The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism and Other Masks of Deculturation

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 grass-roots activists trying, in the language of Gustavo Esteva, to 'regenerate people's space'. Its aim is three-fold: (1) to systematize some of the 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 ethno-nationalisms, is not an 'extreme' form of Hinduism but a modern creed which seeks, on behalf of the global nation-state system, to retool 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 happen to be unacquainted with—or inhospitable to—the ideology of secularism.

I must make one qualification at the 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 repertory of cultures and religions of the region that could ensure religious

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 secularized—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. In such a society, people become anxiously aware of living in an increasingly desacralized world, and start searching for faiths to give meaning to their life and to retain the illusion of being part of a traditional community. If faiths are in decline, they begin to search for ideologies linked to faiths, in an effort to return to forms of a 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.

The enthusiasm of some states to aggressively impose secularism on the people sharpens these fears of deracination. Already sensitive about the erosion of faith, many citizens are particularly provoked by a secularizing agenda imposed from the top, for that agenda invariably carries with it in this era a touch of contempt for believers. Such secularism is:

- essentially a religious ideology, not based on any scientifically demonstrable propositions. ... It is the religion of a divinized human rationality of a particular kind, making critical rationality the final arbiter. This religious ideology is then imposed on our children in schools—from which all other religions are proscribed. ... This religion spread in the UK and the USA for two generations. Sunday schools were established. Catechisms of the new religion were published. With the rise of Nazism and the Second World War it fizzled out, and merged with modern liberalism, which is also the religion of the new civilization now sweeping Europe. ... Secularism creates communal conflict because it brutally attacks religious identity, while pretending to be tolerant of all religions.5

When Indian public life was overwhelmingly nonmodern, 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 secularization of Indian polity has gone far, the scope of secularism as a creed has declined. Signs of secularization are now everywhere; one does not have to make a case for it. Instead, there has grown the fear that secularization has 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

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versions of religion circulating in modern or semi-modern India owe their origins to this perception of the triumph of secularization 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 try to look religious, for the sake of their constituency, but they can pursue political power in a secularized polity only through secular politics, secular organization and secular planning. They increasingly resemble the jet-setting gurus and sadhus who, while criticizing 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 recognizing this in India is to affirm that 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. 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 characterize a section of urban, modernizing India. While other parties observe, even if by default, some limits to their instrumental use of religion, there seems to be no such restraint in the BJP or the Shiv Sena. The people these parties mobilize may sometimes be driven by piety — in the Shiv Sena's case even that is doubtful — but their leaders value that piety only as a part of their political weaponry.

Even religious riots or pogroms are secularized in South Asia. They are organized the way a rally or strike is organized 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 specialize 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 appear to believe, is for the hoi polloi, not for serious politicians playing the game of ethnic politics. 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, the 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 or, for that matter, in the whole of South Asia. The anti-Sikh riot in Delhi in 1984 provides dramatic evidence of such a consensus. Though over 3,000 Sikhs were killed in the three-day pogrom in India's capital, for over fifteen years its instigators and active participants 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 more or less the same fate awaits the self-declared instigators and perpetrators of the anti-Muslim violence in Bombay in January 1993 and in Gujarat in March 2002.

On the other hand, though by now human-rights activists and students of communal violence have supplied enough data to show that riots are organized, they have rarely pushed this point to its logical conclusion. Riots have to be organized because ordinary citizens — the 'illiterate', 'superstitious' South Asians, uncritically allegiant to their primordial identities — are not easy to arouse to participate in riots. To achieve that

6 The great European witch-hunt, it has frequently been 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 Other Essays (New York: Harper, 1967), pp. 90–192. See also Norman Cohn, Europe's Inner Demons (New York: Basic, 1975).

7 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, Spring 1986, 18, 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 Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, an MP of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the most powerful political front of the Hindu nationalist formations, was accused of harbouring criminals with terrorist connections and protecting them from the law, the criminals turned out to be associates of the notorious don of Bombay's underworld, Dawood Ibrahim. Likewise, when the former BJP President Lai Krishna Advani 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!
end, one needs 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. 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. 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. I have been hearing since my childhood literally hundreds of caustic accounts of the victims of the great Partition riots—about their suffering in 1946–7. In most cases, the experiences have made them bitterly anti-Muslim, anti-Sikh or anti-Hindu. Despite the bitterness, however, most accounts include 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 atomized individuals. Not only do riots take place more frequently in the cities, but also they are harder to organize 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 India's urban middle class attained a certain size and India's modernization reached a certain stage.

