Article

India's Secular Journey

Sociological Bulletin
66(3) 257–270

SAGE Publications
sagepub.in/home.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0038022917726933
http://journals.sagepub.com/home/sob

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Abstract

Secularism as an ideology and a framework of governance evolved in the West, but this Western inheritance had no relevance to secularism in India. It was Jawaharlal Nehru who gave currency to it in India. Hindu masses had not the slightest notion of what secularism meant or should mean. They saw it as an invitation for social and communal harmony and as a concession to the minorities. Ultra Hindu groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Sweyam Sangh were hostile to the idea of secularism. Muslim responses were even more varied. Muslim theologians rejected it on theological grounds. Muslims who were influenced by liberal and leftist ideologies espoused it. A large number of Muslims were sceptical whether the Indian State could remain secular for long. For them the presence of Nehru at the helm of affairs was a greater assurance that they would be treated fairly. Therefore, they decided to wait and watch. However, subsequent developments weakened the thrust towards secularism. The developments include Jaiprakash Narayan's idea of non-statal politics and the legitimacy it provided to the forces which had been and were opposed to secularism from the start. The current situation is a continuation of that process.

Keywords

Secularism, minorities, communalism, religious differences, religious conflict

One difficulty in the exploration of the canvas of secularism arises from the somewhat exaggerated view of the Indian past.[1] Indians tried to trace almost all aspects of human civilisation back to their ancient and rich cultural heritage. This tendency was the strongest during the freedom movement. In those days, the Indian past was glorified, and elements which seemed to give Europeans a sense of superiority and, consequently, enabled them to justify their right to rule were seen as existing in the Indian past.

Secularism as a system of values and a framework for governance evolved in Europe as a result of two almost simultaneous developments: the growing conflict

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between the Church and State and the emergence in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution of new social classes who saw the values imposed by the Church constraining for their future development. This historical development had no parallel in India. Secularism as a word was introduced in the Indian political discourse by Jawaharlal Nehru. He was familiar with the European antecedents of secularism, but he never invoked them as having any relevance for India. For him, secularism was essentially a means to deal with communalism which plagued the country in the aftermath of the Partition. One can realise the truth of this formulation from his letters to chief ministers (Khosla, 2014). He even conceded, when the idea found widespread acceptance that secularism could be equated with the notion of Sarva Dharma Sambhav.[2]

One can easily understand the tendency among Indians to glorify the past during the freedom struggle. However, persistence of this tendency with respect to secularism, especially, has had somewhat unfortunate consequences. It has encouraged the belief that there already existed a sufficiently strong basis for the secular state, and there is no special need to promote secular values in society.

The evidence of history does not support the view that secularism as embodied in the Indian Constitution is derived from ancient Indian traditions, or that there is a pre-existing place for secularism in the Indian system of values (see Bhargava, 2016). It is no doubt true that the State in ancient India was often tolerant of all religions, but the promotion of dharma was regarded as the foremost responsibility of the State. Moreover, the system of justice in ancient India was founded on the principle of inequality. Special treatment meted out to religious minorities was dictated by considerations of commercial interests and political expediency, not a conscious acceptance of the principle that adherents of all religions were equal in the eyes of the State. In fact, religious minorities were protected and granted special rights, but the rights enjoyed by them were not on a par with the majority of the population.

I emphasise the uniqueness and radical nature of the decision by Indian leaders to make India a secular state for two main reasons. First, it serves to highlight the fact that there was no basis for secularism in ancient and medieval India. Second, it suggests that promotion of secularism called for unusual energy and efforts. It was required that certain tendencies which had dominated social and political life for centuries and had become particularly pronounced in the second half of the 19th century should be consciously and systematically curtailed and discouraged. In the course of our discussion, I shall try to pinpoint some of these tendencies in somewhat greater detail.

