

Dynamic of the “Other” Community in India

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Abstract: Secularism, in a broader sense, essentially means that religion is kept firmly in its place if not discarded altogether from public life. Can India, a fundamentally religious country, profess belief in God and yet be paradoxically secular? While sporadic Hindu Muslim violence has been an endemic problem in India since Independence, generally the major political parties did not encourage it. This changed radically since the 1990s. Based largely on a study of secondary sources limited in period between 1988 and 1998 when religious mass campaigns brought the nationalist brand of ideology back to the fore of public life, the present article attempts to provide an overview to the rise of religion in modern Indian politics and its impact on the future of our secular polity.

Key words: Secularism • Religion • Communalism • Politics • Pluralism

INTRODUCTION

“Religion”, as observed Karl Marx, is the “opium of the masses”. Perhaps nowhere else was this as much in evidence over the last two decades as on the Indian subcontinent. The tryst with religion of the pro-Hindu RSS-BJP combine (“one nation, one people and one culture”) heralding its victorious return in 1998 to the helm of national politics after a period of hibernation, has spawned a large number of studies on the uneasy co-habitation between religion and secularism in contemporary India.

Secularism, in a broader sense, means that religion is kept firmly in its place if not discarded altogether from public life. Can India, a fundamentally religious country, profess belief in God and yet be paradoxically secular?. While sporadic Hindu Muslim tension and violence has been an endemic problem in India since independence, generally the major political parties did not encourage it. This as we shall see, changed radically since the 1990s. The Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, since the mid 1980s, demonstrated the savoir-faire to whip up large- scale mass support through the mobilization of ethno-religious symbols and the resuscitation of the Babri Masjid issue. The shift from socialism to globalization between 1989-1992 with its disparities for the vast majority of the population excluded from the benefits of liberalization provided yet another basis for the exploitation of Hindu discontentment.

Based largely on a study of secondary sources limited in period between 1988 and 1998 when large-scale mass campaigns targeted against the Muslim minority brought the nationalist brand of ideology back to the fore of public limelight, the present article provides an overview to the rise of religion in modern Indian politics as a wider trend while attempting to explain the secular character of our polity and the way the same has been implemented in practice. My own position here is that it is not so much a problem of secular versus non-secular as that of pluralism.

The Cultural Paradox: Hindu revivalism developed essentially in the 1920s and 30s in the context of India’s Freedom Movement to promote the interests of Hindu society and culture against growing Muslim League fundamentalism. The agenda of this revivalism rests largely upon two assumptions. Firstly, Hindu nationalists believe that nation-states can only be built around a shared cultural identity. Secondly, Hindu nationalists maintain that Hinduism is not a religion per se but a ‘way of life’ that is and should be, the basis of a shared cultural and national identity. For Savarkar, the Hindus ‘are not only a nation but a jati (race), a born brotherhood’ “Every person is a Hindu who regards...this land from the Indus to the seas, as his fatherland as well as his holyland - i.e., the land of the origin of his religion, the cradle of his faith. Muslim and Christians however, were regarded as ‘foreigners, since ‘Hindustan’ is not to them a holyland...

[Their holyland is far off in Arabia or Palestine' [1] Created by a resolution of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1932, the Rashtriya Swayamamsevak Sangh (RSS) provides the institutional infrastructure for the articulation of this ideology.

The popularity of the Hindu political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was to a large extent propelled in recent years by alleged Congress minority politics (or what the BJP terms "pseudo secularism") as also the rise of separatist movements in Kashmir, Punjab and the northeast. The assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 which saw wide scale communal riots described as "amongst the bloodiest in Delhi's history since 1947" further contributed to the consolidation of collective Hindu Angst. The BJP now appeared increasingly as a viable alternative to the Congress I as the national party of the future. The rest, as they say, is history.