The first serious riot in the sacred city of Ayodhya took place on 6–7 December 1992. For seven years, despite all efforts to mobilize the locals for a riot, no riot had taken place. This time, it was organized 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 urbanized, semi-educated, partly westernized men and, less frequently, women. They broke more than a hundred places of worship of the Muslims in the city to celebrate the 'fall' of the unprotected Babri mosque.

In the final reckoning, the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992 was proof that the secularization 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, institutionalized secularism has failed. Communal riots have grown more than ten-fold and have now begun to spread outside the perimeters of modern and semi-modern India. 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 they 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. It was introduced 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 traditional systems of healing. 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 were destroyed, the inevitable happened. Most of those who converted to modern medicine found it prohibitively costly, more exclusive, often inhuman and alienating. They also found out that their proselytizers 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 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 ideas of inter-religious understanding and tolerance. These traditions had allowed the thousands—yes, literally thousands—of communities living in the subcontinent to co-survive in reasonable neighbourliness for centuries. The co-survival was not perfect; it was certainly not painless. Often, there

16 See Kumar Suresh Singh, People of India: An Introduction (New Delhi: The Anthropological Survey of India, 1992), Vol. 1, part of a voluminous and authoritative survey which almost incidentally shows that even in the 1990s, nearly 50 years after the Hindu-Muslim divide has become the most dangerous cleavage in the subcontinent, of the 2800 old communities identified as Hindu and Muslim, about 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 Appel-Marglin, 'On Pirs and Pandits', Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society, 1995 (91), pp. 17-26. Also, Shail Mayaram, 'Representing the Hindu-Muslim Civilizational Encounter: The Mahabharata of Community of Muslims', Jaipur: Institute of Development Studies, 1996; and 'Ethnic Co-Existence in Ajmer', Project on Culture and Identity, Colombo, Centre for Ethnic Studies and Delhi, Committee for Cultural Choices, 1995.
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 to even 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 wish to be reminded of them. I shall risk political incorrectness here and obstinately turn to these very questions.

First, once institutionalized as an official ideology, the concept of secularism helps identify and set up modernized 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 nevertheless ‘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 speak it have the sole right to determine what true democratic principles, governance and religious tolerance are.

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 values 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 westernizing, media-exposed, urban middle classes. They can neither 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. Such politics is already getting too secularized 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 actualize 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.

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18 For a concise, if non-committal coverage of this part of the story, see C.A. Bailey, 'The Pre-History of "Communism": Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1985, 19(2), pp. 177-203.

19 An apparently harmless but chilling example of this attitude is Sumanta Bannerji, 'Sangh Parivar and Democratic Rights', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1993, 28(34), pp. 1715-18.
or she, though given democratic rights, would not exercise the rights except within the political limits set by South Asia's westernizing elite, 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 contemporary ideas of political development. To complete his evocative metaphor, one must view secularism as a crucial defence of the ego.

Banuri's metaphor also supplied a clue to the fanaticism of many secularists in India, eager to fight the cause of secularism to the last Muslim, Christian, 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'. Though 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 internalize 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 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 to 'legitimately' 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 and the profane are interwoven. . . even in Islam there is no clear distinction drawn between the sacred and profane, or religious and secular. Jyoti Sahi, 'Response to Asghar Ali Engineer's "Imaging and Imagining Religious Symbolism in Mass Media"', Paper presented at the conference on Globalization of Mass Media: Consequences for Indian Cultural Values, United Theological College, Bangalore, 29 June-1 July 1998.


24 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 Discontent', in Kaushik Basu and Sanjay Subramanyam (ed.), Unraveling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India's Secular Identity (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.

25 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 a 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, October 1997.
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 did have something to contribute to Indian public life. That context presumed a low level of politicization, a personalized, impressioned quality in collective violence, its expression and execution. As ethnic and religious violence has become more impersonal, organized, rational and calculative, it has come to represent, to rework my own cliché, a pathology of rationality rather than that 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 has become chronically susceptible to being co-opted or hijacked by the politically ambitious. Simultaneously, 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 Indian who are believers), has thrown up the various readymade, packaged forms of faith for alienated South Asians—Banuri calls them Paki-Saxons—who populate urban, modernized South Asia. For that feared, invisible majority, on the other hand, the religious way of life continues to have an intrinsic legitimacy. 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 not by means created by a free insight grounded on reasons. If that religious way of life cannot find 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 yudha 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 organized around religion, to the genuine

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I should clarify here that, following the conventions of contemporary social psychology, I make no assumption regarding the truth or falsity of the consciousness that underlies faith or ideology: I am merely underscoring the psychological organizational principles of two distinct forms of consciousness, one of which includes a theory of transcendence, while 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 Ashis Nandy (ed.), Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity (Tokyo: UN University Press and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 1-16.