In the historic past, Indians had not been seized with that spirit of nationalism which so radically changed the face of Europe in the 19th century. They remained a congeries of castes and communities. The principal reason for this was that the concept of nationalism or national unity was lacking in Indian thought. This traditional absence of patriotism or national feeling had important consequences for future political developments. When the nationalist sentiments began to germinate in the minds of Indian leaders in the latter half of the 19th century, these were driven to develop the nationalist doctrine from scratch, so to speak, since Indian history could not provide any adequate framework upon which a theory of nationalism could be erected. The concept of nationalism was, therefore, improvised with the assimilation of

certain deities from the Hindu pantheon. Symbolised by the figures of Hindu goddesses Durga, Vani and Lakshmi, India was deified as the Mother to whom her children owed the highest loyalty.

Such a view of nationalism could hardly be expected to appeal to the Muslim mind.[3] The Muslims were adherents of a different religio-centric manner of life, and they did not share the Hindu veneration of the country as Mother. It is true that the Muslim community in India was formed gradually through absorption from Hinduism over the centuries, yet the two communities remained distinct with emphasis on their separateness.

There is no doubt that Hindus and Muslims shared, and still share, many common cultural values and practices, and that they were often bound together in close social and economic relationships. Cultural habits die hard. But it is not necessary that these common practices should have made for a lasting homogeneity between the two communities. As Louis Dumont (1964) has rightly suggested, the significance of the difference between Hindus and Muslims is generally missed because religion is not taken as constitutive of society. Moreover, a clear distinction is also not drawn between the various levels at which the religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims found its expression.

For a proper understanding of the differences between Hindus and Muslims, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the ideological and interactional levels and to consider the religion of the masses separately from that of the educated Hindus and Muslims. Ideologically, Hinduism and Islamism are quite antithetical to each other. It is true that Islam in India adopted many elements which were quite foreign to it. On the one hand, the Muslims tolerated the infidels as a part of the socio-political system which they established in India, abolishing, from Akbar to Aurangzeb, the capitation tax (*jizya*) on them. On the other hand, the Hindus accepted as rulers, people who could not be transformed into Kshatriyas as they denied the supremacy of the Brahmins and, theoretically at least, the validity of caste distinctions. But this co-existence produced no general ideological synthesis. Islam refused to be completely fused into Hinduism, although it adopted several elements from it. Hinduism ossified in self-defence; the Hindu social system put itself on the defensive after the Muslim conquest and tightened itself more than ever before. Although there were movements and individual efforts at harmony, synthesis and even composite development, the two religions remained widely separated.

The links were perhaps the strongest at the base of the social system, and the two communities touched one another in positive ways. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., has shown, using literary evidence from the Muslim Vaishnava poets of Bengal, that Hindus and Muslims shared pastoral and other festivals and the similarities of devotional Sufi doctrines to those of Hindu bhakti made it but a short step from one religion to another. On the other hand, the educated or otherwise culturally sophisticated members of the two communities recognised differences between themselves and operated in different social orbits. For instance, the middle-class Hindu, especially of the twice-born status, was never quite comfortable with its Muslim neighbours whom he regarded as rude in their manners and unclean in their customs. The Muslim on his side did not forget that he had conquered India,

and he was apt to assert an importance which only irritated and annoyed the Hindus (see Chaudhuri, 1966; Mohamed, 2007). He was also unable to conceal his contempt for the Hindu as an idolater.[4]

An individual whose religious belief was compounded of elements of animism, and magic and mysticism as well as the teaching of the prophet could be, and frequently was, transformed into a relative orthodox Muslim. It is essential to appreciate this dynamic character of the categories since because of it people who merely shared common cultural elements were unable to develop any special sense of identity. It tended to encourage the development of a consciousness of community, although the conflict of interest among the social strata within the community was often acute and occasionally came to the surface. Whenever conflict arose between the communities, it tended to be posed in terms other than of cultural similarity and to run along the cleavage which was most sharply defined in the social structure, namely religion.

