India's Embattled Secularism

by Mukul Kesavan

Indians are sometimes scolded for misunderstanding secularism. They're reminded that secularism in its original, Western sense means commitment to a public life fenced off from religion, not an equal pandering to all religions. This chiding is unreasonable.

It's unreasonable because secularism in India grew out of the peculiar circumstances of anticolonial nationalism. India isn't a Christian country try-

At a demonstration demanding the construction of a Hindu temple on the Muslim holy site of Ayodhya, a man wields a trishul, *a traditional religious symbol that can double as a lethal weapon. Hindu extremists have distributed many of the weapons to their followers.*

ing to disentangle its state from the tentacles of a smothering, interfering church. Nor is it Atatürk's Turkey or contemporary Algeria trying to erase monarchy and mullahs in the name of a secular modernity. India is an unlikely subcontinental state, first made by the English from the rubble of the Mughal Raj, then remade by their English-speaking subjects—a twice-made state, if you like. India was first fashioned out of a process of colonial expansion and conquest that dragged on for a hundred years, and the India the British made was a complicated jigsaw, an Austro-Hungarian Empire under more ruthless management. In the post-1947 makeover of India, the independent state consolidated the partitioned Raj into a secular republic.

Some part of this task of consolidation had been accomplished by Mahatma Gandhi's huge campaigns of civil disobedience in the decades before independence. In the name of the nation, the discontents of a poor country were harnessed against the colonial state that had, ironically, consolidated the territory the would-be nation wished to occupy. Gandhi's campaigns of mass defiance and solidarity were important not only because they helped throw out the British but because they demonstrated that India's bewilderingly plural population was capable of purposeful collective action.

In economic nationalism, the Indian National Congress found a secular way of being patriotic.

As established in 1885, the Indian National Congress—the party of Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and every Indian prime minister of independent India until 1977—was a self-consciously representative assembly of people from different parts of India. Because colonial nationalism had to prove to the Raj that the variety of India could be gathered under the umbrella of a single movement, there was a Noah's ark quality to the Congress's nationalism: It did its best to keep every species of Indian on board. The Congress never lost this sense that the nation was the sum of the subcontinent's species, and that the more Parsees, Muslims, Dalits, Sikhs, and Christians it could count in its Hindu ranks, the better was its claim to represent the nation. Even before the birth of Pakistan in the partition of 1947, Hindus were an overwhelming 75 percent of the population; today more than 85 percent of all Indians are Hindus. For the Congress, being secular meant making different types of Indians equally welcome. In that context, secularism became a way of being comprehensively nationalist.

The emotional charge of the Congress's nationalism came from anti-imperialism, not from some romantic myth of a suppressed identity struggling to be born. The Congress emptied nationalism of its usual content: language, culture, religion, history. In the place of these components it put an anti-imperialism based on a sophisticated critique of the economic effects of colonial rule. If Indian nationalism was to be fueled by the grievances of victimhood,

>Mukul Kesavan *teaches the history of colonial India at Jamie Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He is the author of a novel,* Looking Through Glass *(1995), and an essay on the crisis of secularism in India,* Secular Common Sense *(2001).*

the Congress made sure that all Indians were made to feel equally victims of economic exploitation. The leeching of India's wealth, the destruction of livelihood through colonial de-industrialization, and the crippling of agriculture by an extortionate taxation were hardy staples of Congress nationalist rhetoric—and for good reason. Taken together, the charges showed how colonialism had ravaged *all* Indians, whether they were peasants or workers, craftsmen or traders, landlords or indigenous capitalists. Theoretically, then, Muslim weavers, Jat peasants, Bohra traders, and Parsi industrialists were knit together by anticolonial grievances of one sort or another. In economic nationalism, the Congress found a nondenominational—a secular—way of being patriotic.

The remarkable thing about the Congress's nationalism was that, despite the personal inclinations of many of its leaders, it generally kept to the secular straight-and-narrow. It was not antimissionary (though Gandhi disliked conversion); it sponsored Hindustani, the lingua franca of northern India, as India's national language, written in two scripts to bridge the gulf between Sanskritized Hindi and Persianate Urdu; in 1937, it abbreviated the patriotic song "Vande Mataram" when Muslim legislators complained about its lyrics. Congressmen reined in their "Hindu" instincts because an all-India nationalism had to embrace everyone, especially when the party's claim to represent the nation was constantly being challenged by the colonial state. Far from keeping religion at arm's length, the Congress used an all-are-welcome secularism to conscript every religious identity in sight and bolster its credentials in the struggle against the Raj. The party's eclectic benevolence toward all faiths was expressed symbolically by the presence of its leaders at religious festivals, by the declaration of a rash of public holidays to mark the landmark events on every religion's calendar (Christmas, Easter, Eid, Muharram, Divali, and the birthdays of Buddha, Mahavira, Nanak, and Muhammad are all public holidays in republican India), and occasionally, as in the case of state subsidies to Muslims making the haj, by substantial financial support.

