

# The twilight of certitudes: secularism, Hindu nationalism and other masks of deculturation<sup>1</sup>

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What follows is basically a series of propositions. It is not meant for academics grappling with the issue of ethnic and religious violence as a cognitive puzzle, but for concerned intellectuals and grassroots activists trying to, in the language of Gustavo Esteva, ‘regenerate people’s space’.<sup>2</sup> Its aim is threefold: (1) to systematise some available insights into the problem of ethnic and communal violence in South Asia, particularly India, from the point of view of those who do not see communalism and secularism as sworn enemies but as the disowned doubles of each other; (2) to acknowledge, as part of the same exercise, that Hindu nationalism, like other such ethnonationalisms, is not an ‘extreme’ form of Hinduism but a modernist creed which seeks to retool, on behalf of the global nation-state system, Hinduism into a national ideology and the Hindus into a ‘proper’ nationality; and (3) to hint at an approach to religious tolerance in a democratic polity that is not dismissive towards the ways of life, idioms and modes of informal social and political analyses of the citizens even when they happens to be unacquainted with—or inhospitable to—the ideology of secularism.

One qualification at this beginning. This is the third in a series of papers on secularism, in which one of my main concerns has been to examine the political and cultural-psychological viability of the ideology of secularism and to argue that its fragile status in South Asian politics is culturally ‘natural’ but not an unmitigated disaster. For there are other, probably more potent and resilient ideas within the repertoire of cultures and religions of the region that could ensure religious and ethnic co-survival, if not creative inter-faith encounters. Few among the scores of academic responses to the papers—some of them hysterically hostile—have cared to argue or examine the issue of political-cultural sustainability, which I thought would be of interest to even dedicated secularists. Evidently, for some academics, the ideology of secularism comes prior to the goals it is supposed to serve. Much less provoked were those who had some direct exposure to religious or ethnic strife either as human rights activists, first-hand observers or victims, for whom the papers were written in the first place. For even when uncomfortable with Gandhi’s belief that ‘politics divorced from religion becomes debasing’,<sup>3</sup> they seemed intuitively to gauge the

power of Raimundo Panikkar's pithy formulation: 'the separation between religion and politics is lethal and their identification suicidal'.<sup>4</sup>

### The paradox of secularism

Secularism as an ideology can thrive only in a society that is predominantly non-secular. Once a society begins to get secularised—or once the people begin to feel that their society is getting cleansed of religion and ideas of transcendence—the political status of secularism changes.<sup>5</sup> In such a society, people become anxiously aware of living in an increasingly desacralised world and start searching for faiths, to give meaning to their life and retain the illusion of being part of a traditional community. If faiths are in decline, people begin to search for ideologies linked to faiths, in an effort to return to forms of traditional moral community that would negate or defy the world in which they live. If and when they find such ideologies, they cling to them defensively—'with the desperate ardour of a lover trying to converse life back into a finished love', in the language of Sara Suleri. What sometimes happens to communities can also happen to sections of a community or to individuals. Thus, in recent years many expatriate South Asians in the West have become more aggressively traditional, culturally exclusive, and chauvinistic. As their cherished world becomes more difficult to sustain, as their children and they themselves begin to show symptoms of getting integrated in their adopted land, they become more protective about what they think are their faiths and cultures.

When Indian public life was overwhelmingly non-modern, secularism as an ideology had a chance. For the area of the sacred looked intact and safe, and secularism looked like a balancing principle and a form of legitimate dissent. Even many believing citizens described themselves as secular, to keep up with the times and because secularism sounded like something vaguely good. Now that the secularisation of Indian polity has gone far, the scope of secularism as a creed has declined. For signs of secularisation are now everywhere; one does not have to make a case for it. Instead, there has grown the fear that secularisation had gone too far, that the decline in public morality in the country is due to the all-round decline in religious sensibilities. Many distorted or perverted versions of religion circulating in modern or semi-modern India owe their origins to this perception of the triumph of secularisation rather than to the persistence of traditions.

As part of the same process, many 'non-secular' ideologies and movements have become more secular in style and content. They *do* try to look religious, for the sake of their constituency, but they can pursue political power in a secularised polity only through secular politics, secular organisations and secular planning. They increasingly resemble the jet-setting gurus and *sadhus* who, while criticising the 'crass materialism of the West', have to use at every step western technology, western media and western disciples to stay in business. A popular way of recognising this in India is to affirm that the politicians misuse religion. But that affirmation usually fails to acknowledge that only a person or a group at least partly repudiating the sanctity of religion can 'misuse' religion

or 'use' it only instrumentally.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena, though called fundamentalist, are two of the most secular parties in India, for they represent most faithfully the loss of piety and cultural self-doubts that have come to characterise a section of urban, modernising India. While other parties observe, even if by default, some limits in their instrumental use of religion, there seems to be no such restraint in the BJP or the Shiv Sena. The people these parties mobilise may sometimes be driven by piety—in Shiv Sena's case even that is doubtful—but their leaders view that piety as only a part of their political weaponry.

Even religious riots or pogroms are getting secularised in South Asia. They are organised the way a rally or a strike is organised in a competitive, democratic polity and, usually, for the same reasons, to bring down a regime or discredit a chief minister here or to help an election campaign or a faction there. Some political parties in India today have 'professionals' who specialise in such violence and, like true professionals, do an expert job of it. Often these professionals, though belonging to antagonistic religious or ethnic communities, maintain excellent personal, social and political relationships with each other. Fanaticism, they apparently believe, is for the hoi polloi, not for the serious politicians playing the game of ethnic politics.<sup>7</sup> It is not difficult today to find out the rate at which riots of various kinds can be bought, how political protection can be obtained for the rioters and how, after a riot, political advantage can be taken of it.