Viewed from a historical perspective, it must be remembered that the rise of religious violence over the past few decades is not an isolated phenomenon. Communalism in India was born of the politics of the Muslim feudal lords, the Hindu landed aristocracy and the British rulers. "Communalism is a belief that people who follow the same religion have common secular interests i.e common political, economic and socio and cultural interests. Further, in a multi-religious society like India, it goes on to propound that the social, cultural, economic and political interests of the followers of different religions are different and they may be antagonistic as well." [2] It had led to widespread riots due to its popular appeal to the subconscious fears about the "other" community leading, in 1947 to the creation of Pakistan on the basis of communal majority. Free India, however, despite an overwhelming Hindu majority, implicitly embraced a "secular" form of government that guaranteed all its citizens "liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship". The Indian Constitution was framed on November 26, 1949 in marked contrast to the Muslim League assertion that diverse religions do not form a single nation. The "implosion" that led to Bangladesh in 1971 proved that there is no cementing magic in fundamentalism.

Perversely however, there is a certain truth in the Hindu revivalist statement that "India is the land of Hinduism". In our zeal to distance ourselves from all forms of fundamentalism, we must not lose sight of the fact that Hinduism in its essence, has molded the life of more than 80% of the Indian population who have inherited from it one of the most glorious spiritual and cultural legacies in

the world. The paradox here is that on the one hand, "India is indeed the land of Hinduism" and on the other, the undemocratic idea of domination of one community by another. Every large human aggregate, in view of its specificity, must be allowed to stand out in its own right, albeit in harmony with the "other" instead of simply merging into a single "melting pot", the stereotyped description in which European migrants, despite some initial hesitations, were assimilated into the larger American society. M.S Golwalkar, in some of his earlier public speeches talks about the possibility of assimilation albeit with some reserve. In a lecture delivered on 19 October 1949 for instance, he asserts, "the Muslim community was there during foreign rule. It is now demoralized and defeated. Therefore, we must make them part of ourselves. But do we still have the capacity to digest such a process of assimilation or not?" [3] But shortly thereafter, in yet another lecture delivered two months later in Uttar Pradesh, he is even more forthright, describing the Muslims as "parakriya" or "outsiders". [3] The term "parakriya" used to segregate the Muslims as "outsiders", is a word that also carries the etymological connotations of the prefix "para", which among a complex of meanings, signifies such attributes as "strange", "foreign", "alien", "adverse" and "hostile" [4].

Of course, a Hindu must never be confused with a Christian or Muslim or Jew despite the idea of secularism propagated by the State. The distortion here lies in the idea of domination of one cultural group by another: "India is the land of Hinduism and the Muslims are Hinduism's enemies and must be kept under Hindu domination." Or as the Organizer put it, "Let the Muslims look upon Ram as their hero and the communal problems will be over" [5]. Some Western and Indian scholars have used the term "racism" to characterize Hindu-Muslim relations in India. Christophe Jaffrelot for instance uses the term "upper caste racism". Thankfully, it is "more a racism of domination than a racism of extermination... the Other is not excluded but he can only be included at a subordinate rank" [6]. This concept is fallible given the fact that Hindus and Muslims in India are originally of the same racial stock [7]. Although in Hindu nationalist discourse Muslims are represented as "foreign", the majority of Muslims in India in fact are converts from lower-caste backgrounds.

The "Other": Anthropologically speaking, there is of course always a battle for domination. Group identity brings forward solidarity but also leads to hostility with "other" groups. The concept of the "other" is a recurring

theme in French literature (recall Jean Paul Sartre for example). Yet and the point I make is that development of national identity is by no means a bad thing if it contributes to the crystallization of certain essential attributes such as love for the land and bonding between the inhabitants. In a nation state, in spite of internal differences, all unite against foreign aggression, further contributing to the consolidation of national identity. But if we stop at this definition (recall the definition advanced by M.S Golwalkar in his book, "We or our nationhood defined" where he theorizes, "When the vast majority of people are Hindus, the state is democratically Hindu" [8]. and believe that we have done with nationhood when we have applied it to one aggregate of individuals only ((recall the definition advanced by Veer Savarkar - a Hindu is someone who shared the blood of "Vedic Aryan" ancestors), we are guilty of committing a folly to which the modern mind is increasingly prone - the folly of regarding the diversity of human existence as real and the underlying unity as abstract. Life is not broken up or divided by being pluralistic; indeed it is made richer, more capable of self-expression provided the underlying unity is not forgotten.