Certain cultural processes tended to sharpen the differences between the two communities and to contribute to the development of community feeling among them. For want of better words, I use the terms 'Sanskritisation' and 'Islamisation' to refer to the processes operating among Hindus and Muslims, respectively. Sanskritisation refers to a process by which the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology and the pantheon of orthodox Hinduism spread to low Hindu castes and outlying groups. The parallel process among the Muslims is Islamisation. It involves the spread of the customs, ideology and practices of the orthodox Muslims belonging to the upper strata of the Muslim society. When a Hindu group was converted to Islam, it was immediately pushed out by the Hindu social system. It, no doubt, continued to perform certain socio-economic functions for the Hindu castes, but the degree of its contact was restricted, especially so far as commensality was concerned. Moreover, the convert group realised that its status within the Muslim community depended upon its distance from Hindu castes. As a result, it soon discarded the un-Islamic practices which formed part of its general life style, adopted a new name designed to connote a better social status and advanced a claim to have descended from one of the noble-born (*ashraf*) families of Arabic or Persian origins.

It may be objected that I am advocating what is commonly known as the 'two-nation theory'. There is no doubt that lasting heterogeneity between Hindus and Muslims was emphasised as one of the cardinal points of the theory. Its proponent, the Muslim League, used this lasting heterogeneity between the two communities as a justification for its claim to be the sole representative of the Muslims and to support its demand for a separate homeland for Muslims. Most historical studies in Pakistan insist that the creation of Pakistan was a logical development of Indian history since Muslims remained a separate nation despite the efforts towards cultural synthesis between Islam and Hinduism. This trend in Pakistani historical writings has its counterpart in India. The principal concern of many Indian historians seems to be to counteract the Muslim League's two-nation theory and to provide a historical basis for modern India's choice of secularism as a goal of national policy.

The standpoint taken here is that the case for arguing that Hindus and Muslims remained separate despite mutual interaction is historically sound. It is

undoubtedly true that Indian culture has imbibed a number of different cultural streams over the centuries. From time immemorial, India has attracted peoples of different cultures, religions and races, and the interaction among them, whether military or peaceful, helped to create a culture, which would have to be regarded as syncretic. However, the dominant strain of this culture was always Hinduism, and to the extent that Indian civilisation remained an amorphous entity, other cultural streams were only partially integrated into the national culture.

It should be recognised that religious differences between Hindus and Muslims did not make Pakistan inevitable. On the contrary, it was the subsequent development of Indian politics which made the idea of Pakistan emotionally appealing to the Muslims. The Muslims were slow to respond to Western education, and there was far less intellectual ferment among them. When they did take to Western education nearly fifty years later, they found that the whole idea of nationalism was deeply embedded in orthodox Hinduism. As with the Hindus, therefore, their nationalism took the form of Muslim nationalism, looking back to Islamic traditions and culture, and fearful of losing those because of the reassertion of orthodox Hinduism.

Some secular-minded leaders in the Congress were disturbed by the development of two parallel nationalisms in India, and they tried to broaden the concept of Indian nationalism to include both Hindus and Muslims. In a series of writings, beginning with the *Glimpses of World History*, Jawaharlal Nehru tried to show that the Hindu–Muslim schism in Indian life was a superficial phenomenon. India, he postulated, was a unity in which people of different races, cultures and religious outlooks had intermingled to constitute a composite national culture. As Michael Brecher has noted: 'Nehru was not alone in this view, but his influence gave it special weight in the party' (1959, p. 617).

The impact of the secular leadership of the Congress was confined to the intellectual level, however. On the popular level, the leadership of the Congress, after the death of Tilak up to the time of the Partition, remained in the hands of Gandhi. Gandhi's religious background was the popular Vaishnava tradition which provided him with an intimate knowledge of the legends and symbolisms of the religious folk heroes of India. Until his advent on the political scene, the national movement as represented by the Congress was restricted to the Western-educated elite who had no mass base. Gandhi was quick to realise that a political movement could not succeed without mass support, and he directed his energies to carrying the political movement to the masses.

It is difficult to say whether Gandhi wanted to appeal to the masses of all religious persuasions or, first and foremost, to the Hindu peasantry and, only secondarily, the non-Hindu communities. It can be shown, however, that Gandhi took the Indian masses into groups and tried to enlist their support for the national movement separately, making an appeal to each group on an issue which was likely to have some emotional appeal for it, and at a time which appeared suitable for his purpose. He made a directly emotional and religious appeal to the Hindu masses from the beginning, and, when the occasion presented itself, tried to enlist the support of the Muslims on the Khilafat issue. In any case, to carry the political movement to the countryside, Gandhi expressed himself in a Hindu idiom.