There is even a vague consensus among important sections of politicians, bureaucracy and the law-and-order machinery on how such specialists should be treated. Despite hundreds of witnesses and detailed information, hardly anyone has ever been prosecuted for complicity or participation in riots in India and, for that matter, in the whole of South Asia. The anti-Sikh riot in Delhi in 1984 was only a more dramatic evidence of such consensus. Though more than 3000 Sikhs were killed in the three-day pogrom in India's capital, till 1995 the instigators and active participants in it have not only escaped prosecution but have risen high in the political hierarchy. At least two have been in the Union cabinet and another three have been Congress Party MPs from the capital. It does not need much political acumen to predict that the same fate awaits the self-declared instigators and perpetrators of the anti-Muslim violence in Bombay in January 1993.

On the other hand, though by now human rights activists and students of communal violence have supplied enough data to show that riots are organised, they have rarely pushed this point to its logical conclusion. Riots have to be organised because the ordinary citizens—the 'illiterate', 'superstitious' South Asians, uncritically allegiant to their primordial identities—are not easy to rouse to participate in riots. To achieve that end, you need detailed planning and hard work. It is not easy to convert ordinary citizens into fire-spitting fanatics or killers; they may not be epitomes of virtue, but they are not given to blood-curdling Satanism either. Not even when lofty modern values like history, state and nationalism are invoked.<sup>8</sup> South Asian loves and hates, being often community based, are small scale. In the case of communal violence, the most one can accuse them of is a certain uncritical openness to the rumours floated before

riots, which help them make peace with their conscience and their inability to resist the violence.

Yet, they do resist. Each riot produces instances of bravery shown by persons who protect their neighbours at immense risk to their own lives and that of their families.<sup>9</sup> Often entire families and communities participate in the decision to resist. There is no empirical basis whatever to explain away this courage as a function of individual personality while, at the same time, seeing the violence it opposes as a cultural product. In South Asia as much as in Nazi Germany, those who resist such violence at the ground level derive their framework from their religious faith.<sup>10</sup> I have been hearing since my childhood literally hundreds of caustic accounts of the victims of the great Partition riots—about their suffering in 1946–47. In most cases, the experiences have made them bitterly anti-Muslim, anti-Sikh or anti-Hindu. Despite the bitterness, however, most accounts includes a story of someone from the other community who helped the family. The loves and hates of everyday life, within which usually are fitted ethnic and religious prejudices and stereotypes, may be small scale but they are not always petty.

The resistance is stronger where communities have not splintered into atomised individuals. Not only do riots take place more frequently in the cities, but they are harder to organise in villages. The village community is breaking down all over the world, but it has not broken down entirely in South Asia. Even the smaller towns in South Asia have often escaped massification. It is no accident that, despite the claim of some Hindu nationalists that more than 350,000 Hindus had already died fighting for the liberation of the birthplace of Rama, Ramjanmabhumi, during the previous 400 years, the residents of Ayodhya themselves lived in reasonable amity till the late 1980s. The Sangh Parivar sensed this; till the mid-1980s, the case for demolishing the Babri mosque at Ayodhya was not taken up by any of the noted Hindu nationalists, from V. D. Savarkar, Balkrishna Munje and Keshav Hedgewar to Bal Thackeray, Lal Krishna Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi. The Babri mosque was turned into a political issue only after the India's urban middle class attained a certain size and India's modernisation reached a certain stage.<sup>11</sup>

The first serious riot in the sacred city of Ayodhya took place on 6–7 December 1992. For seven years, despite all efforts to mobilise the locals for a riot, it had not taken place.<sup>12</sup> This time, it was organised by outsiders and executed in many cases by non-Hindi-speaking rioters with whom the local Hindus could not communicate. These outsiders were not traditional villagers, but urbanised, semi-educated, partly westernised men and, less frequently, women. They broke into more than a hundred places of worship of the Muslims in the city to celebrate the 'fall' of the unprotected Babri mosque.<sup>13</sup>

In the final reckoning, the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992 was a proof that the secularisation of India has gone along predictable lines.

### **The politics of secularism**

Over the last fifty years or so, the concept of secularism has had a good run. It has served, within the small but expanding modern sector in India, as an

important public value and as an indicator of one's commitment to the protection of minorities. Now the concept has begun to deliver less and less. By most imaginable criteria, institutionalised secularism has failed. Communal riots have grown more than tenfold and have now begun to spread outside the perimeters of modern and semi-modern India.<sup>14</sup> In the meanwhile, the ruling culture of India, predominantly modern and secular, has lost much of its faith in—and access to—the traditional social and psychological checks against communal violence.

In this respect, one is tempted to compare the political status of secularism with that of modern medicine in India. Traditionally Indians used a number of indigenous healing systems, and did so with a certain confidence and scepticism. These systems were seen as mixed bags; they sometimes worked, sometimes not. But they were not total systems; they did not demand full allegiance and left one with enough autonomy to experiment with other systems, including the modern ones. Slowly well-meaning reformers broke the confidence of their ignorant compatriots in such native superstitions. In the second half of the nineteenth century, modern medicine was introduced into India with great fanfare, usually with the backing of the state and sometimes with the backing of the coercive apparatus of the state, not merely as a superior science but also as a cure for the irrational faith of the natives in the traditional systems of healing.<sup>15</sup> People were constantly bombarded with the message that the older systems were bogus or, at best, inefficient; that they should, therefore, shift to the modern, 'truly universal' system of medicine.

Once the confidence of a sizeable section of Indians in the older, more easily accessible healing systems was destroyed, the inevitable happened. Most of those who converted to the modern medicine found it prohibitively costly, more exclusive, often inhuman and alienating. They also found out that their proselytisers had other priorities than to give them easy access to modern medicine. In the meanwhile, the converts had lost some of their faith in the traditional systems of healing. Many of the practitioners of the traditional systems, too, had lost confidence in their vocation and had begun to pass themselves off as deviant practitioners of modern medicine; they had begun to copy the allopaths in style and, more stealthily, in practice.