Yet and the point I make is that "Indian secularism, in the sense of equal reverence for all religions, was not born on January 26, 1950... It predates the Constitution, the freedom movement... It is part of the spiritual conviction of this country as expressed in the Vedas and the Upanishads" [9]. As Sri Aurobindo in his Uttarpara Speech [10] points out, "That which we call Hindu religion is really the eternal religion because it is the universal religion which embraces all others. If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal. A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can only live for a limited time and limited purpose." "The Sanatana Dharma" as he enunciates, "is life itself; it is a thing that is not so much to be believed as lived."

Indeed India, with its many religions, races, languages and political persuasions, has millennia experiences in radically different cultures living and working together. The outcome was the engendering of a broad and identifiable composite culture, which has perhaps been best described by Sunil Khilnani in his book, "The Idea of India", where he suggests we are like a bowl of salad, where each ingredient is separate and distinctive and yet all contribute to its enriching [11]. That also explains, in part, Pandit Nehru's famous observation of India being a "unity in diversity" - This "unity in diversity" is the actual credo of a religion that without the least violation of its own character could take Buddhism

to its fold just as it could Christianity and Islam. Indeed the basic tenet of Hinduism is contained in the old Rig-Vedic formulation: "The One whom the sages call by many names." Or as Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, "Whatever is the form in which you worship me, I am available to you in that form, help you concentrate in the worship of that form and answer your prayers" (chapter 7, shlokas 21 & 22).

Historically, Hindu society has never attempted to reject "otherness". In fact, Hindu revivalists perceive Islam as anti-pluralistic and intolerant of what is from the Islamic viewpoint the "Otherness" of Hinduism. As M.S Golwalkar points out, "As a matter of fact, in no other country in the world, where Islam has spread, their original dress, language, views of life etc have remained the same. But in our country, everything, even thinking also, has changed. If this change was not there, there would have been no Muslim problem at all. It has cut them off from the main national current of life" [12]. Sri Aurobindo also acknowledges the Hindu-Muslim antagonism but refuses to identify it as a problem of "national" versus "foreign" preferring instead to term it as the clash of two distinct civilizations "The real problem introduced by the Mussalman conquest was not that of subjection to a foreign rule and the ability to recover freedom, but the struggle between two civilizations, one ancient and indigenous, the other mediaeval and brought it from outside". As he explains, "That which rendered the problem insoluble is the attachment of each to a powerful religion, the one militant and aggressive, the other spiritually tolerant indeed and flexible, but obstinately faithful to its own principle and standing on the defense behind a barrier of social forms" [13]. As he says succinctly, "You can live amicably with a religion whose principle is toleration. But how is it possible to live peacefully with a religion whose principle is, "I will not tolerate you? Certainly, Hindu-Muslim unity cannot be arrived at on the basis that the Muslims will go on converting Hindus while the Hindus shall not convert any Mohammedan" [14]. As for the "other" minority religion in India, missionary Christianity is also disliked by Hindu revivalists not because of its "Otherness" but because of its declared objective to eliminate Hinduism through conversion or in other words, because of its rejection of Hinduism's "Otherness".

Caste and Distinction: The fact that Hinduism evolved the caste system and other religions such as Buddhism did not is not necessarily to the discredit of the former. What after all, is the basis of the system? It is simply an