The prevailing public attitude towards Gandhi is one of reverence. This mitigates a critical assessment of his political strategy and the place of religion in his political philosophy. Louis Dumont (1964, p. 56) has suggested that Gandhi's objective was twofold: to attain independence and to consolidate Hinduism. In order to attain both ends, it was necessary to show the beginning to reform. But reform was subordinate to independence.

Gandhi's approach to politics brought him in direct conflict with the secular leaders in the Congress. These leaders were vexed by the increasing part played by religion in organised politics. Men such as Nehru and Bose found Gandhi's political tactics somewhat ideologically frustrating, though they were unable to make a clear break with him for reasons of political expediency. (Bose, of course, parted company with Gandhi subsequently.)

This created a duality of character in the Congress organisation. On the level of principles, it claimed to be a truly secular organisation, refusing to take into consideration the religious differences found in Indian society and presenting itself as a representative of the nation. On the level of fact, on the other hand, it tended, or at least appeared to the Muslims, to be a predominantly Hindu organisation, identifying in the first place the Indian nation with the high caste Hindu.

It is not my intention to suggest here that Gandhi was a communalist. In fact, his religious faith was different from that of the earlier extremists like Tilak, and while his approach to politics was basically traditionalistic, he broadened the nationalism of the Congress to include the Muslims. It is nevertheless evident that Gandhi's efforts to bring about Hindu–Muslim unity made little sense to a majority of the Muslims. His use of the religious terminology of Hinduism alienated the majority of Muslims. They felt that his primary sympathies lay with the dominant majority community and were unwilling to accept his leadership. They continued to rally under the banner of the Muslim League. It should, however, be emphasised that the Muslim image of Gandhi underwent a radical change in the mid-1940s, when the Mahatma travelled across the country protecting Muslims against communal frenzy. But this change in the Muslim image was far too late: The seed of communal discord had already grown into a large shady tree and was bearing bitter fruit.

It is often difficult for politicians to control the forces which they themselves set in motion. Gandhi had taken the Indian masses in groups and tried to incorporate them into the national movement in their own right, hoping that they would be able to share power together. On the other hand, the leadership of the Muslim League failed to see how the inherently Hindu character of the Congress organisation could make for peaceful and fair political co-existence. They exploited the Muslim alienation which Gandhi's political tactics had accentuated, and used the combined Muslim support for political bargaining. All this had already sharpened the Hindu–Muslim friction. The Partition of the Indian subcontinent and the large-scale movement of population across the borders gave an impetus to social animosities between the two communities. There was mass killing on both sides and communal tensions mounted to a point which is rare, though not unknown, in human history.

The creation of Pakistan brought the Indian Muslims face to face with a difficult problem. When Pakistan came into existence, some of the areas where the

movement for a 'separate homeland for Muslim' was most popular remained in India. In India, the Muslims were not faced with the same kind of threat to personal security and material assets as were the Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab, or, at least, not to the same extent. In west Punjab, as Prakash Tandon's autography (1961) shows, the Hindus and Sikhs wanted to stay on, but it was the political situation which forced them to flee. In India, on the other hand, the presence of a secular leadership, more significantly Nehru, gave the Muslims assurance that their personal lives and personal property could be protected. The Muslims living in areas which were not directly affected by communal riots stayed on even though many of them were involved with the idea of Pakistan.

The continued presence of the Muslims in India was, however, a source of irritation for the majority of Hindus. Hindu antagonism and hatred towards the Muslims who stayed in India were so strong within the first few months of the Partition that one would not have been surprised if India had emerged as a Hindu state. The Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS were already committed to the idea. Certain elements within the Congress were also favourable to the idea of India becoming a theocracy (see Saberwal, 2000). However, there were other factors which were not quite favourable to such a development. For one thing, the leadership of the Congress and the country had passed, by this time, into the hands of leaders who were intellectually and emotionally committed to the idea of secularism. Second, India's declaration of becoming a theocracy would have seriously damaged the image of the Congress. Third, the assassination of Gandhi created a favourable climate for the acceptance of the concept of a secular state. Finally, the attainment of Independence infused the Hindus with a novel sense of power, and in the wave of liberalism, which often comes with the acquisition of such power, they committed themselves to the idea of a secular state as a concession to the Muslims. Many orthodox Hindus entertained the belief after Independence that in accepting secularism they were making a gesture of goodwill towards Muslims for, as masters of India's destiny, they could as well make it a theocratic state. All these factors were not equally significant but they all contributed to the emergence of India as a secular state.

