Indian Secularism in Practice*

— *Paul R. Brass*

The bulk of writing on the question of secularism in contemporary India has focused on an issue that has its origin in Western civilization, history and religion, namely, the relationship between the state and religion, and specifically concerning the establishment or not of a state religion or the official recognition of a multiplicity of religions. Most of these writings also reach the hardly surprising conclusion, given the focus, that the beliefs and practices of Western civilization, history, religion and state policy towards religion are either not relevant to the religions, religious practices, and religious beliefs of the peoples of the subcontinent, or else require considerable modifications to make them so. The battle is often joined between those who argue for their relevance and deny that their non-indigenous origins pose insurmountable obstacles and those who take the opposite position.[1] In this essay, I will take a different view of the matter, arguing that the political issues and political practices that involve the question of secularism in India have a different focus and meaning altogether from the issues and practices that dominate Western societies and polities.

The first point to note is that, in practice, as opposed to academic discussion of the matter, the issue of state and religion is not central in Indian political discourse. The issue exists, of course, in the English-language newspapers, in the party platforms of the political parties, and in judicial decisions where the emblematic subject matter concerns whether or not India should at last frame a uniform civil code applicable to all religious groups or should retain the separate so-called personal laws of different communities. In fact, this issue has been reduced to the question of whether or not Muslims in India should be allowed to retain their own personal laws, that is, laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, alimony to a divorced wife, and inheritance especially. And this reduction is of the utmost importance in understanding what lies behind this discussion, which is not primarily an abstract issue of state policy towards religion, but concerns more the definition of the Indian nation, the meaning of citizenship, and the relations between the two largest bodies of religious believers in the country, Hindus and Muslims. Since the relationship between these two communities, as they are called, has too often involved separatism, antagonism and extreme violence in

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the form of riots, pogroms, massacres, and even genocidal attacks, the political arguments concerning secularism in India revolve especially around this matter of Hindu-Muslim relations. Secularism, in the political discourse of the country, therefore, is defined by its opposite, which does not refer to state policy on separation of state and religion, but to popular animosities and their consequences, namely, separatism, defined in social and political terms. Secularism is the opposite of separatism; secularism means national unity. It is more common, however, to frame the opposition as one between secularism and communalism, but that is a polemical framing rather than an analytical one, as I will show.[2]

Indian Secularism and Universal Values

What then does secularism actually mean to those who are actively involved in politics, either in political practice or political commentary in India? For such people, *secularism means first of all universal values* applicable to persons of all faiths or none, but it does not refer to all values. It does not refer to whether or not one has one wife or four, whether one has faith in a higher being or not. Rather, it refers to personal behaviour in everyday life in one's relationships to, and with, others, particularly to and with others with different religious beliefs and practices or none. Such values are often unspoken, matter of fact, not proclaimed loudly. Others are so fundamental that, even those who act differently, cannot argue against them: the right to life, to safety, to work, to practise one's religion or not, and so forth. But, what is essential to understand in the Indian context is that all these fundamental values and practices are, in fact, denied to many, if not most people in everyday life in the country through caste discrimination, police misbehaviour and brutality, and the consequences of extreme and grinding poverty. Moreover, they are often denied to whole categories of people, including caste and religious groups, particularly Muslims in post-Independence India.

Indeed, Muslim political spokesmen have, more or less continuously over the past century, complained about discrimination against them in public employment, language use, and safety during communal riots. It should be noted, however, that before Independence, under British rule, Muslims were often favoured in most of these respects and that their demands then were quite inflated. Nor are all their grievances now necessarily to be taken at face value. But it is a contemporary fact in India that Muslims are discriminated against in most parts of the country in public employment, that their favoured language/script, Urdu, has been nearly eliminated from public instruction in north India, and that they have suffered grievously in countless communal riots in which they have been attacked and killed by state police forces.

It is here that the second meaning of secularism in India applies. *Secularism means—and some of this is written into the constitution of the country—that all religious and cultural groups in India are entitled to practise their faith, to be instructed through the medium of their mother tongue, and to be protected, not attacked without cause by the police.* So, secularists and their political organizations respect the religious beliefs of the other; exchange greetings with each other during their respective religious holidays and festivals;[3] accept a multiplicity of languages for various uses in the country or in particular parts of the country; abhor communal riots, condemn them openly, and, in recent years, form public interest groups to investigate them and expose those who have fomented them.

With regard to the question of Hindu-Muslim riots in particular, secularists do not blame either Hindus or Muslims as communities for riots. Rather, they blame the politicians, Hindu and Muslim, where they find either or both responsible, and such non-communal factors as economic competition. Their analyses may be, and sometimes are, faulty, but the stance is not. Moreover, the stance is entirely different from that of people and organizations characterized as "communal" in India. Hindu communal groups blame Muslims as a community, or large parts of the Muslim community, after every riot, no matter whether most or even all the victims are Muslims. Most Muslim political leaders do not blame the Hindu community as a whole. They specifically blame particular political parties, especially militant Hindu groups, and the police. But, some of their self-proclaimed leaders do blame the Hindu community as a whole. Others, while proclaiming themselves as secularists, demanding only equal rights for members of their community, are themselves communalists, who use the grievances of their community as a basis for inflating their own political importance, often to the detriment of their community.

Indian Secularism: Nationalism and History

Secularists, therefore, are universalists in the terms just described, though many masquerade as secularists, who are not in practice. *But Indian secularists are also nationalists.* Their values are universal, but their focus, of course, is on the practice in their own country. However, it is not merely a question of practices, but of identity, citizenship, nationality and history. *Secularists are nationalists who believe and teach that there is an Indian history that encompasses all the peoples of the subcontinent.* They, therefore, reject the common division of Indian history, before the imposition of British rule, into Hindu and Muslim periods. Many also reject any idea, of course, that the histories of the peoples of the different regions of the country are distinct from that of the country as a whole, which,

they assert, has always striven for unity. Further, secularists stress the indigenous origin of the vast majority of the Muslim population of the country.