admission of the non-uniformity of human nature and an attempt to make the non-uniformity work with the utmost efficacy. Of course, no human being is entirely one functioned and room must also be allowed in any social system for transition from one group to another. But even as we unequivocally condemn the caste system that resulted in the segregation and humiliation of the Untouchables, it must be remembered that social injustice of this type is not associated with Hindu society alone. Human nature in general is inclined towards unjust domination and a social structure with any other religious ingredient is just as likely to throw this up. In his fortnightly, *Dalit Voice*, B R Ambedkar rejects the notion that Islamic society is more egalitarian and better than Hindu society. After giving Mother India, Miss Katherine Mayo's book of anti-Hindu 'drain inspection' (as Gandhi called it), the credit for "exposing the evils [of Hindu society]", he observed that "it created the unfortunate impression throughout the world that while the Hindus were groveling in the mud of these social evils and were conservative, the Muslims were free from them and as compared to the Hindus were a progressive people." [15] He then proceeded to enumerate all the social evils of Hindu society and found that they are generally also present in Muslim society: child marriage, oppression of women, social inequality. As he says, "There can be no manner of doubt that the Muslim society in India is afflicted by the same social evils that afflict the Hindu society.

Indeed the Muslims have all the social evils of the Hindus and something more. That something more is the compulsory system of purdah for Muslim women" [15]. In his last point, Ambedkar summarizes relations between the two communities as essentially a struggle for domination where "The Muslims think that the Hindus and Muslims must perpetually struggle ... that in this struggle the strong will win and that to ensure strength they must suppress or put in cold storage everything which causes dissension in their ranks." [15] Referring to the caste system, he observed that Islam also has its own caste system: "The Mohammedans themselves recognize two main social divisions, 1) Ashraf or Sharaf and 2) Ajlaf. Ashraf means "noble" and includes all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from high-caste Hindus. All other Mohammedans, including all occupational groups and all converts of lower ranks are known by the contemptuous terms Ajlaf, "wretches" or "mean people"... In some places a third class called Arzal or "lowest of all" is added. With them no other Mohammedan would associate and they are forbidden to

enter the mosque [and] to use the public burial ground. Within these groups there are castes with social precedence of exactly the same nature as one finds among the Hindus [15]. Today, the most important thing about caste, the basic structuring device over the past 2000 years is that in the context of the modern Indian society, it now looks to the State to regulate and to define it. In this sense, it is very much part of the secular and non-divine world.

The Constitutional Dilemma: To come back to the heart of the contemporary ideological battle: does the absence of "Ishwara" (or "God") in the Indian Constitution not denote a basic contradiction given the propensity on the part of certain political parties in recent years to peddle religiosity for political gains? The answer to the question is both a "yes" and a "no" and perhaps therein lies the paradox of the Indian nation that openly embraced the secularism advocated by Pandit Nehru, punished the political parties that deviated from this principle by throwing them out and yet ...rank atheism in India is virtually unknown. Many eminent national leaders over the years in fact had sought to utilize Hindu religious rituals and symbols for mass mobilization: Bal Gangadhar Tilak for instance in promoting the traditional Hindu religious festival of Ganesh Chaturthi; Gandhiji through his support of the Khilafat movement, his invocations of Ramrajya etc. In the case of Gandhiji, his vision for India encompassed a State, which treated all religions equally (*Sarva-dharma-sambhava*). This became even more pronounced towards the latter period of his life. For instance, prior to the 1940s, he had insisted that there can be "no politics without religion" - and post 1940, that the post-Indian State should be secular; Hence, in November 1924, writing in *Young India*, he had stated, "I must not deceive the country. For me there is no politics without religion [*dharmathi bhinn raajniti*] - not the religion of the superstitious [*vahim*] and the blind [*andhshraddha*] - religion that hates and fights, but the universal [*vishwayyaapi*] Religion of Toleration [*sahisnuta*] [16]. By the 1940s however, he speaks repeatedly of a secular State, "If I were a dictator, religion and State would be separate. I swear by my religion, I would die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it. The State would look after your secular welfare, health, communication, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern" [17]. And in a similar vein, after Independence, he states, "After all we have formed the Government for all. It is a "secular" Government, that is it is not a

theocratic Government rather it does not belong to any particular religion. Hence it cannot spend money on the basis of communities. For it, the only thing that matters is that all are Indians. Individuals can follow their own religions, I have my religion and you have yours to follow [18]. It may be argued that one of the reasons for this greater emphasis on secularism was the steady deterioration in Hindu Muslim relations in the post 1940s.

