

Struggle between hindu and secular nationalisms in india

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Struggle Between Hindu and Secular Nationalisms in India India holds a prominent place in the history of imperialism and decolonization, making recent events in this country of nearly one billion especially important to the current day citizen. India also faces problems associated with accommodating religion and diversity within a large federal republic, making their experience important for Americans concerned with these issues. India faces growing action of governing which invites the use of violence to achieve political objectives. In spite of India's size and importance, it is hard for an American to gain an understanding of the issues and conflicts which have set the stage for the most recent revival of Hindu nationalism. The central feature of this new reform in Indian federal politics is the clash between Hindu and secular nationalists. The overview of this situation comes from the perspective of an American born Indian student interested in Indian history and federal systems, so the observations are intended as suggestions designed to encourage more progressive work both in India and the United States. While the prominence of Hindu themes affects many levels of Indian government, this paper will focus only on India's central government on Hindu Nationalism. This conflict is crucial to understanding the current situation in India. Indian democracy and secularism face a menace from the forces of militant Hinduism which hope to turn India into a Hindu state. What is the nature of the present challenge to secularism in India? What do Hindu nationalists hope to achieve by making their government more assertively Hindu? One can begin to answer these questions by examining the large body of writing on secularism recently produced by Indians. Academics, lawyers, journalists, and political citizens have explored the many facets of

Indian secularism. These works provide clues to the nature of Hindu nationalism's appeal in contemporary Indian politics. These writings are interesting for what they reveal about India and its versions of nationalism. Sudipta Kaviraj, a scholar from Jawaharlal Nehru University, admits that, "among those who consider themselves secular individuals there is an intensifying sense of crisis". What are the criticisms of secularism which lead to the perception of a predicament? At first glance, the challenge appears minuscule, since all political parties, even the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), accept secularism in some form. As government official P. K. Nijhawan remarks, "the contending sides swear by secularism." However, secularism as it has come to be practiced by the Congress Party and the Indian government (hereafter referred to simply as secularism) comes under scrutiny for four general reasons: the unequal treatment of different religious groups, the implied hostility to religion, the poor translation of secularism from the West to India and the inability of secularism to create a national identity for India. That both sides attempt to appropriate the term secularism can lead to confusion; even the U. S. government had some problems in its effort to categorize the debate about secularism. In the opinion of the Hindu nationalist, the Congress commitment to secularism does not bring about the tolerance, the Sarva Dharma Sambhava to be expected of Hindu rulers. P. N. Joshi, President of the Rashtriya Hindu Manch, a militant Hindu organization, explains in his 150 page pamphlet, *Secularism in Action: A Fraud, A Conspiracy to Destroy Hinduism* that in reality, the picture of secularism in action in this country is neither beautiful nor presentable ... in fact, it is ugly and abominable and the produce even though so well packed in gorgeous

colours is foul and stinking'. ii The concept of secularism in this country, in fact, means to ignore the Hindus, to sell the rights and interests of the Hindus with a view to appeasing the Muslims, Sikhs and Christians for buying their votes. The BJP also attacks the government's application of secularism, referring to current practice as "pseudo-secularism." According to these critics, policies such as a separate personal law for Muslims and educational policies which grant special status to various groups within India are damaging to the secular credentials of India. A few academics see democratic secularism encouraging communalism. D. D. Joshi of the Indira Gandhi National Open University argues that "the religious minorities are nurtured and encouraged to maintain their separate identity as political pressure groups and then used as 'vote banks' to obtain legitimacy through the elections." Few political groups want to bear the label "communal," indicating that within India, secularism as a general goal remains a popular concept. Academics observe these developments in India; the politicians try to blame each other for the circumstances. The Challenge to Post-Colonial Indian Federalism English academic Anthony Smith's description of the problems faced by political leaders in ethnically diverse post-colonial societies applies loosely to India. Smith explains that the government, or those who aspire to govern, will attempt to develop a form of identity which conforms to the territorial unit of the state. Governments try to carry out this project through reinterpreting various ethnic attributes. With states organized along linguistic lines and a fragmented regional party system, the federal government has no monopoly on loyalty and interest. Most of those participating in the debate over secularism tend to favor greater