The Congress's historical difficulties with Muslims kept it honest. In its first three decades, the Congress was not a mass party, nor did it wish to be. It was an annual assembly of professionals and local notables from all over India. Muslim notables were hard to find. Faced with a politics that counted heads, Muslims did their sums and got a worrisome answer: In this new politics of numbers, the Hindus had the bigger battalions. The Congress always counted distinguished Muslims among its leaders—Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a traditionally educated alim, the peer and confidante of Nehru and Gandhi and the republic's first education minister, is a good example—but never in sufficient numbers to give the lie to the charge of tokenism.

The Congress's peculiarly Indian secularism had been designed to keep Muslims on board. So what happened to it after the Muslim League won Pakistan in 1947 and most Muslims left India? In fact, it held up well. The constitution of the new nation was remarkably secular in its approach to protecting religious freedom and preserving the neutrality of the republican state in the matter of faith. The Congress's construction of secularism, which had

once had the aim of persuading the Raj that the Congress spoke for all Indians, was written into the constitution to reassure religious minorities that they did not live on sufferance in free India. The constitution guaranteed their right not only to practice their faith but to propagate it and to establish educational institutions that despite their denominational status would be entitled to financial subsidies from the state. In the years that followed, the state under Nehru ritually demonstrated its enthusiasm for all of India's faiths. Nehru at a Sufi shrine, Nehru in a Sikh turban, the mandatory presence of cassocked padres, bearded ulema, Buddhist monks, and Hindu priests at the annual commemoration of Gandhi, the use of the Buddhist wheel, or Dharma Chakra, as the central motif of the Indian flag—these are but random examples of how the Indian republic tried to demonstrate its pluralist good intentions. It was a clumsy, patronizing secularism, always vulnerable to resentment and the charge of appeasement, but at a critical moment in India's history it held the pass and helped buy time for secularism to become an ordinary part of the republic's furniture. It did what good political ideas do: It worked.

Since the rise of the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Indian politics in the 1980s and 1990s, and especially since the party's ascension to power at the head of a coalition in 1999, concerned secularists have wrung their hands over the number of civilized middle-class people—educated folk who ought to know better—who have embraced the ideas and slogans of the Hindu Right. True believers had tended to see secularism as the rock on which the Indian elite had built its house. They were wrong.

> The secularism practiced by the Indian elite often had little to do with conviction or ideological principle.

Nehru's state was heir to the Indian National Congress's political beliefs and convictions. But the ruling class of republican India wasn't made up of Congress nationalists. It was a mixed class of bureaucrats, businessmen, rich peasants, rentiers, soldiers, and professionals who had served the Raj and now served the republic. They were secular because the preferred ideology of the state they served was a plural secularism. In addition, to be a secular individual in republican India was to be modern, unburdened by traditional beliefs and ascriptive identities. Every postcolonial ruling class yearns to be modern, and during his time as prime minister (1947–64), Nehru successfully sold secularism, nonalignment, and economic self-sufficiency as the essential ingredients in India's recipe for postcolonial modernization.

The secularism practiced by the Indian elite, then, often had little to do with conviction or ideological principle. It was a mark of modernity and metropolitan good taste. That helps to explain why, beginning in the 1980s, large sections of this elite traded in their secular clothes for the khaki shorts favored by the factions of the Hindu Right. The state's inability to make India

an economic success eroded its claim to be progressive and modern. The failure of the planned economy discredited as well the secularism to which the economy had been linked. And because the diffusion of secularism depended on its sponsorship by the Nehruvian state, the decline of the Congress as a political power and the BJP's withdrawal of state support for congressional secularism had the opposite effect. Secularism for the republican elite wasn't a political stance. It was a style choice—and styles change.

How did being secular become passé? Why did L. K. Advani's inspired coinage *pseudosecular* in the late 1980s persuade so many Indians that secularism was a hectoring, anti-Hindu project? Advani, the most important leader of the Hindu BJP after the prime minister, A. B. Vajpayee, has done to *secular* what Ronald Reagan did to *liberal*: The word now signifies an approach that has crippled a great nation by suppressing its basic impulses.

The Hindu Right, to which the BJP belongs, is implacably opposed to the Congress's pluralist construction of secularism because its political identity depends on the demonization of Muslims as the enemy Other. Christians are part of this demonology, but the historical grievance of the Hindu Right derives principally from the Muslim conquest of India that began a thousand years ago; its nationalism is premised on the idea of a beleaguered Hinduism. This is a sheepdog chauvinism, and the BJP is the dog: It works to keep a Hindu flock together and to protect the strays from Muslim and Christian wolves. If there were no wolves, the BJP would have nothing to do. Its nationalism—of a type familiar in Europe—slips easily into intolerance and bigotry.