The BJP March to Power: Sixty years after Gandhi's assassination and the short ban placed on the RSS, the literature on communalism has proliferated. Outsiders to the world of Indian studies might even be forgiven for thinking that Hindu nationalism in its most overt political manifestation constitutes the pre-eminent area of inquiry for those interested in Indian affairs [19]. Let us recall how in the early 1980s the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had launched massive anti-Muslim rallies to rouse Hindu sentiments through recourse to popular religious symbols. In particular, the controversy over a 16th century mosque at Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh) was revived with the VHP requesting every Hindu in the country to contribute a brick each towards the reconstruction of a Rama temple [20]. The campaign was led from the front by the senior BJP leader Mr. L.K. Advani, who even undertook a long ratha yatra laden with symbolism, leading from the famous Somnath temple (repeatedly destroyed by Muslim iconoclasts) in Gujarat to Ayodhya. The propaganda in this instance was as much about reinforcing Hindu unity as segregating the Muslim community as the "other". In this, the BJP was largely aided by alleged Congress "minority" politics of the mid-1980s.

By opening up the Babri Masjid for the Hindus on the one hand and by passing the controversial Muslim Women's Bill [21] almost instantaneously on the other, the Rajiv Gandhi Government in 1986 in fact had attempted in fact to woo both communities. However, this strategy, otherwise known in the Indian political discourse as "the "Hindu" card" backfired when the core constituencies of the Congress deserted it and the new sections that it was courting proved more comfortable putting their faith in the overtly "Hindu" agenda of the BJP. The Ram-Janmabhoomi -Babri Masjid agitation coming as it did in the post-Shah Bano period enabled the BJP to capture 89 seats in the 9th Lok Sabha elections as against a mere two in 1984. The 1989 elections catapulted the BJP for the first time into the third largest national party with an increase in its share of votes from 7.4% in 1984 to 11.4% in 1989. The Congress (I) captured the largest number of seats (193) followed by the Janata Dal

with 141 seats and the BJP with 88 seats. In the absence of any clear majority, the five Party National Front led by Mr. VP Singh formed the Government with the external support extended by the BJP and the Leftist parties. The 1990s was to witness the decline of the Congress and the rise of the BJP as one of the main political forces in India.

In 1990, two major events contributed towards reinforcing the popularity of the Hindu party - the outbreak of separatist violence in Kashmir and the persecution of Kashmiri Brahmins and the Mandal Commission Reservation Policy Report for the backward communities. The latter witnessed widespread agitation by the upper caste youth in the country because of its announcement, that in addition to the 22,5% of reservations in Government jobs and educational institutions for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes [22], a further 27% for the other disadvantaged communities would be included. The Mandal announcement sent shock waves through the BJP since it directly hit their upper caste base. The BJP which had been attempting to expand its upper caste support by targeting the numerically strong and politically assertive backward castes, was trapped since it could neither support the issue without alienating its traditional support base nor oppose it without losing the backward class Hindu votes. Consequently it further intensified the agitation for building a Rama temple as a "crusade for strengthening national unity and promoting nationalism in the country" [23].

The 10th Indian Lok Sabha was formed on June 20, 1991. The picture that emerged however was that of a "hung" Lok Sabha as for the second time in quick succession, no single party could secure an absolute majority. In the elections, the Congress I emerged as the single largest party, capturing 220 seats out of 511. The BJP emerged as the second largest party, representing almost one fourth of the votes and pushing the Janata Dal (the ruling party of 1989) to a poor third position. Consequently, a coalition Government was formed with the pro-Hindu Opposition party, which had increased its seats from 2 to 119, thereby expanding its share of votes from 11.4% in 1989 to 19.9%. With the formation, in Uttar Pradesh, of a BJP Ministry, the demolition of the Babri mosque on 6 December 1992 was a foregone conclusion. Facilitated by the State machinery, it was undertaken without a single shot being fired.