centralization. Issues of local control and regional autonomy are given greater scrutiny in another debate currently taking place in India--the debate over center-state relations within Indian federalism. In the goals for the central government, secularists and Hindu nationalists agree on the need for a unified India which accepts diversity, omits communal violence, and is prepared for the modern world. The following statement by R. L. Chaudhari is notable because by simply inserting the word 'Hinduism' for 'Secularism' one has a declaration strikingly similar to those made by Hindu nationalists. "Hinduism is of great significance in view of India's social, economic and political frame work". Secularism can meet the demands of a multi-religious, multi-culture, multi-caste and multi-lingual society like India. Secularism is essential for fostering ties between people of different communities in India. It seems to be the most effective cementing force in this context.. Secretary of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), perhaps the most influential Hindu nationalist organization, makes a similar point when discussing the identity of India, or Bharat. Then which is the 'nation' existing down all these countless centuries during all the ups and downs of its fortunes? And what is the supreme factor which has helped maintain its identity undisturbed all along? What is that unifying life-stream which, in spite of the vast variety of regions, climates, customs, languages, religious faiths, political and economic disparities, etc., has held and harmonized them all into one organic national entity? Even in the recent times what was that urge which inspired our freedom fighters all over the country to sacrifice themselves at the altar of nation's freedom, born though they were in distant parts of the country? For Seshadri, it is a " life-stream" born out of " the deeply ingrained

love and adoration for the Motherland--Bharat" which accounts for this. By quickening this life-stream, the Hindu can seriously set about " revitalizing our natural oneness and neutralising the forces of national disruption."

Indian author Jalalul Haq in his Nation and Nation-Worship in India argues that the traditions of Hindu and Secular nationalism have much in common in that both, in a sense, deify the nation. In an analysis comparing Discovery of India by Jawaharlal Nehru and Hindutva by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Haq writes " although considered to be representing two opposite poles of national thinking, the two writers are found to have more things in common with each other than they could individually have with any other thinker or writer among their contemporaries." In spite of similar goals, the two different ideologies conflict with each other. It is in this fourth challenge to secularism in India that one can most easily talk about two defined camps: secular nationalism and Hindu nationalism. These camps do not debate so much as they argue about national symbols and blame each other for the worst of India's problems. While Hindu nationalism was not the organizing principle for Nehru's India, Hindu symbols were used freely by the independence movement, much to the chagrin of many Muslims. Hinduism has been used as an effective political tool by such leaders as B. G. Tilak and Mohandas Gandhi. Most influential in the latest surge in Hindu nationalism has been the RSS, founded in 1925 to develop the cultural attributes needed to make India a strong nation. With their focus on discipline and the creation of small, trained, and devoted cadres, the RSS has emerged as a potent force in the Indian political culture. With the success of cultural nationalism in India, one can already see a shift in Indian historiography away from a

stress on the triumph of the Indian National Congress and Nehru. The cultural content of Indian nationalism preoccupies Hindu nationalists. H. V. Seshadri, commenting on Dr. Hedgewar, founder of the RSS, argues for a cultural purpose of independence: " the prophets and pioneers of our freedom movement had conceived of political freedom not as an end in itself but as an opportunity of the nation to flower forth with its pristine genius in all its facets." Seshadri responds negatively to explanations of India which do not recognize its underlying unity. The reference in the Constitution to India as a " Union of States" receives criticism because this " means our country is just a confederation of several political units. And the only binding links between them are common political rights and economic interests." Seshadri exclaims, " it is evident that such materialistic factors can hardly unite the people at heart." Hindu nationalists emphasize that Hinduism is not a religion in the sense of Islam or Christianity, but merely refers to the culture of the people who live in India. P. K. Nijhawan observes that formerly the Hindu " never projected himself to be the champion of any particular religion." Seshadri asserts that "'Hindu' is not the name of a religious faith like the 'Muslim' or the 'Christian.' It denotes the national way of life here." Hindu nationalists portray Hindus as a persecuted majority. Seshadri declares that " this is the only country in the whole world where the so-called minorities enjoy more rights than the majority itself! And the majority is required to agitate for equal rights!" To further insult the Hindu, " the recipients of this special honour under freedom are those who sided with the British and cut up our country." In another article, Seshadri explains that " our present day anti-Hindu slant of secularism has not only aggravated social tensions and