Jawaharlal Nehru was the most outstanding advocate of the secular state in India. For him, secularism was an important element in his total ṣocial philosophy, not simply an empty political slogan. It was Nehru's contention that communalism, a dismal aspect of Indian political life on the whole, was mainly a reflection of its backward economic organisation and stagnant social structure. Soon after Independence, Nehru initiated large-scale programmes of economic development and social change, and launched the country on the road to modernisation.

However, Nehru's forward-looking programmes were essentially the programmes of a small minority. A second class of opinion, with its roots spreading through all the main interest groups in the country, was the body of orthodox and traditionalist Hindu opinion. Its extreme expression was in the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS and the Jan Sangh, but it had the sympathy of a large majority of Congressmen. This class of opinion was opposed to most of the programmes and policies advocated by Nehru. It disliked the efforts to raise the untouchables, to treat the Muslims as equal citizens in a predominantly Hindu India, and to extend

the rights related to inheritance and divorce to women. In short, it disliked the whole concept of a secular state.

Soon after Independence, the traditionalist opinion called for formal recognition of Hinduism in the Indian Constitution and social directives of state policy. Sardar Patel vowed that he would not rest until the Somnath temple, partially destroyed during the Muslim invasion in the 11th century, was reconstructed and restored to its old glory. Ramakrishna Dalmia launched a nation-wide campaign for the inclusion of a clause forbidding cow slaughter. K. M. Panikkar called for the revival of Sanskrit. Of course, these revivalist demands were a natural outcome of the manner in which Indian nationalism had developed and the ideology which had provided substance to it. With the attainment of Independence, it was only natural that the demand should have been made that the State get rid of the cultural vestiges of alien rule and set about restoring the past greatness of traditional Indian culture.

Nehru, thus, had to make important compromises with and concessions to orthodox opinion. For instance, Nehru hoped to pass the Hindu code bill in a single session of the Constituent Assembly. It look him nearly six years to pass the two important measures giving Hindu women equal rights with men in inheritance, succession and holding of property, establishing monogamy and providing for divorce. Moreover, the measures were processed piecemeal rather than as a single comprehensive enactment. There was a second limitation also. The Indian political leaders were divided into two major groups. The first contained the all-India politicians who had been mainly interested in the theoretical side of nationalism before Independence. The other group consisted of provincial leaders, amongst whom commitment to the ideals of secularism and socialism was considerably diffused, varying in its form, character and intensity.[5] Moreover, these provincial leaders retained their political influence through an articulation of various regional and local interests. Sometimes, these interests ran counter to the ideals accepted at the all-India level. Thus, we find that whether on the question of equal treatment of Muslims and other religious minorities, removal of untouchability or elimination of religious symbolism from the State, the provincial leaders often went their own way.

Within the Congress, the trend towards the consolidation of traditionalist forces was reflected in the changing character of the leadership. The leaders who earlier advocated secularism and economic development were either gradually pushed out of the Congress (or put in the background) or voluntarily left the organisation. Their place was taken by the so-called political bosses who controlled the party machinery, organised factional politics and engineered the elections through their links with the cadre at the grassroots level. These leaders did not share the conviction of the earlier leaders nor were they afraid to lose anything, if the programmes of secularisation, modernisation and economic development were abandoned. In fact, they had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo for the success of the programmes of economic development and social change might bring about significant changes in people's attitudes and values, and thereby undermine the real bases of their power and influence. The consolidation of orthodox forces had been accompanied by an increase in the spread and revival of traditional values and a growing communal consciousness.