SECULAR NOW SIGNIFIES AN APPROACH THAT HAS CRIPPLED A GREAT NATION BY SUPPRESSING ITS BASIC IMPULSES.

The BJP's chauvinism, which the Western press sometimes characterizes as Hindu nationalism, is very different from a nationalism born of anti-imperialism. The chauvinism of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the paramilitary volunteer corps founded in the 1920s that created the BJP as its parliamentary front in 1949, had very little to do with the struggle against colonialism. The RSS was a professedly apolitical militia, dedicated to Hindu self-strengthening. It was committed to an exclusionary nationalism that aimed to create a uniform citizenry on tried and tested European nationalist principles: a shared language, an authorized history, a dominant religious community, and a common enemy.

The BJP's brand of majoritarian nationalism isn't uniquely Indian. It has parallels, for example, with Serbian nationalism. Both are built from the same historical debris: a memory of centuries-old defeat at the hands of the Turks, legends of gallantry in defeat, an enduring memory of Turkish dominance and atrocity. Much as the Serb majority succeeded in aligning its state with its faith, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the BJP, despite the much-advertised absence

Balasaheb Thackeray, whose right-wing Shiv Sena party is allied with the ruling BJP, last fall called for the formation of Hindu suicide squads to target Muslim extremist groups. Police in the Indian state of Maharashtra brought criminal charges against Thackeray for his comments.

of a Hindu clergy, has been doing quite handily with its bands of militant sadhus and vocal Shankaracharyas. The BJP and its affiliates cite historical Hindu grievance as their reason for being, and they are committed to the transformation of a pluralist and secular republic into a Hindu nation. The RSS salutes a saffron flag, the Bhagwa Dhvaj, which is its emblem for the Hindu state-in-the-making. Its most revered ideologue, Guruji Golwalker, argued in a tract called *We, or Our Nation Defined* (1939) that Muslims living in India should be second-class citizens, living on Hindu sufferance, with no rights of any kind:

> From this standpoint sanctioned by the experience of shrewd old nations, the non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu Nation, i.e., they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ingratitude towards this land and its age-long traditions, but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead; in one word, they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizens' rights.

The campaign challenging the right of minorities to be equal citizens and questioning their loyalty has begun to gather pace in India.

Balasaheb Thackeray, the leader of the Shiv Sena, a Hindu supremacist party allied with the BJP, said in a newspaper interview in December 2000 that all political parties in India would toe the chauvinist Hindu line if Muslims were denied the right to vote. The BJP itself is partial to the idea that Hindus are natural citizens of India because their sacred sites are contained within the boundaries of the nation, while Muslims and Christians are suspect on account of their extraterritorial loyalties. The chief of the RSS recently advised Indian Catholics to reject the Pope and sever their links with Rome, the better to "nationalize" the Catholic Church.

Early last year, a pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat, a state ruled by the BJP, left between 700 and 1,000 Muslims dead and many more displaced, their homes burnt and their businesses destroyed. The pogrom, and the complicity of the civil administration and the ruling party in the killing and the subsequent demonization of the Muslim victims as Pakistani fifth columnists, came as no surprise to anyone who has followed the bloody history of Muslim nationalism in Pakistan and Bangladesh or of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism in Sri Lanka. The history of South Asia over the past half-century has shown that chronic violence and civil war are the inevitable outcome of majoritarian nationalism.

Secularism in India has now come to mean resistance to the long-standing and increasingly violent campaign to force the republican state to acknowledge the primacy of the Hindu majority. In the vanguard of this campaign is the main constituent of the ruling National Democratic Alliance, the BJP and its affiliated organizations, sometimes collectively described as the Sangh Parivar, or Sangh Family. It's no coincidence that the parties of the Hindu Right leading the campaign came to power a few years after the destruction, in 1992, of the Babri Masjid, a medieval mosque in Ayodhya, a Hindu pilgrim town in northern India. The campaign to build a Hindu temple on the site of the illegally razed mosque was (and is) a concerted attempt to rig the republic's politics in a majoritarian way—in effect, a coup in slow motion. More than the fate of a mosque hinges upon the Babri Masjid dispute and its resolution. The real estate in dispute is not the site on which the Babri Masjid once stood but the constitutional ground on which the republic is built. The argument is about India.

To accept the claims of the Hindu Right in Ayodhya is to accept that Hindu grievance (in this instance, the festering belief that the mosque was built by the first Mughal emperor, Babar, after he razed a temple dedicated to the Hindu god Ram) takes precedence over the republic's laws and institutions. The construction of a Ram temple where the Sangh Parivar wants it built would alter the common sense of the republic. This generation of Indians and their children would come to find it reasonable that those in the majority enjoy a *right* to have their sensibilities respected and their beliefs deferred to by others. And imperceptibly, India would become some other country. ❑