discriminations and fostered anti-national divisiveness but deprived our nation of its sublime cultural ethos that is capable of lighting up a new and purposeful vision of statecraft for the entire world." The 1947 partition of India remains one of the gravest sins attributed to the secular nationalists. Jan Sangh, a precursor of the BJP, consistently refers to the political boundaries of the country as "truncated India." According to Madhok, it is Gandhi and Nehru who "paraded their perverted communalism as secularism" who are most to blame for partition. Hindu nationalists claim the religious diversity and tolerance of India are only safe in a Hindu state. Madhok asserts that "religious freedom, tolerance, and democracy will survive in India only so long as it remains Hindu." Those resisting the greater assertiveness of the Hindu identity of India, according to T. R. S. Sharma, professor of English at Mysore University, "scarcely realize that at the present historical juncture no democratic and truly secular polity in India can survive without the support and strength provided by a majority." Those who claim that a Hindu Rashtra, or Hindu state, would be a theocracy exacerbating communal tensions do not understand the nature of Hindu statecraft. As C. P. Bhishkar, an RSS member, points out in his analysis of the concept of the Rashtra as understood by Deendayal Upadhyaya, leader of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh in the 1950s and 1960s, "Hindus have never supported the idea of a sectarian state.... No king used his kingly power to propagate any particular religion. The Kings were expected to obey only one dharma, viz. Raja-Dharma." Great confusion results "from the wrong belief that the two terms *dharma* and religion are synonymous." The secular nationalists are the heirs to the tradition of the Indian National Congress and

Nehru's vision of a secular socialist society. They have the prestige associated with maintaining power but can be blamed for current problems. Secularism, they claim, allows for diversity within India. Harvard professor Amartya Sen, in his recent Nehru Lecture at Cambridge University, gave an argument for secularism resembling the appeal of Hindu nationalists. But secularism is, in fact, a part of a more comprehensive idea--that of India as an integrally pluralist country, made up of different religious beliefs, distinct language groups, divergent social practices. Secularism is one aspect--a very important one--of the recognition of that larger idea of heterogeneous identity. I shall argue that the sectarian forces that seek to demolish Indian secularism will have to deal ... with India's regional, social, and cultural diversity. Given the evident diversity in India and the need to act as a modern state, secular nationalism is often presented as the only alternative. Asghar Ali Engineer, Director of the Institute of Islamic Studies in Bombay, asserts that " Secularism has been our ideal since the day Indian National Congress was founded. It could not have been otherwise." R. L. Chaudhari maintains that " it is revealed from the experiences of many states in the world that religion cannot be the basis of the State in modern times. Therefore, there is no alternative to secularism." Mahip Singh, Reader in Hindi at the University of Delhi, claims that " the biggest guarantee of the unity and integrity of this country is to recognize its plurality and diversity. Secularism is the only answer to the problems created by religio-cultural pluralism and caste system in this country." Emil D'Cruz, in Indian Secularism: A Fragile Myth, a book written for the Indian Social Institute, provides a view of secularism which recognizes its power as a quasi-religious

symbol. One can ask whether the constitutional ideal of a secular state serves as a quasi-religious myth to remind the leaders of the country of that vision of a pluralistic society which our founding fathers had at the time of independence, and to guide them in making that vision a reality. At the same time, the myth serves to reassure all religious communities, but especially the minorities, that the country is committed to respecting their religious freedom. D'Cruz recognizes that secularism is under threat, in large part because of " the divergent expectations that the majority and minority communities have regarding the role of the state toward religion." The forces of secularism do seem on the defensive. The strength of Nehru's vision for an Indian state based on socialism, secularism, non-alignment, democracy, and nationalism has eroded with the collapse of socialism as a respectable ideology and the growing irrelevance of non-alignment in the post-Cold War world. Girilal Jain, former Chief Editor of the Times of India, points out that for Nehru " the concept of secular nationalism more or less divorced from the country's cultural heritage could not have been a viable proposition if it was not guided by the promise of a brave new socialist world of equality." Singhvi, India's High Commissioner in the United Kingdom, agrees, arguing that the Indian mainstream only tolerated Nehru's rationalism and his " supposedly western brand of secularism." Nehru's perspective is " traceable to his western moorings and the hold and spell of the Soviet Union on his mind--a great leader's two errors of judgment." The reinterpretation of Nehru's legacy casts a shadow over many of the writings on secularism. Many secular nationalists, then, recognize the need for reforming their appeal. Sudipta Kaviraj thinks the government has failed to inject secular