It has been rightly said in the literature that the spread of traditional values, whether through films or All India Radio or in popular books, brings about radical changes in the content of traditional culture. Indeed, from an academic point of view, it is possible to see the revival and revitalisation of traditional symbols and values in contemporary India as an aspect of modernisation. However, for a variety of reasons, we can still characterise the spread of traditional values as a reassertion of orthodox Hinduism. For one thing, the content of Sanskritic values, symbols and mythologies retains its religious and moral character and does not undergo secularisation in the course of their spread through mass media or school textbooks. For instance, 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharat' were seen as a source of Hindu religion, not as literary classics, and there is no attempt to un-deify their heroes, Ram and Krishna. In fact, any attempt to un-deify the characters of the epics is considered 'futile and positively mischievous'. Second, these values are frequently characterised as a part of the cultural heritage of all Indians, not only of the adherents of Hinduism. Finally, and this is a significant consideration, the revival of traditional culture is viewed by the majority of Hindus as a symbol of Hindu resurgence and dominance.

Paradoxically, while on the one hand, the democratisation of the Indian social system has revived the role of the traditional groupings based on caste, sectarian and regional or linguistic identity, increased Sanskritisation has brought about the consolidation of the Hindus as a religious community on the other. Some people are often inclined to believe that the two types of communal consciousness (those of the traditional grouping and the religious community) are similar in character and tend to neutralise one another. What is generally forgotten by the proponents of this view is that they are situationally determined and operate at different levels of segmentation. Broadly speaking, the identity of the traditional grouping based on caste or sect is effective only so long as the conflict or competition is confined within the religious community. When, on the other hand, competition involves two or more religious communities, the internal cleavages within each community usually merge together to form the wider religious community, and consequently it is the religious identity that assumes greater prominence.

The two wars between India and Pakistan, in which India became involved during the 1960s and the early 1970s, contributed a great deal to the intensification of communal consciousness and the consolidation of the traditionalist forces in the country. On both occasions, the upsurge of nationalism had strong undertones of Hinduism. Particularly, during the 1964 Indo-Pakistani war, the whole concept of patriotism was deeply embedded with Hinduism. It speaks a great deal about the nature of Indian society that during the final phase of the 1964 war, the entire propaganda machinery of the Government of India had to be directed towards projecting an image of Indian Muslims as loyal citizens and rescuing them from a possible onslaught of Hindu communal violence.

The process of adjustment to the post-Partition situation produced two different political tendencies among Indian Muslims. Some Muslim isolated themselves from the mainstream of national political life and turned to the world of religious preoccupations. They were encouraged in this by some Muslim religious or semi-political organisations, such as the All-India Tablighi Jamaat and the

All-India Jamaat-i-Islami, which had come into existence shortly before the Partition and whose members had offered support for the creation of Pakistan.

The majority of Indian Muslims were quick to see that too effective a participation in the political process would arouse the hostility of the Hindus, and withdrawal from it would reinforce their charge that the Muslims were keeping themselves aloof from the mainstream of national life. So, led by Muslim leaders in the Congress and the All-India Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind, which alone among the Muslim organisations had some influence in the community after the Partition, the Indian Muslims extended their political support to the Congress Party.

It would be a mistake to assume that the Muslim support for the Congress was based on a conscious realisation that political integration was the most desirable course open to the community from the viewpoint of the future development of Indian polity. It was based on pragmatic considerations: the community saw in the Congress a political umbrella which could offer it protection against Hindu communal forces and safeguard its political interests.

It is a matter of common knowledge that when a religious minority feels seriously threatened, the machinery of its faith begins to wear out and its traditions begin to falter against those of the majority, it turns worriedly in upon itself and its members cling even more intensely to the faltering traditions. That something like this happened in the case of the Indian Muslim seems quite certain. Studies of religious change in some parts of the country where Muslims are found in substantial numbers show that the social and political developments in the country have precipitated a renewal of interest in religion among Muslims and given rise to revival movements.