The Hindu party which had attempted initially to consolidate the "secular" legacy of the Janata Party by a compromise of its own core ideology now realized that

first, a distinct “Hindu electorate” existed and could be manipulated and second, that the strategy of dilution it had embraced to return to the mainstream of national politics had also considerably weakened its traditional support base amongst the upper castes. Its spectacular breakthrough in 1989-91 was due primarily to its adoption of such sturdy Hindu issues as the Common Civil Code (against Muslim “separatism” in Personal Law highlighted in the 1985-86 Shah Bano affair), the struggle against Pakistani and Muslim Kashmiri secessionism and the Ayodhya temple issue. Between 1992-1996, Hindutva prevailed as the guiding principle with the party politics centered on attacking what it termed as the pseudo-secularism of the Congress. The Preamble of the 1996 BJP manifesto upheld Hindutva: “Hindutva or cultural nationalism ... will guide from swarajya (self-rule) to surajya (good governance) [24]. Hindutva was asserted as “a unifying principle, which alone can preserve the unity and integrity of our nation. It is a collective endeavor to protect and re-energize the soul of India to take us into the new millennium as a strong and prosperous nation.” The BJP, in conformity with this ideology, promised to promulgate a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), disband the Minorities Commission in favor of a National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), make fraudulent conversions a punishable offence and introduce a system of registering all conversions. On the Kashmir issue, it reiterated its demand to abrogate Article 370 and criticized the frequent resort to President’s rule by promising to strengthen federalism. But if the old “mantra” was “Hindutva”, the new policy gradually became “flexibility”. In 1998 the BJP could come to power only by forming an alliance with “secular” and prominent regional parties and by softening its Hindutva rhetoric. The compulsions of forming a coalition government forced it to drop, at least for the time being, the so-called “contentious issues” which included the construction of a Rama temple at Ayodhya, the modification of Article 30 of the Constitution which guarantees the rights of minorities to run their own educational institutions and the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution conferring a special status on Jammu and Kashmir. If the BJP political trajectory conveyed the impression that there was a certain oscillation of its core ideology at certain decisive moments, this was dictated more by electoral compulsions rather than any fundamental deviation from it. In the Hindu revivalist perception of things, the ideology, which dominated independent India in its first half century i.e Nehruvian secularism is not neutral vis-à-vis religion in

general and Hinduism in particular; in fact, it is negatively biased towards both. The fact that a Hindu Code Act established a uniform civil code for all ‘Hindus’ in the country (including Sikhs), while leaving Muslims with their own Personal Law, furthermore, compromises the state’s claim to be secular. As historian Ronald Inden observes, the Indian Government is not really secular but one that selectively discriminates against Hindu communities while superficially appeasing Muslim leaders. He writes, “Nehru’s India was supposed to be committed to “secularism”. The idea here in its weaker publicly reiterated form was that the Government would not interfere in “personal” religious matters and would create circumstances in which people of all religions could live in harmony. The idea in its stronger, unofficially stated form was that in order to modernize, India would have to set aside centuries of traditional religious ignorance and superstition and eventually eliminate Hinduism and Islam from people’s lives altogether. After independence, Governments implemented secularism mostly by refusing to recognize the religious pasts of Indian nationalism, whether Hindu or Muslim and at the same time (inconsistently) by retaining Muslim “personal laws” [25]. The electoral dividends following the BJP’s softening of its Hindutva approach clearly suggest that toeing the hard line when it comes to communally sensitive issues does not necessarily yield majority in Parliament.. Its electoral defeat, on the other hand, appears as a clear repudiation of the BJP’s vision of India as a specifically ‘Hindu’ economic and political superpower. But whether rank political opportunism will make the Hindu party abandon its *raison d’être* that is a different question altogether.

The Ayodhya Controversy: One of the reasons for the Government succumbing increasingly to communal pressures in recent years is its fragmented and parochial electoral base leading to what Rajani Kothari terms as “ethnic calculus” and ultimately to “communal politics” [26]. As a result, there has grown a very strong tendency among major political parties in India to use religion as a political tool unmindful of the consequences for national unity and integrity. Hence while the BJP tried to utilize the Ram Janmabhoomi- Babri Masjid issue to strengthen its base among Hindus, the decision of the Rajiv Gandhi Government to undo the judgment of the Supreme Court in the Shah Bano case was just as detrimental to our secular polity. In fact, it is following this major concession to Muslim pressures on the issue of the separate Muslim

Personal Law that the Government found itself making a conciliatory gesture to Hindus by unlocking the Babri Masjid gates. The continued conflict serves to illustrate the potential violence that may be unlocked in case the religion based Personal Law System were indeed to be abolished.