nationalism with elements to appeal to the masses. " The greatest default of the bourgeois ruling elite in India has been its inability to see the need for continuing the cultural construction of the nation." This project has not been carried out because " nationalist forces underestimated and misunderstood their own historic tasks precisely because they started seriously believing their own political rhetoric." The historiography emerging from nationalism " conveyed a false sense of something like modern secularism having been achieved in the precolonial past, disrupted only by the evil designs of the colonial administration." As the concerns of maintaining power moved to the forefront, " the ideology of nationalism gradually converted itself from an ideology of the people into an ideology of the state, or to put it more cynically, into a Central subject." In order to respond to the challenge of Hindu nationalism, some secular nationalists desire a greater awareness of and sensitivity to religion. Asghar Ali Engineer insists that " one must understand in all earnestness the psyche of Indian people and their religio-cultural traditions. It would not do to merely eulogize western concept of secularism. ... such a position, however desirable for some, would alienate us from the masses." Sudhir Chandra of the Centre for Social Studies, South Gujarat University, reflects that " however comforting we may find it morally, may be even intellectually, as supporters of secular democratic polity we should be shaken out of our cynical devaluation of much that tradition denotes." Chandra admits that " I find myself employing the language of fear and condemnation when it comes to my own contemporaries, a language that is hardly conducive to understanding." Sudipta Kaviraj agrees with this assessment, arguing that " if we are really interested in engaging it [religious

thinking], and not enjoying the thrill of admiring our own secularism, this contestation has to be done on a discursive terrain on which religion exists." In considering the case of Hindu and secular nationalism in India, the theoretical approaches of both Smith and Anderson encounter difficulty. The Indian case merits three additional observations in terms of Smith's model. First, the Hindu nationalist ideology involves an identity which extends beyond the territorial boundaries of present day India. In India, the concept of a broader country has a basis in fact, especially due to the recent occurrence of partition. Unlike other post-World War II partitions, however, no one seems to anticipate any form of impending reunion. Second, the effort to develop an identity takes place within a vibrant federal polity, in which competition for resources, patronage, and control over government occurs on a more complicated playing field than that described in Smith's theoretical work. Both ideologies, in large part, support policies which enhance the power of the federal government. Finally, there are two opposing versions of a national identity in competition. Such a situation may actually facilitate the process of building a stable nation, with the rivalry helping to clarify the issues involved and force self-definition. Hindu nationalists and secular nationalists are in some ways co-conspirators in the effort to secure loyalty to the central government. While the need to create an identity corresponding to national boundaries does not explain events in India, neither does Benedict Anderson's focus on the "Russifying," or centralizing, impact of the British Empire and the material impact of a capitalist mass culture. This approach, while illuminating some aspects of Indian politics, cannot adequately explain the cohesive nature of an India

constructed from a variety of communities. Indeed, many of these communities were able to grow, prosper and develop their "imagination" under British rule. What can account for India's unity in diversity? One important element may well be the experience and tradition accumulated during India's time within the British Empire. With the collapse of efforts to maintain federal models in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and the fraying of the European Community, the overwhelming majority of working federal models have emerged from the British Empire. India may well have attained unity, then, for reasons similar to those that allowed the thirteen American colonies to create out of many one following their independence from Britain.

Hostile Elements of Hindu Nationalism

Even though the theory of a Hindu state presents a tolerant polity, many still feel threatened by Hindu nationalism. P. K. Nijhawan, a Hindu nationalist, seems puzzled that "if all paths of worship are sacred for the Hindus, including that of the Muslims or the Christians or the Sikhs, then where is the problem in not calling themselves as Hindus which should mean the citizen of Hindustan only?" Given such an outlook, why does Hindu nationalism threaten? The major weakness for Hindu nationalists is that, although they profess to unify India, they deal in symbols with great potential to divide and their rhetoric harbors a thinly veiled hostility toward Muslims. Although the BJP has retreated somewhat from the effort to install Hindi as the unifying national language, Hindu nationalism retains a Hindi and especially Sanskritic bias. Balraj Madhok argues that "India has a distinct culture which is common to all people of India. Being a vast country it has a number of developed languages with Sanskrit as the common link between them." Such a