These changes were not confined to the rural areas. My research among Muslims in Uttar Pradesh showed that similar changes were taking place in the urban areas also. In all large towns and cities in the state, the number of traditional Muslim schools increased (even though the population of Muslims was somewhat reduced after the Partition), and there was a tendency among the Muslims to send their children to those schools. Moreover, Muslim festivals and ceremonies were celebrated with greater pomp and show. Meanwhile, the death of Nehru whom the Muslims had considered a shield and protector and the erosion of the Congress umbrella encouraged a tendency towards political consolidation among them. The most direct evidence of this is to be found in the emergence of All-India Muslim Mahlis-e-Mushawarat as a fairly influential political force in North India. It shows that the Muslims were trying to consolidate themselves in Indian political life so as to be able to influence the political process directly. Whether consolidation on the basis of religious identity is detrimental to the secularisation of Indian society is a debatable question and cannot be discussed here. Beteille has argued that

> [t]he growth of 'communal consciousness' need not be viewed as necessarily an unhealthy or disruptive force. It may, on the contrary, be a precondition for the integration of a minority group into the wider body politic. For the measure of integration lies not so much in the passive acceptance of the status-quo as in the adoption of a body of common political rules through which divergent interests are organised and articulated. Thus what has been viewed by some as an increase in communal consciousness may be only a step forward in the politicization of Indian society. (1967, p. 115)

However, the revival of traditional Islamic culture and political consolidation of the Indian Muslim community had been seen by many as an expression of Muslim separatism and militancy.

Separatist or militant politics requires a special legal framework for its operation. It generally operates in a political framework wherein two or more parties can vie with one another for political favours from a superior arbiter. Until Independence, the presence of the British created a political system in which both Hindus and Muslims sought to appropriate as many advantages for themselves as they could bargain for. However, since Independence the political balance of power has undergone a significant change, and the politico-legal system does not provide an operative framework for separatist or militant politics: there is no superior arbiter, and Muslims in the country have had to reconcile themselves to the fact that they could no longer assert themselves without the risk of arousing the hostility of the majority community.

Muslims were not the only group which consolidated itself in order to influence the political process. Even a casual look at the political developments which have been taking place will show that political consolidation has taken place at almost all levels of Indian society, and social groups based on different kinds of communal loyalties have tried to use their combined strength to influence the political process. Political scientists have commented on the democratic reincarnation of caste for a long time. In addition, regional and linguistic groups all over India have been consolidating themselves to count for more in political life.

After the Emergency and the second phase of Indira Gandhi, a sea change came about in Indian society. The rise of the Bihar Movement under Jaiprakash Narayan greatly undermined the legitimacy of the State. It has been my argument that the state had been the main pillar for upholding secularism and countering the overreach of the communal forces both among the majority community and the minority communities. Jaiprakash Narayan's call for party-less democracy undermined the legitimacy of the state and allowed for interplay of the communal forces both among the Hindus and the minority communities in public life.

The second significant development was that the communal forces, especially Hindu forces, which had been discredited and held at bay until then acquired legitimacy and came to enjoy the possibility of spread of their activated more widely and at a level not seen earlier. This was particularly true with the RSS. As Nehru often stated, the RSS posed a great danger to the nation and could destabilise the polity. The RSS used the political climate created by the rise of the Bihar Movement and the so-called Janta experiment to spread in the far corners of the county to arouse Hindu consciousness at a level not witnessed earlier. One of the consequences of this was that the Congress lost its secular thrust and had to adopt a soft-Hindutva line.

In India, the state is committed to the ideology of secularism. The Indian Constitution guarantees equality of opportunity to everyone without the discriminations of race, religion and creed. Moreover, religious or other kinds of minorities have been provided with special safeguards to protect their interests. It is now increasingly becoming obvious, however, that these constitutional guarantees and protective measures have not worked well in practice because those responsible for controlling the machinery of the state have often allowed their attitudes

and values to influence the administrative and political process (see Gupta, 2017; Saberwal, 2000).

It is obvious that a distinction can be meaningfully drawn between secular society and secular state. Society is wider than the state in its operation. In a society where the outlook of the people is dominated by communalism, the state usually cannot function for a long time on secular lines because the prevailing social tendencies, sooner or later, find their expression in the politics of the State. On the other hand, when a society is organised on secular principles or respect for secularism as a social ideology is diffused throughout the society, the State is generally likely to function on secular lines.