The historical Ayodhya conflict dating back to 1528 when a mosque was allegedly built over a temple dedicated to Lord Rama, continues, as we know, to be mired even today in a slew of legal suits. Even though the BJP had placed the construction of the Rama temple on the backburner on assuming power in 1998, tensions resurfaced in 2001 with the VHP once again pledging to build a Hindu temple at the site. In February 2002, even though the nationalist party had ruled out committing itself to the construction of a temple in its election manifesto for Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, the VHP confirmed its deadline of 15 March to begin construction. This led to hundreds of volunteers converging on the site. At least 58 people were killed in an attack on a train in Godhra, which was carrying Hindu activists returning from Ayodhya. In March 2002, between 1,000 and 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in riots in Gujarat following the train attack. In June 2009, the Lieberhan Commission set up on December 16, 1992 to enquire into the demolition of the disputed structure submitted its report - seventeen years after it first began investigating. The report blamed leading politicians from the Hindu nationalist BJP for a role in the razing of the mosque while recommending that politicians in the future refrain from garnering votes preaching religion or caste. In September 2010, the Allahabad High Court ruled that the site be split with the Muslim community getting control of a third, Hindus another third and the Nirmohi Akhara sect the remainder. However, in December 2010, both the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha and Sunni Waqf Board moved the Supreme Court of India challenging the Allahabad High Court's verdict. In May 2011, the Supreme Court stayed the High Court order splitting the disputed site into three parts, saying that the status quo would remain. So the controversy, for one reason or another, drags on. In the meantime, in view of the elections, the BJP returned to Uttar Pradesh with the new clarion call of Ram Rajya (Good Governance) and the launch of yet another political ratha yatra (Jan Swabhiman Yatra). With repeated terrorist attacks on Indian soil, we are passing through a similar phase of acute anxiety where not everybody is convinced that being nice to Pakistan is the right policy. The terrain no doubt, is once again ripe for whipping up communal passions.

What Secularism?: Can the volatile amalgam of religion and secularism continue to co-exist given the inherent tug of war? It is not totally impossible. However, unlike Europe, its continent of origin, secularism in India, cannot be envisaged as a fundamental contradiction to religion. Secularism in the western sense refers principally to the strict separation of religion and state in order to guarantee individual citizens equal rights to religious freedom. In England, the State has a religion and yet it does not discriminate between different citizens on the ground of religion. Although the post-colonial Indian state abolished separate electorates, it continued to uphold the colonial distinction between majority and minority religious communities, most particularly in the realm of personal and civil law. Secularism was incorporated in the Indian Constitution in the light of the following resolution of the Constituent Assembly in 1948: "whereas it is essential for the proper functioning of democracy and the growth of national unity and solidarity that communalism should be eliminated from Indian life, this assembly is of the opinion that no communal organization, which by its constitution or by the exercise of discretionary power vested in any of its officers and organs, admit to, or exclude from its membership, persons on grounds of religion, race and caste, or any of them, should be permitted to engage in any activities other than those essential for the bonafide religious, cultural, social and educational needs of the community and that all steps, legislative and administrative, necessary to prevent such activities, should be taken' [27]. Article 25 (1) of the Constitution gives all persons 'the right to profess, propagate and practice their religion' (Government of India 1949). The provisions of the Indian Constitution make clear the nature of secularism in India. Broadly speaking, it means: (i) the rejection of a theocratic or semi-theocratic State; (ii) the proclamation that religion is of private or group concerns (iii) equality of all citizens irrespective of caste or creed and (iv) the right of the State to interfere in the religious practices of various communities in the interest of their peaceful co-existence and cultural development [28]. The Indian variant of secularism, sarva dharma sambhava (let all religions flourish), does not attempt to banish religion from the public sphere but sees it as an integral part of India's democracy. The Constitution of India (which added the term explicitly in 1976) does not run counter to belief in God by the majority of the population who are religious and whose voice is echoed in the Government. Hence the desire to emphasize communal equality does not signify that India will cease to be the land of Hinduism or that