formulation cannot easily appeal to the linguistically distinct Dravidian south. Aryan racism also enters the Hindu nationalist appeal. Madhok points out that " the fact remains that the Aryan race spirit has pervaded the various racial and ethnic elements that constitute the Indian or Hindu nation, just as the Anglo-Sexan racial and Cultural characteristics have pervaded the life of people of England...." V. T. Rajshekar, in a political pamphlet, disputes such a view: " Singing Bhajans, offering kumkum, arati, adopting names of Hindu gods, using Sanskrit expressions, building churches resembling temples--are not Indianising. They are Aryan symbols. And Aryans are not Indian. They are foreigners." In spite of its desire to speak for all India, Hindu nationalism does not. Hindu nationalism hardly conceals its contempt for Islam and Muslims. Balraj Madhok refers often to the " Muslim mind" and speaks with some regret that the " re-incorporation of Muslims" into " Hindu Society" stopped with British protection of Muslims. On the Muslims who are in India, " they are the progeny of the weakminded Hindus who could not stand up to the military, political and economic pressures of Muslim rulers and became Muslim to save their lives and properties." In this view, Muslims share the blame for partition. Seshadri asserts that " it was the Muslims remaining in Bharat who had spearheaded the agitation for Pakistan and had voted for partition." Seshadri goes so far as to argue that " the Muslims, in fact, should have been promptly asked to pack up and leave for the Islamic dreamland. But our Hindu leaders, in all their generosity, decided otherwise." This generosity was misplaced. Now, Seshadri assures somewhat ominously, the Hindu " has decided to mend matters." One wonders why Hindu nationalists wonder why their appeal engenders concern in some parts of India. Hindu

nationalism also faces a threat from those forces of militant Hinduism not willing to make the compromises necessary to participate in the political system. These Hindu revivalists form a dedicated core of support for many Hindu positions, but they are unlikely to display the tolerance normally associated with Hinduism. Some revivalists are critical of the BJP, claiming it impedes the rise of Hinduism by embracing "positive" secularism and the vote getting process, which forces compromise. P. N. Joshi explains, "to the Hindus, BJP remains a secular party and in the secular circles, BJP remains a communal party." As events in Ayodhya and Bombay show, it may not be easy to curb communal violence when some local groups see the imposition of a Hindu state as a license for brutality. Although this strand of cruel fundamentalism can be found in Hindu nationalism, one risks confusion by focusing on this aspect as the central element in the Hindu appeal. While it makes good press to talk of a Hindu fundamentalism analogous to Muslim fundamentalism, as a dynamic and open federal polity India is much more complicated. Even if the Hindu nationalists take power there are reasons not to anticipate disaster. Indeed, such a development could stabilize the situation. M. M. Sankhder, Professor of Political Science at the University of Delhi, points out that "power breeds responsibility and brings the ruling party face to face with the realities of internal power equations within the parliamentary and federal arenas of government." Sankhder also observes that "governmental power ... strengthens the arms of a parliamentary/legislative party in dealing with its mass membership organization and allied mass movements in the civil society." The challenge to secularism consists of a variety of distinct criticisms, which implies that a

group which gains power on an anti-secular platform will find fashioning a ruling coalition for positive action difficult at best. At the heart of the Hindu nationalist agenda is an effort to refashion the Indian government and the federal system into a more unified structure bolstered by sentiments of nationalism. While chauvinistic and even violent elements are unleashed, many Hindu nationalists seem to accept constitutionalism and tolerance. India does not, as some observers would have it, sit on the verge of fascism along the lines of Nazi Germany or an Islamic-like Hindu state. Compromise and moderation are required by any group seeking power at the center. India's diversity becomes its bulwark against extremism. Implications for the Student of India The study of the current debate about secularism in India reveals the shortcomings of many models commonly used by Americans to explain Indian history and society. While there is probably a large degree of Indian exceptionalism which makes India comprehensible only in its own terms, two strategies may help enrich the understanding of India. First, the factional nature of Indian politics, as emphasized in the current debate and explained by academics like Atul Kohli, Paul Brass and B. R. Tomlinson, reminds this historian more of the situation faced by the American colonies in their effort to achieve a unified central government following independence from Britain than of the situation in most "third world" countries. While not denying the many important differences between India and the United States, an American historian cannot help but be reminded of James Madison's observations in The Federalist Number 10 regarding factions in a large scale federal republic when analyzing the situation in India. Rather than comparing India to fascist Europe, the Soviet Union, or the

" third world", comparisons to the United States may prove more fruitful. Second, excessive use of historical analogy from other periods in time runs the risk of incorporating outmoded assumptions regarding development stages so prominent in modernization theory. India's current problems relate directly to developments in this phase of world history; one could go so far to say that India's problems foreshadow those the United States is likely to face when the resources used to lubricate the machinery of a diverse federation can no longer be borrowed. Furthermore, those familiar with the constitutional debate over the separation of church and state in the United States and Stephen Carter's recent book *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* understand that questions regarding religion and politics are by no means confined to the so-called " developing" world. Rather than grappling with issues already solved by Western countries, India faces dilemmas associated with the modern state. Understanding India's experience in confronting these problems may provide unanticipated insights into problems faced by federal government in the United States.