Similarly, the concept of secularism was introduced into South Asian public life by a clutch of social reformers, intellectuals and public figures—seduced or brainwashed by the ethnocidal, colonial theories of social evolution and history—to subvert and discredit the traditional concepts of inter-religious understanding and tolerance that had allowed the thousands—yes, literally thousands—of communities living in the subcontinent to co-survive in reasonable neighbourliness. The co-survival was not perfect; it was certainly not painless. Often there were violent clashes among the communities, as is likely in any 'mixed neighbourhood'. But the violence never involved such large aggregates or generic categories as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Tamils or Simhalas. Conflicts were localised and sectoral, and were almost invariably seen as cutting across religious boundaries, for such boundaries were mostly fuzzy.<sup>16</sup> More important, both the conflicts and their resolutions were explained and negotiated in languages that were reasonably transparent to a majority of the peoples living

in the region. To the reformers, thinkers and politicians—brought up on the colonial state's classification of Indians into broad European-style religious categories—this 'living past' looked like an anachronism, an embarrassment and a sure prescription for ethnic and religious strife. To them, some of the clashes between sects, denominations or ethnic groups in the earlier centuries began to look in retrospect like clashes between entire religious communities. Simultaneously, the categories that sustained such inter-religious adaptations or tolerance—or, to put it modestly, the categories that contained communal animosities within tolerable limits—were systematically devalued, attacked and ridiculed as parts of an enormous structure of irrationality and self-deceit, and as sure markers of an atavistic, retrogressive way of life. In place of these categories, the concept of secularism was pushed as *the* remedy for all religious conflicts and fanaticism, something that would do away with the constant religious violence and bloodletting that had reportedly characterised the region from time immemorial. 'Reportedly' because no one produced an iota of empirical evidence to show that such conflicts existed on a large scale and involved religious communities as they are presently defined.<sup>17</sup> That did not cramp the style of the properly educated South Asian liberals and progressives. They seemed convinced that the data did not exist because their societies were ahistorical; had a proper scientific, objective history existed, it would have shown that pre-modern South Asia had been a snake pit of religious bigotry and blood lust.

That innocent social-evolutionist reading today lies in tatters. Yet, the dominance of the ideology of secularism in the public discourse on religious amity and ethnic plurality in India continues. Why? Why do even the Hindu nationalists uphold not religion but genuine secularism (as opposed to what they call the pseudo-secularism of their political enemies)? Above all, who gets what from secularism and why? Any attempt even to raise this question triggers deep anxieties; it seems to touch something terribly raw in the Indian bourgeoisie—as if secularism was a sacred trans-historical concept, free from all restraints of space and time, and any exploration of its spatial and temporal limits was a reminder of one's own mortality; as if those disturbed by the questions knew the answers, but did not like to be reminded of them. I shall risk political incorrectness here and obstinately turn to these very questions.

First, once institutionalised as an official ideology, the concept of secularism helps identify and set up the modernised Indians as a principle of rationality in an otherwise irrational society and gives them, seemingly deservedly, a disproportionate access to state power. After all, they are the ones who have reportedly freed themselves from ethnic and religious prejudices and stereotypes; they are the ones who can even be generous and decide who among the majority of Indians who do not use the idiom of secularism are 'objectively' secular. Secularism for them is often a principle of exclusion. It marks out a class that speaks the language of the state, either in conformity or in dissent. At this plane, secularism is emblematic of a person or group willing to accept two corollaries of the ideology of the Indian state: the assumption that those who do not speak the language of secularism are unfit for full citizenship and the belief that those who do have the sole right to determine what true democratic principles, governance and religious tolerance are.<sup>18</sup> The main function of the ideology of

secularism here is to shift the locus of initiative from the citizens to a specialist group that uses a special language.

To be more generous to this sector and those mentoring them in the mainstream global culture of scholarship, secularism has become mainly modern India's way of 'understanding' the religious tolerance that survives outside modern India. It has become a concept that names the inexplicable and, to that extent, makes it more explicable. Its necessity depends on modern India's loss of touch with Indian traditions and loss of confidence in the traditional codes of religious tolerance that constitute an alternative vantage ground for political intervention in a democratic polity. Hence the modern Indian's fear of the void that the collapse of the concept of secularism might produce.

Many secularists are secular on ideological or moral grounds. They consider their ideology to be compatible with radical or leftist political doctrines and seem oblivious of its colonial connections and class bias. Evidently, class analysis for them, unlike charity, does not begin at home. Some of them have personally fought for religious and ethnic minorities, but now face the fact that, with the spread of participatory mass politics, they are being reduced to a small minority among the very section within which they expected to have maximum support—the westernising, media-exposed, urban middle classes. Neither can they give up their faith in secularism, because that would mean disowning an important part of their self-definition, nor can they shake off the awareness that it is doomed, at least in ground-level politics.<sup>19</sup> Such politics is already getting too secularised to be able to sustain secularism as a popular ideology.

Second, the ideology of secularism not merely fits the culture of the Indian state, it invites the state to use its coercive might to actualise the model of social engineering the ideology projects. Secularism and statism in India have gone hand in hand—perhaps the main reason why Hindu nationalism, statist to its core, has not given up the language of secularism. The goal of both is to retool the ordinary citizen so that he or she, though given democratic rights, will not exercise these rights except within the political limits set by South Asia's westernising élite, constituting the steel frame of the region's Wog empires. Secularism, too, has its class affiliations; it, too, has much to do with who gets what and when in a polity. Tariq Banuri compares the dominant position of the ego in Freudian psychology with the dominant position of the nation state in the contemporary ideas of political development.<sup>20</sup> To complete his evocative metaphor, one must view secularism as a crucial defence of the ego.