religion will no longer play any role in public life. As stated by Pandit Nehru in his autobiography, “No word perhaps in any language is more likely to be interpreted in different ways, by different people as the word religion. That being the case, secularism which is a concept evolved in relation to religion can also not have the same connotation for all” [29]. In other words, the State in India, while claiming to be secular, overlooks the basic universal ingredients of secularism such as separation of State from religion, religion from politics. Indeed we often define secularism “to mean some sort of multi-communalism. In the name of toleration of all communities and their eventual harmonization, what we finally achieve is reconciliation of multiple communities, promotion of multiple obscurantism, superstition and cheerful mixing of mythologies” [30]. For the same reasons, if a candidate chooses to identify with a religion-based cause, it is because it is what the voters want to see represented in Parliament. Can a candidate be debarred from wearing things, which are identified with a particular religion? The ground reality is that a Sikh candidate who turns up at election meetings in rural Punjab bare-headed and clean-shaven will lose Sikh votes.

CONCLUSION

Secularism in India must co-habit with Hindu nationalism but a Hindu nationalism that is benevolent not discriminating or partisan. In other words, the “Hinduism” of the Republic of India, in view of the minorities, must make every effort to reflect the pure quintessence of the Hindu faith. The quintessence consists simply in the doctrine that there is one Universal Truth or Reality capable of multiplicity. This signifies - and it is apparently what the BJP also wants, (its slogan, “justice for all, appeasement for none” says it all in a nutshell) - that the minorities of the land are entitled to equal civic and individual rights with the majority but for their sake, the majority must not be asked to compromise on their own civic and individual rights. The function of secularity in the Constitution therefore is discharged as soon as it assures the absence of any form of discrimination against any citizen of India. The majority of Hindus in India in fact are convinced of the need to help the Muslims preserve their religious and cultural distinctiveness. But they are also worried that the measures required to make this possible may foster Muslim separatism. Indeed this is a dilemma faced by most multi-ethnic societies operating on a pluralist strategy of integration. Unfortunately, there are no

tried and tested ways of resolving the dilemma. Each society must find its own specific solution. Indeed that is the ensuing challenge before the pluralistic Indian Civil Code.

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20. In 1947, the Indian Government had declared the disputed site out of bounds for both Hindus and Muslims. In 1949 however, a temple sprung up inside the mosque. The ensuing status quo preserved the temple for Hindus but froze the site for Muslims. The VHP agitated to open it for public worship resulting in a successful local court decision in 1986. In 1989, the Rajiv Gandhi Government allowed the Brick ceremony take place at Ayodhya, Which in Turn Incensed the Minorities.
21. In 1986, the Rajiv Gandhi Government had passed a very controversial bill on the divorce of Muslim women. The Supreme Court of India had upheld Shah Bano’s petition in a 1985 judgment which provided three arguments for reaching its conclusion that she was entitled to maintenance: the priority of criminal law (section 125 of the Cr. Pc) over personal law; the justification found in the Koran itself of maintenance; the need to take steps towards the establishment of a common civil code. However, following protests from Muslim religious leaders, the Muslim Women Act Introduced in Parliament in 1986 Was Directed at Reversing this Judgment.
22. Article 15 (4) of the Indian constitution provides for special reservations for the advancement of the socially and educationally backward classes including Dalits, Scheduled Castes and Tribes with 15 per cent of vacancies in government jobs reserved for the Scheduled Castes and 7.5 per cent for the Scheduled Tribes. However, scheduled Caste categorization was first recognized only for Hindus. In 1956, Sikhs were included and in 1990, Buddhists. Muslims and Christians excluded on the grounds that the caste system is not applicable in their instance.
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