In India, the State has remained committed to secularism but the widely diffused communalism and the highly-strung atmosphere of the county has made it impossible for the secular values and ideals to be realised. The champions of the ideology of secularism were conscious that the constitutional declaration of India as a secular state was not likely to be particularly meaningful unless the basic orientations of society were radically altered. In recent years, unfortunately, the programmes which could help create a secular society have been gradually discarded or slowed down. It has been commonly assumed that so long as the constitutional provisions are not altered, there is no cause to worry. In my opinion, the only guarantee for the constitutional provisions to be translated in practice is that a consolidated and continuous effort should be undertaken to create a society in which mutual respect and freedom of opportunity can be given actual shape. And it is to the task of creating such a society that the political leadership should address itself in the future. This is unlikely to happen so long as the present dispensation lasts.

Notes

1. This article is based on the M. N. Srinivas Memorial Lecture delivered in 42nd All India Sociological Conference held at Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam on 27–30 December 2016.
2. There has been an interesting debate in India whether secularism is an indigenous concept or whether it is a transplant. Most of the writers who have written on secularism in India have been inclined to take the view that secularism in India is a transplant and have critiqued it for this reason. Ashish Nandi (1995) and T. N. Madan (1987) are two salient champions of this view. Nandi does concede that there are two distinct meanings of secularism: one which is known to every Westerner and the other which he suggests is an Indianism. However, rather than pursuing this second meaning, he focuses his attention on secularism as an implant and attacks secularism in India on the grounds that it does not fit with the realities of Indian society (see Bhargava, 1994). It is my contention that secularism was adopted in India in the instrumental sense as something necessary to contain the monster of communalism.
3. Communalism was not about Hindu–Muslim conflict. It was and continues to be about the conflict between the dominant majority and the minorities or even about the conflict between sects among both the majority and minority communities, such the Shaivite and Vaishnavite conflict during the 13th century, Hindu–Sikh conflict and Shia–Sunni conflict. However, its most pronounced expression was the conflict between Hindus

and Muslims. It was this dimension of communalism that also engaged the attention of the nation before the Partition and continues to be the focus of attention in the contemporary period. It is for this reason that I deal with Hindu–Muslim dimension at length here.

4. It needs to be emphasised here that the distinction between those who accepted the absolute requirements of the faith and those whose behaviour was guided by the custom of the village rather than by the precise prescriptions of Islamic law was not absolute. This is best illustrated by the simultaneous operation of Islamic law and custom or usage. The rules of Islamic law notwithstanding, Muslims in many parts of India followed customs and usages which they shared with their Hindu counterparts. One judge noted in 1882 with respect to several Muslim communities in Gujarat that they were Muslims when they were alive but Hindu after death, referring to the fact that they followed the Hindu law in matters of inheritance and succession. It was only in the first half of the 20th century that both Muslims and other communities began to consolidate themselves as solidary groups that law came to enjoy priority over customs and usages.
5. Soon after taking over as the Prime Minister, Nehru adopted the practice of writing letters to the chief ministers, reminding them of the obligation of the government to maintain communal peace, and fair and equal treatment of the minorities. He laid particular emphasis on carefully monitoring and checking the activities of the religio-political organisations which had the potential to destroy communal peace. On one occasion, he wrote:

> I still think, as I have said on many occasions, that the most dangerous development today is that of communalism…. Some people have criticised me because of this and declared that there is no such thing as communalism in India. That is a thing of the past. Most of these critics happen to function in communal organizations today and themselves play an exceedingly narrow-minded and communal role. It is understandable that they do not find any fault with themselves and their own activities. They could only see the communalism of some other group, and not their own. (Khosla, 2014, p. 54)

On another occasion, Nehru wrote:

> Communal organizations are the clearest example of extreme narrowness of outlook, strutting about in the guise of nationalism. In the name of unity, they separate and destroy. In social terms they represent reaction of the worst type…. We have to contend against these forces. (Khosla, 2014, p. 67)

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