Banuri's metaphor also supplies a clue to the fanaticism of many secularists in India, eager to fight the cause of secularism to the last Muslim or Sikh. It is their version of a passionate commitment to interests or, if you like, irrational commitment to rationality (a typical nineteenth- and twentieth-century psychopathology in which allegiance to an ideology outweighs the welfare of the targeted beneficiaries of the ideology). Such romantic realism is the underside of what Banuri calls 'the overly enthusiastic pursuit of national integration'.<sup>21</sup> Thoughtfully carrying the white man's burden after the demise of empires in the subcontinent, these secularists seem particularly unhappy at the South Asian failure to internalise the psychological traits and social skills congruent with the ideology of secularism. Underlying the unhappiness, however, is a certain glee

at the persistence of religious belligerency. It is a proof that the average South Asian's internship to qualify for full citizenship is not yet complete and it justifies further postponement of the day when the plebeians would be allowed 'legitimately' to claim their full democratic rights and exercise the power of numbers.

The third reason for the survival of secularism as an important ideological strain in Indian public life is for some reason even less accessible to political analysts, journalists and thinkers. Though the culturally rootless constitute a small, if audible, section of the population, to many of them, secularism is not just a way of communicating with the modern world but also with compatriots trying to enter that world. These neophytes do not have much to do with the European associations and cultural baggage of the term 'secularism', but they have stretched the meaning of the term for their own purposes and adapted it in such a fashion that it manages to communicate something to others who have to cope, however unwillingly, with Indian realities.<sup>22</sup> They seem satisfied that such secularism allows one to break the social barriers set up by castes, sects and communities, and helps one to converse not only with the political and social élite, but also with the metropolitan intellectuals and professionals. Secularism for them is a marker of cosmopolitanism. Many Indian politicians—when they pay lip service to the standard, universal concept of secularism—have one eye on the response of the national media, the other on their clever competitors who have profited from the secular idiom.

Finally, there are the self-avowed 'genuine secularists'—political actors and ideologues who have an instrumental concept of secularism. They see secularism partly as a means of mounting an attack on the traditional secularists and partly as a justification for majoritarian politics. (The fact that this majoritarianism appeals only to an urban, deracinated minority is a frustrating experience which probably contributes significantly to organised violence against constructed 'others' in South Asia.) These are the people who often use, participate in, or provoke communal frenzy, not on grounds of faith but on grounds of secular political cost calculations. Occasionally, in place of political expediency, they are motivated by political ideology and that ideology may *appear* to be based on faith. But on closer scrutiny it turns out to be only a secularised version of faith or arbitrarily chosen elements of faith packaged as a political ideology.<sup>23</sup> I accept the self-definition of the genuine secularists simply because their world *is* entirely secular. They use religion rationally, dispassionately and instrumentally, untouched by any theory of transcendence. They genuinely cannot or do not grant any intrinsic sanctity to the faith of even their own followers.

At one time, secularism *had* something to contribute to Indian public life. That context presumed a low level of politicisation, a personalised, impassioned quality in collective violence, its expression and execution.<sup>24</sup> As ethnic and religious violence has become more impersonal, organised, rational and calculative,<sup>25</sup> it has come to represent, to rework my own cliché, more a pathology of rationality than one of irrationality. As part of the same process, the ideology of secularism too has become ethnocidal and dependent on the mercies of those controlling or hoping to control the state. It is has become chronically susceptible to being coopted or hijacked by the politically ambitious.

Corollarily, religion as the cultural foundation for the existence of South Asian communities has increasingly become a marker of the weak, the poor and the rustic.

As a result, modern India, which sets the tone of the culture of the Indian state, now fears religion. That fear of religion, part of a more pervasive fear of the people and of democracy (which empowers the majority of Indians who are believers), has thrown up the various readymade, packaged forms of faith for the alienated South Asians—Banuri calls them Paki-Saxons—who populate urban, modernised South Asia.<sup>26</sup> For that feared, invisible majority, on the other hand, the religious way of life continues to have an intrinsic legitimacy. For that majority seems to believe, with Hans-Georg Gadamer, that ‘the real force of morals ... is based on tradition. They are freely taken over but by no means created by a free insight grounded on reasons.’<sup>27</sup> If that religious way of life cannot find a normal play in public life, it finds distorted expression in fundamentalism, revivalism and xenophobia. That which is only a matter of Machiavellian politics at the top does sometimes acquire at the ground level the characteristics of a *satyagraha*, a *dharma yuddha* or a *jihad*.

I do not mean to identify secularism as a witches’ brew in South Asia. Perhaps in parts of the region where political participation has not outstripped the legitimacy of the nation state, secularism still has a political role, exactly as it had a creative role to play in India in the early years of independence. But its major implications are now ethnocidal and statist, and it cedes—in fact, lovingly hands over—the entire domain of religion, in societies organised around religion, to the genuine secularists—the ones who deal in, vend, or use as a political technology secularised, packaged versions of faith. Secularism today is threatening to become a successful conspiracy against the minorities.

Is secularism doomed to political impotency in the southern world where historicisation of consciousness and individuation are not complete? What is the fate of secularists who are dedicated crusaders for communal peace and minority rights. There is no reliable answer to the questions but some secularists, I suspect, *will* survive the vicissitudes of South Asian politics. They are the ones in whom there is no easy, cheerful assumption that one day they would abolish categories such as Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs, including their myriad subdivisions, and have the luxury of working with newly synthesised categories such as Indians, Sri Lankans or Pakistanis. They do what they do—by way of defending the human and cultural rights of the minorities—not so much as a well-considered, ideological and cognitive choice, but as a moral reaction set off by a vague sense of rebellion against the injustice and cruelty inflicted on fellow citizens. The social evolutionary project sits lightly on such secularists. They do not really expect the world to be fully secularised over time. Nor do they expect the ‘rationality’ of modern science to gradually supplant the ‘irrationality’ of religion. (Somewhat like Sigmund Freud, who, propelled simultaneously by the optimism of the Enlightenment and a tragic vision of life, hoped that the human ego would gradually win over more and more territory from the id, without fully giving up the belief that the dialectic between the two was an eternal one. I am sure Banuri will accept this qualification of his metaphor.)