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, 1995, 18(1), pp. 1-25; see p. 4.

26 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 skullduggery, and fashionable, jet-setting gurus—both within India and among the decultured, uprooted, expatriate Indians and Indophiles in the West. Those given to this modern version of religion find all other spiritual experiences low-brow, corrupted and, thus, meaningless, uncontrollable and fearsome. That fear of religion of the uncontrollable kind (to which the majority of Indians of all faiths give their allegiance) is part of the fear of the vernacular, the democratic, and the plural. It is the fear that the majority of Indians are religious in a way that is not centrally controllable and does not constitute a 'proper' religion in contemporary times.

27 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.
secularists—the ones who deal in, vend or use as a political technology secularized, 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 historicization 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-synthesized 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 secularized 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.)

It is not much of an inheritance. 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 the key civilizational categories that distinguish this part of the world. It cannot be written off as ethically pointless or politically futile.

I have said that the huge majority of South Asians knows 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 and scheming politicians spoilt it all. 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 of 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 keep on harping on the codes of secularism, at the ground level, where survival is stake, the traditional codes of tolerance are the ones that matter, however moth-eaten they may otherwise look.

Finally, I should like to venture two formulations. 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 life styles, secularism can become the counterpoint of religious chauvinism, because both begin to contest for the allegiance of the decultured, the atomized 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 its 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, political institutions may even begin to protect the view that religion is essentially a drag on civil society. The primary function

30 For a random example, see the superbly executed television series made by Saeed Naqvi and shown on Doordarshan between 1992 and 1994.

31 Nandy et al., Creating a Nationality.
of secularism then becomes 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 politicization 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. To be implemented, the secularist project may then have to depend even more on the coercive power of the state. 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).

This should not be much of a shock to the Indian secularist. Secularism has always had a statist connection, even in the West, and most South Asian, especially Indian, secularists are confirmed statists. 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 westernized, 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. Modern India is the world's fourth largest country in itself.

This India does have sufficient exposure to the ideology of the state to be able to internalize 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 plenty 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 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 a billion Indians—ineducable, disorganized, squabbling and, above all, multiplying like bedbugs. 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 secularizing society throws up its own versions of religion, elitist 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.

Speaking pessimistically, 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, westernizing Indians to their uprooting, cultural and geographical. According to V.D. Savarkar, the openly agnostic, westernized nationalist who coined the term, Hindutva is not only the means of Hinduizing the polity but also of militarizing the effeminate, disorganized Hindu. 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 marginalize.33

32This 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
Though I have stressed earlier the pathology of rationality that characterizes 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 sub-category of it that 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, not on grounds of substance, but ‘style’. The ‘pseudo-secularists’ represent for them the ambition; the Muslims (in India, consisting mostly of communities of artisans getting proletarianized) the fear. Hence, the hatred for both.

It is as 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 principles of religious reform movements in the colonial period, Hindutva cannot but see Hinduism as inferior to the Semitic creeds—monolithic, well-organized, 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 which, if it succeeds, might end up making Nepal the world’s largest Hindu country. Hinduism will then survive not as a faith of the majority of Indians, but in pockets, cut off from the majority.


The line drawn between Hinduism and Hindutva is visible at the ground level, when communal violence spreads to or breaks out in rural India, where communities have not yet fully broken down and where the ideology of Hindutva faces resistance from every day Hindutva. 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 Pir’s and Pandits’; and Mayaram, ‘Representing the Hindu-Muslim Civilizational 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).

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 Southeast Asian Islam. The votaries of Hindutva will celebrate that death of Hinduism. For they have all along felt embarrassed and humiliated by Hinduism as it is. Hence, the pathetic, counterphobic 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.

I go back once again to the important question that many years ago H.R. Trevor-Roper raised 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? He reached the conclusion that, on the whole, the witch-craze did not grow out of the social and religious processes operating in modern Europe; it ‘grew by its own momentum’ from within modernizing Europe. The growth of Hindutva has depended heavily upon invented heresies that are organized 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 doubles. 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.

Speaking optimistically, Hindu nationalism has its territorial limits. It cannot spread easily beyond the boundaries of urban, westernizing India. Nor can it easily penetrate those parts of India where Hinduism is more resilient and Hindus are less prone to project on to Muslim the feared, unacceptable parts of their self. Hindutva cannot survive where

34 Trevor-Roper, The European Witch-Craze, pp. 115–27.
35 Ibid., p. 119.
36 For a while, they found it in M.S. Golwalkar’s book, We or Our Nationhood Defined (Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939). 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.
the citizens have not been massified and come 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 modernized 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 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 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 die a slightly unnatural death. Perhaps that euthanasia will be called politics.