

Reflections on Secularism in India

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Abstract

Locating secularism as it has developed in the Indian context, we may distinguish between secularism as a *value* (of non-discrimination, acceptance of difference, mutual respect) and secularism as a *principle of state-craft*. I hold that we can continue to call ourselves secular in the first sense while mounting a critique of the practice of secularism by the Indian state.

To put very starkly what I see as the paradox in Indian politics, the question we must confront is: Can secularism survive the functioning of democracy? All too often, secularists find themselves depending on non-elected institutions - the Supreme Court, the Election Commission, the army - to protect secular values. Is it the case that the state in India is (nominally) secular while the people are communal? While the role played by institutions of the Gujarat government in the recent carnage in that state (February-March 2002) cannot be emphasized enough, we cannot underestimate the significance of the overwhelming participation of ordinary citizens in the targeted violence against Muslims. The most dramatic manifestation of this was the landslide victory of the same Hindu-Right wing government within eight months of the state-sponsored communal massacre of Muslims, in what was one of the most closely monitored and publicly scrutinized elections ever to be held in India.

Here then, is the paradox of our times - the emerging contradiction between “the people”, on whom democracy must depend, and the ethical ambitions of any kind of secular and democratic politics. When the 400-year old Babri Masjid (Mosque) was demolished by the Hindu Right in 1992 the shock in the secular ranks was matched by the confidence that this was only a matter of a short sharp battle. Over ten years down the line, with the Gujarat carnage behind us, we look back on that shock as well as that optimism with disbelief – why were we taken so off-guard? And why did we think it was such an easy battle to win?

These two questions lead us to reflect upon popular participation in politics, which one had assumed to be necessarily progressive, but is clearly not inevitably so. On the other hand, an equally difficult question is raised about the legitimacy of the state to act as the agent that will over-ride popular views and opinions/beliefs to bring about or protect secularism and democracy.

This discussion has a resonance in the current debates in France over the banning of the veil in French educational institutions. My presentation will reflect upon the issues that circulate around these questions.