Apparently, it is not much of an inheritance with which to enter the next

millennium. However, I like to believe that that inheritance is not trivial either, for it has something to do both with the very core of our humanness and with the key civilisational categories that distinguish this part of the world. It cannot be written off as ethically pointless or politically futile.

I have said that a huge majority of South Asians know neither the literal meaning of the word ‘secularism’ nor its connotative meaning derived from the separation of the state from the church in post-medieval Europe; and, sadly, in an open polity, the choices of this majority matters. I have also pointed out that most properly educated Indians love to believe that life in pre-colonial India was nasty, brutish and short; that communal violence was a daily affair till the imperial state forcibly imposed some order on the warring savages. Strangely, many secular South Asians are not comfortable with that ‘history’ either. They feel compelled to remind us, often in maudlin detail, how gloriously syncretic India was before religious fanaticism spoilt it all.<sup>28</sup> Only they do not stop to ask if that syncretism was based on secularism or on some version of ‘primitive proto-secularism’ and if those who did so well without the ideology need it now.

These secularists seem oblivious that mass politics in an open polity demands an accessible political idiom, even when that idiom seems crude and unbecoming to the dignity of a modern state or looks like a hidden plea to return to the country’s brutal, shabby past. That is why, at times of communal and ethnic violence, when the state machinery and the newspaper-reading middle classes harp on the codes of secularism, at the ground level, where survival is at stake, the traditional codes of tolerance are the ones that matter, however moth-eaten they may otherwise look.<sup>29</sup>

Two formulations at the end. First, religion as the foundation of social life is true for mainly the weak, the poor and the rural. Modern India, which sets the tone of the culture of the Indian state, fears that kind of religion. Second, the opposite of religious and ethnic intolerance is not secularism but religious and ethnic tolerance. Secularism is merely one way of ensuring that tolerance. However, in societies where most citizens have been uprooted from traditional lifestyles, secularism *can* become the counterpoint of religious chauvinism, because both begin to contest for the allegiance of the decultured, the atomised and the massified. In other societies, religious fanaticism mainly contests the tolerance that is part of religious traditions themselves.

That is why in South Asia secularism can mostly be the faith of—and be of use to—the culturally dispossessed and the politically rootless. In favourable circumstances, it can make sense even to the massified in the growing metropolitan slums, but never to the majority living their life with rather tenuous links with the culture of the nation state. True, when such a concept of secularism is made profitable by the state and the élite—that is, if lip service to the concept pays rich enough dividends—many begin to use it, not in its pristine sense but as an easy, non-controversial synonym for religious tolerance. If such a reward system functions long enough in a society, the political institutions may even begin to protect the view that religion is essentially a drag on civil society. The primary function of secularism then becomes the management of the fear of religion and the religious.

To function thus, the ideology of secularism must presume the existence of an individual who clearly defines his or her religious allegiance according to available census classifications and does not confuse religion with sect, caste, family traditions, *dharma*, culture, rituals and *deshachara* or local customs. That is, the ideology presumes a relatively clear, well-bounded self-definition compatible with the post-seventeenth-century ideal of the individual, comfortable in an impersonal, contractual-relations-dominated society. There is nothing terribly wrong with such a presumption and many people might in fact wish to live in such an individualistic society, seeing in it the scope for true freedom. Only, they have to take into account two political developments, working at cross-purposes.

On the one hand, the majority impervious to the charms of the official ideology of secularism has now *some* access to political power. And with quickening politicisation in this part of the world and large-scale efforts to empower newer sections of people by parties and movements of various kinds, this access is likely to increase. So, the contradiction between the ideology of secularism and the democratic process is likely to sharpen further in the future. The secularist project may then have to depend even more on the coercive power of the state to be implemented. Not merely to keep in check the enemies of secularism, but also to thought-police history (through the production of official histories, history textbooks, time capsules, and other such sundry tricks of the trade to which both India's intellectual left and the liberals are privy).<sup>30</sup> This should not be much of a shock to the Indian secularists. Secularism always has had a statist connection, even in the West, and most South Asian, especially Indian, secularists are confirmed statist. As the legitimacy of the state as a moral presence in society declines, this state connection may produce new stresses within the ideology of secularism.

On the other hand, there is now a powerful force that may find meaning in the secularist worldview. Modern India—by which I mean the westernised, media-exposed India, enslaved by the urban—industrial vision—is no longer a small, insignificant oasis in a large, predominantly rural, tradition-bound society. One-fourth of India is a lot of India. In absolute terms, modern India is itself a society nearly four times the size of its erstwhile colonial master, Britain. It is—to spite Thomas Macaulay, that intrepid, romantic ideologue of the *raj*—no longer a buffer between the rulers and the ruled. It is the world's fourth largest country by itself.

This India does have an adequate exposure to the ideology of the state to be able to internalise the concept of secularism, and sections of it are willing to go to any length to ensure that the concept is not questioned. But that by itself is not particularly surprising. There are a lot of Indians now who are willing to sacrifice the unmanageable, chaotic, real-life Indians for the sake of the idea of India. They are miserable that while the Indian democracy allows them to choose a new set of political leaders every five years, it does not allow them to choose once in a while the right kind of people to populate the country. Instead, they have to do with the same impossible mass of 950 million Indians—uneducable, disorganised, squabbling and, above all, multiplying like bed bugs. For in the Indianness of Indians who are getting empowered lies, according to many learned scholars, the root cause of all the major problems of the country.

### Hindu nationalism and the future of Hinduism

When a secularising society throws up its own versions of religion, extremist or otherwise, to cater to the changing psychological and cultural needs of the citizenry, what is the link between these versions and the faith that serves as their inspiration? The relationship between Hindutva, the encompassing ideology that inspires all Hindu nationalist movements in India, and Hinduism provides the semblance of an answer.

