamia campus is not. Is it because of a construction of secularism that

regards it as a matter of ineffable intent, not one that assesses institutional conduct? Or is it a version of the hilarious line from Ishqiya: tumhara ishk ishk aur hamara ishk sex?

The point is not to pick on the Congress. Despite its veneer of pedigreed gentility, it is rotten enough to be an easy target. The point is this: it is worth reminding us why the terms of ideological discourse are still very much set by the BJP versus Others, not by the Congress. Nitish has his opportunistic calculus. But his speech could draw lines in the sand more convincingly than Rahul. The second point is more conceptual. Secularism has been conflated with a rather shadowy personal virtue that seems to survive all kinds of institutional perfidy. Even within the

BJP, what distinguishes Advani from Modi? After all, Advani's autobiography gives the same narrative of 2002 that Modi does. Or is it simply that secularism means consecration by passage of time? Often, secularism is a kind of gesture of reaching out, as Nitish Kumar hinted: recognizing that the topi has the same place as the tilak. Faced with the organised violence of right-wing mobs, this is a valuable gesture. But this politics has limitations. It rests on creating coalitions of fear: the topi being swamped by the tilak. It rests on boxing people into identities, which you then protect.

It does not recognize that a robust secularism now needs a new institutional language: one

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founded on

individual freedom, dignity, rule of law, building institutional accountability and so forth.

This version of secularism also personifies it: the knight with benevolent intentions providing protection.

This was Mulayam Singh's model: a benevolent protector presiding over a rotting state structure, secularism

embedded in his persona even while the institutions that should embody it go to the dogs.

Modi's own answer to the question on the meaning of secularism was bizarrely off the mark. Secularism, he suggested, means putting India first. It aligned secularism with some kind of personal loyalty test, a move with an insidious history. But again, missing the element new India needs: secularism embedded in a series of commitments — individual rights, freedom of expression, dignity, equal treatment by the state, rule of law. But then he might be forgiven. Between opportunist cant and ineffable virtue, the institutional foundations of the idea long disappeared. Which is why the three-cornered fight over secularism seems a contest between the shallow, the hollow and the callow.

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