If we take a pessimistic view, Hindutva will be the end of Hinduism. Hinduism is what most Indians still live by. Hindutva is a response of the mainly Brahminic, middle-class, urban, westernising Indians to their uprooting, cultural and geographical. According to V. D. Savarkar, the openly agnostic, westernised, nationalist who coined the term, Hindutva is not only the means of Hinduising the polity but also of militarising the effeminate, disorganised Hindus. It is a critique of—and an answer to the critique—of Hinduism, as most Indians know the faith and an attempt to protect, within Hinduism, the flanks of a minority consciousness—including the fears and anxieties—that the democratic process threatens to marginalise.<sup>31</sup>

Though I have stressed earlier the pathology of rationality that characterises this minority consciousness, there is also in it an element of incontinent rage. It is the rage of Indians who have decultured themselves, seduced by the promises of modernity, and who now feel abandoned. With the demise of imperialism, Indian modernism—especially that subcategory of it which goes by the name of development—has failed to keep these promises. Hence the paradoxical stature of Hindutva; it is simultaneously an expression of status anxiety and a claim to legitimacy. At one plane, it is a *savarna purana* that the lower-middle class ventures while trying to break into the upper echelons of modern India; at another, it is an expression of the fear that they may be pushed into the ranks of the urban proletariat by the upper classes, on grounds not of substance, but of 'style'. The 'pseudo-secularists' represent for them the ambition; the Muslims (in India, mostly communities of artisans getting proletarianised) the fear. Hence, the hatred for both.

It is as a part of the same story that Hindutva represents in popular, mass-cultural form some of the basic tenets of the worldview associated with secularism and the secular construction of the Muslim. Built on the tenets of religious reform movements in the colonial period, Hindutva cannot but see Hinduism as inferior to the Semitic creeds—monolithic, well organised, and capable of being a sustaining ideology for an imperious state. And, being a mass-cultural ideology, it *can* do to Hinduism what the secularists have always wanted to do to it. Hindutva at this plane is a creed that, if it succeeds, might end up making Nepal the world's largest Hindu country. Hinduism will then survive not as a faith of a majority of Indians, but in pockets, cut off from the majority who will claim to live by it—perhaps directly in Bali, indirectly in Thai, Sri Lankan and Tibetan Buddhism and, to the chagrin of many Hindu nationalists, in South Asian and South-East Asian Islam. That death of Hinduism will be celebrated by the votaries of Hindutva. For they have all along felt embarrassed and humiliated by Hinduism as it is. Hence, the pathetic, counter-

phobic emphasis in Hindutva on the pride that Hindus must feel in being Hindus. Hindutva *is* meant for those whose Hinduism has worn off. It *is* a ware meant for the supermarket of global mass culture where all religions are available in their consumable forms, neatly packaged for buyers. Predictably, its most devoted consumers can be found among the expatriate Hindus of the world.

Many years ago, H. R. Trevor-Roper raised an important question in the context of the great European witch-hunt: did the inquisitors discover a new 'heresy' beneath the faith of the heretics or did they invent it?<sup>32</sup> Trevor-Roper reached the conclusion that, on the whole, the witch craze did not grow out of the social and religious processes operating in medieval Europe; it 'grew by its own momentum' from within modernising Europe.<sup>33</sup> The growth of Hindutva has depended heavily upon invented heresies that are organised around themes that have no place in Hindu theology: the modern state, nationalism and national identity. It has borrowed almost nothing from existing Hindu theology in its construction of the non-Hindus; it has followed its own trajectory in the matter. This is another crucial difference between Hindutva and Hinduism. It is a pity that, to some extent, the same can be said about some of the more fanatical opponents of Hindutva in the modern sector, too. That fanaticism comes from a tacit recognition that, beneath the skin, they are each other's double. Only, while the ideologues of Hindutva have already found Indian analogues of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, some opponents of Hindutva are still desperately looking for them.<sup>34</sup>

If we take an optimistic view, Hindu nationalism has its territorial limits. It cannot spread easily beyond the boundaries of urban, westernising India. Nor can it easily penetrate those parts of India where Hinduism is more resilient and the Hindus are less prone to project on to the Muslim the feared, unacceptable parts of their self. Hindutva cannot survive where the citizens have not been massified and made to speak only the language of the state.

To those who live in Hinduism, Hindutva is one of those pathologies that periodically afflict a faith. Hinduism has, over the centuries, handled many such pathologies; it still retains the capacity, they feel, perhaps over-optimistically, to handle one more. It will, they hope, consume Hindutva once a sizeable section of the modernised Hindus finds an alternative psychological defence against the encroaching forces of the market, the state and the urban—industrial vision.

Whether one is a pessimist or an optimist, the choices are clear. They do not lie either in a glib secularism talking the language of the state or in pre-war versions of nationalism seeking to corner the various forms of increasingly popular ethnic nationalism breaking out all over South Asia. It lies in alliance with forces that have risen in rebellion against the social forces and the ideology of dominance that have spawned Hindutva in the first place. As the world built by nineteenth-century imperialism collapses around us, Hindutva, too, may die a natural death. But, then, many things that die in the colder climes in the course of a single winter survive in the tropics for years. Stalinism has survived better in India than even in the Soviet Union and so probably will imperialism's lost child, Hindutva. Maybe its death will not be as natural as that of some other ideologies. Maybe post-Gandhian Hinduism—combined with a moderate, modest and, what Ali Mazrui calls, ecumenical state—will have to take advantage of

the democratic process to help Hindutva to die a slightly unnatural death. Perhaps that euthanasia will be called politics.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper published in *Alternatives*, 22, 1997, and draws upon a keynote address delivered at the XVII International Congress of History of Religions, Mexico City, 5–12 August 1995, and upon brief notes written for Ved Bhasin & Om Prakash Saraf (eds), *Challenges Facing India: Essays in Honour of Balraj Puri*, New Delhi, Konark, 1994, and the *Revue Internationale de Theologie*, 1995, p 262.
- <sup>2</sup> Gustavo Esteva, 'Regenerating people's space', *Alternatives*, 1987, 12(1), pp 125–152.
- <sup>3</sup> M K Gandhi, in *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Raghavan Iyer (ed), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p 374.
- <sup>4</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, 'The challenge of modernity', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 20(1/2), 1993, pp 183–192; see p 189.
- <sup>5</sup> The decline of faith I am speaking of has its rough counterpart in the erosion of beliefs surveyed in a somewhat different context by Mattei Dogan, 'Decline of religious beliefs in Western Europe', *International Social Science Journal*, 47(3), 1995, pp 405–417; and Ronald Inglehart, 'Changing values, economic development and political change', *ibid*, pp 379–403. See also Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Societies*, Princeton, Princeton University, 1991.
- <sup>6</sup> The great European witch-hunt, it has been frequently pointed out, peaked not during the period when European Christendom and the Church were secure, but when modernity had weakened their bases. Speaking of the belief in witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, H. R. Trevor-Roper says, 'It was not, as the prophets of progress might suppose, a lingering ancient superstition, only waiting to dissolve. It was a new explosive force, constantly and fearfully expanding with the passage of time.' H R Trevor-Roper, 'The European witch-craze in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in *The European Witch-Hunt in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and the Other Essays*, New York, Harper, 1967, pp 90–192. See also Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, New York, Basic, 1975.
- <sup>7</sup> In the context of the films of Woody Allen, Barbara Schapiro speaks of the 'clever, manipulative technique by which Allen attempts to control his critics by demonstrating an awareness of his own potential weaknesses. ... The character displays awareness of his problem while in the very act of demonstrating the problem, and that self awareness, of course, creates the humour.' Barbara Schapiro, 'Woody Allen's search for self', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 18, 1986, pp 47–62. I am speaking here of an analogous process which produces, instead of humour, tragedy for millions.  
 However, there is some scope for irony, if not humour, within such tragedies. Recently, when Brijbhushan Sharan Singh, an MP of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the powerful political front of the Hindu nationalist formations, was accused of harbouring criminals having terrorist connections and protecting them from law, the criminals turned out to be associates of the notorious don of Bombay, Dawood Ibrahim. Likewise, BJP President Lal Krishna Advani, when he was accused of being involved in criminal money laundering, the main source of payments to him was said to be one Ameerbhai. The party has established its secular credentials the hard way!
- <sup>8</sup> Probably the rational-legal values of an individualised, mass society have not yet made inroads into the interstices of South Asian personality, and the values and faiths most South Asians live with cannot be mobilised that easily for collective action cutting across sects or denominations. Urbanisation and massification is changing this profile, but the changes as yet affect a minority.
- <sup>9</sup> For instance, Tariq Hasan, 'How does it matter who is the victim?', *The Times of India*, 3 April 1995. Also, Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram & Achyut Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf Eva Fogelman, 'Victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers in the face of genocide and its aftermath', in *Genocide, War and Human Survival*, Charles B. Strozier & Michael Flynn (eds), New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 1996, pp 87–98; see pp 91–92.
- <sup>11</sup> Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram & Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality*.
- <sup>12</sup> In the case of both Kashmir and the Punjab, despite the bitterness produced by the militants and the agencies of the state and despite some determined efforts to precipitate riots, there had previously been no communal riot.
- <sup>13</sup> Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram & Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality, passim*.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, Ch 1.
- <sup>15</sup> See for instance Frédérique Apffel Marglin, 'Smallpox in two systems of knowledge', in *Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture and Resistance*, Frédérique Apffel Marglin & Stephen A. Marglin (eds), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990, pp 145–184.

- <sup>16</sup> See Kumar Suresh Singh, *People of India: An Introduction*, New Delhi, Anthropological Survey of India, 1992, Vol 1. This is part of a voluminous and authoritative survey which almost incidentally shows that even in the 1990s, nearly 50 years after the Hindu–Muslim divide became the most dangerous cleavage in the subcontinent, of the 2800 odd communities identified as Hindu/Muslim, more than 400 cannot be identified as exclusively Hindu or Muslim. There are probably something like 600 such communities which live not with multiculturalism without, but with multiculturalism within in South Asia. In a personal communication Singh estimates that the proportion of such fuzzy-bordered communities had been much higher in earlier times. For a fascinating case study, see Frédérique Apffel Marglin, ‘On Pirs and Pandits’, *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society*, 91, 1995, pp 17–26. Also, Shail Mayaram, ‘Representing the Hindu–Muslim civilisational encounter: the Mahabharata of community of Muslims’, Jaipur, Institute of Development Studies, 1996, unpublished ms; and ‘Ethnic co-existence in Ajmer’, Project on Culture and Identity, Colombo, Centre for Ethnic Studies, and Delhi, Committee for Cultural Choices, 1995, unpublished ms.
- <sup>17</sup> For concise, if non-committal coverage of this part of the story, see C A Bailey, ‘The pre-history of “communalism”? Religious conflict in India, 1700–1860’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 19(2), 1985, pp 177–203.
- <sup>18</sup> A cute, if chilling example of this attitude is Sumanta Bannerji, ‘Sangh Parivar and democratic rights’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(34), 1993, p 1715–1718.
- <sup>19</sup> For a profile of westernising, media-exposed urban India as the site of rivalry between the secularists and the Hindu nationalists, see Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram & Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality*.
- <sup>20</sup> Tariq Banuri, ‘Official Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Collective Violence’, Islamabad, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 1993, unpublished ms, p 8.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> I am afraid that much of the recent academic defence of secularism, however elegantly formulated, is totally irrelevant to South Asian political life from this point of view. See, for instance, Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Nationalism and Modernity*, New Delhi, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1995, paper no 29, pp 1–29; and Amartya Sen, ‘Secularism and its discontents’, in *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India’s Secular Identity*, Kaushik Basu & Sanjay Subramanyam (eds), New Delhi, Penguin, 1996, pp 11–43. It is a pity that the academic viability of many ideas in the mainstream global culture of universities does not ensure their political survival in the tropics.
- <sup>23</sup> There has been some discomfort about the distinction between faith and ideology I have drawn in this and other papers on the subject. As should have been obvious from the context, my use of the concept of ideology is not Marxian or Mannheimian but conventional social-psychological and cultural-anthropological. However, I now find that at least one respected scholar-activist and historian of religion has arrived at the same dichotomy, starting from altogether different concerns. Abdolkarim Soroush claims that ‘Islam, or any other religion, will become totalitarian if it is made into an ideology, because that is the nature of ideologies.’ Quoted in *Communalism Combat*, 37, 1997, p 24. And Julius Lipner in an unpublished paper distinguishes between Hinduta and Hindutva roughly along the same lines.
- I should clarify here that I make no assumption regarding the truth or falsity of the consciousness that underlies faith or ideology. I am merely underscoring the psychological organisational principles of two different forms of consciousness, one of which includes a theory of transcendence whereas the other does not or is not supposed to. The distinction echoes the differences in emotive tone of most collective violence in our times and the more hate-filled religious violence that marked earlier centuries. Ethnic cleansing carries the psychological stamp of the modern farmer’s attitude towards pest control rather than that of a crusade or *jihad* (see below). This is a difference to which others also, notably Hannah Arendt and Robert J. Lifton, have drawn our attention. See also ‘Introduction: science as a reason of state’, in *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity* Ashis Nandy (ed), Tokyo: UN University Press, and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp 1–16. I thank Sumit Sarkar and Nivedita Menon for drawing my attention to this issue.
- <sup>24</sup> See Ashis Nandy, ‘The politics of secularism and the recovery of religious tolerance’, *Alternatives*, 13(3), 1988, pp 177–194. See especially the table on p 189.
- <sup>25</sup> According to Zygmunt Bauman, ‘The most shattering of lessons deriving from the analysis of the “twisted road to Auschwitz” is that—in the last resort—the choice of physical extermination as the right means to the task of Entfernung was a product of routine bureaucratic procedures: means—ends, calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application ... The “Final Solution” did not clash at any stage with the rational pursuit of efficient, optimal goal-implementation. On the contrary, it arose out of a genuinely rational concern, and it was generated by bureaucracy true to its form and purpose.’ Quoted in Akbar S Ahmed, ‘Ethnic cleansing’: a metaphor for our time’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 18(1), 1995, pp 1–25; see p 4.
- <sup>26</sup> These packaged forms go with various circus-tamed versions of religion, meant for easy consumption. In India, these versions are bookish, high-cultural, pan-Indian, and go well with modern cults, political skulduggery, and fashionable, jet-setting gurus—both within India and among the decultured, uprooted, expatriate Indians and the Indophiles in the West. Those given to this modern version of religion find all other spiritual experiences lowbrow, corrupted and, thus, meaningless, uncontrollable and fearsome. That fear of the religion of the uncontrollable kind (to which the majority of Indians of all faiths give their

allegiance) is a part of the fear of the vernacular, the democratic and the plural. It is the fear that a majority of Indians are religious in a way that is not centrally controllable and does not constitute a 'proper' religion in contemporary times.

<sup>27</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, quoted in Arindam Chakrabarti, 'Rationality in Indian philosophy', Lecture given at the Devahuti-Damodar Library, 13 July 1996, mimeo, p 15. Of course, neither Gadamer nor Chakrabarti seems aware that this is also a typical Gandhian formulation.

<sup>28</sup> For a random example, see the superbly executed television series made by Saeed Naqvi and shown on Doordarshan between 1992 and 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram & Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality*.

<sup>30</sup> That is partly the reason why even the Bharatiya Janata Party, being ideologically committed to unqualified statism, is unable to shed the idiom and has to define its position as loyalty to 'true' secularism, in opposition to what it calls the 'pseudo-secularism' of other parties dependent on minority vote banks.

<sup>31</sup> This critique of Hinduism, often masquerading as a personological critique of the Hindus, is central to Hindutva. For a useful discussion of this part of the story, see Chaturvedi Badrinath, *Dharma, India and the World Order: Twenty Essays*, New Delhi, Centre for Policy Research, 1991. A flavour of the intellectual and cultural climate that produced Hindutva can be had from Dhananjay Keer, *Veer Savarkar*, Bombay, Popular, 1966. For a succinct comment on the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh as a lower-middle-class, political expression of the ideology of Hindutva and its relationship with Hinduism, see Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr, 'The real RSS: not Hindu, cultural or nationalist', *The Times of India*, 8 July 1998.

The line drawn between Hinduism and Hindutva is visible at the ground level, when communal violence spreads or breaks out in rural India, where communities have not yet fully broken down and where the ideology of Hindutva faces resistance from everyday Hinduism. Some have academic objections to such a separation, but I doubt if those who offer such resistance would worry about that. They will draw sustenance either from the 'lowbrow' Hinduism of everyday life (see for instance, Marglin, 'On Pirs and Pandits'; and Mayaram, 'Representing the Hindu-Muslim civilisational encounter') or from even some of the pillars of Brahminic/classical orthodoxy, such as Shankaracharya Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swami, *Hindu Dharma: The Universal Way of Life*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze*, pp 115-127.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p 119.

<sup>34</sup> For a while, they found it Golwalkar's book. *We Things* became a little convoluted when his disciples disowned it and claimed that Golwalkar, too, had disowned it. That was not what self-respecting fascists were expected to do and it was considered almost a betrayal by important sections of the Indian left.