Sophisticated Hindu nationalists will not necessarily reject these points of view of the secularists, but most militant Hindus have a different view. They do consider that there was a long period of Muslim domination of the subcontinent, in which Hindus were discriminated against, their religious practices derided, and their temples destroyed and replaced by mosques. Moreover, this Muslim period followed after a "golden age" of Hindu history, which was both national and regional in scope, but was all part of a grand, overarching Hindu civilization. They see Islam as a religion of conquerors, who came from Persia and the Middle East, and forcibly converted poor and low caste peoples.[4] These peoples, even when they are acknowledged as of indigenous origin, are nowadays characterized as belonging to non-Indic religions. So, whatever their actual descent, they do not now belong to Indian, that is to say, Hindu civilization.

In a nutshell, therefore, secular versions of Indian history include Muslims and do not separate the Muslim period from the rest of Indian history as a black period of destruction and devastations. On the other side, Hindu nationalists either exclude Muslims as legitimate participants in the historical making of India or include them only grudgingly.

Composite Nationalism and Hindu Nationalism

There are, however, multiple points of contact between the secular and Hindu nationalist points of view. For example, some Hindu nationalists will nod their heads in agreement that Muslim art, architecture, literature, and poetry are part of the glories of Indian civilization. But, the points of contact sometimes amount to a merger. For, the purpose of any survey, reconstruction, or fabrication of Indian history is to justify several claims: first, that Indian history has displayed a striving for unity of the subcontinent and its peoples that has persisted through time; second, that unity must never again be compromised; third, that unity is essential to achieve India's rightful place in the world as a great power; fourth, that any threat to that unity must be squashed by the utmost force, should any group be recalcitrant enough to resist. In all these respects, secular and Hindu nationalists agree, as they do on the great goal that inspires it, namely, that of transforming India into a great, modern state.

What does this mean in practice? It means that secular and Hindu nationalists alike agree that no compromise is possible not only with regard to separatist and secessionist demands based upon

religion, but to the establishment of any units of the country demarcated from the rest by religion. This prohibition applies not only to Muslims in Kashmir, but to Sikhs in the Punjab. It applies also in the northeastern region of the country where the tribal secessionist movements that have been raging for 50 years include many groups long ago converted to Christianity.

Once such demands are excluded, however, secular and Hindu nationalists diverge on the matter of the nature of the Indian nation. As long as religious or any other culturally defined groups do not threaten the unity of India, secular nationalists would, as previously noted, allow all such groups maximum freedom to practise their religions and promote their regional languages and mother tongues. *Secular nationalists stand for composite nationalism*, as it was called during the nationalist movement itself. India was to be, and to remain, a nation composed of many different religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups united primarily in their identification with the past, present and future of India as a whole as a great new/old nation in a world of nations. Diversity was, and is, to be celebrated. Militant Hindu nationalists have a different view here, namely, that whatever the cultural differences among the various groups in the country, they must be united in the same way as they imagine the great nations of the West to be united, that is, as homogenized citizens acknowledging a common history, a common civil identity and a common civil law.

These Hindu nationalists claim that their conception constitutes true secularism, that of the so-called secularists being "pseudo-secularism." However, the insincerity of their claim is revealed by their refusal to accept any other designation for the citizens of the country except "Hindu." They do not prefer the term Indian, which they consider a foreign word for their country, but derive the very name of the country and most everything else cultural about it from the Hindu epics and other Hindu historical and cultural materials. The militant Hindu name for the country, for example, is Bharat, derived from the name of the hero of the *Mahabharata*, and the name of the militant Hindu party is the *Bharatiya Janata Party*, which would translate literally in English as the *Bharat*ian People's Party.

But there are contradictions in the stances of the secular nationalists as well. The great party that led the nationalist movement and governed the country as its dominant party for four decades after Independence, the Indian National Congress, was the primary secular force in the country during that period, however imperfectly it practised secularism. But there was one imperfection that struck at the heart of its secular nationalist claims, namely, that it did not truly see India as a composite nation. On the contrary, it saw the country as a frangible

mosaic, whose unity had to be constantly protected against fissiparous forces. Moreover, they saw the greatest threat to the unity of the country as the divide between Hindu and Muslim communal forces; and they saw the role of the Congress as maintaining a fragile peace between the two sets of forces. Consistently with their secularism, however, Congress leaders did not say that the Hindu and Muslim communities as such were divided, but that they were led astray by communal Hindu and Muslim organizations. So, on occasion, the Congress imposed bans on the functioning of these organizations or threatened to do so, always with a supposed even hand. That is, whenever militant Hindu organizations fomented trouble that endangered the peace, Congress leaders threatened to impose bans on both Hindu and Muslim organizations considered to be communal.

So, secularism, again, is not primarily an issue of the state and religion or the state versus religion, but of nationalism – nationalism of a particular type, called composite nationalism. But this composite nationalism has another term, namely, the state, defined not as secular or religious, but as strong and centralized. The state that secular nationalists want is a strong state. And here comes the final irony: this strong state will remain strong by recognizing that there are two major communities in India, as well as some minor ones, whose separate existence must be recognized as well as their right to maintain separate cultural and religious and legal institutions. Duly recognized by the state, all these separate communities will be loyal to the Indian state. So, entirely contrary to one of the dominant views in the secularism-religion debate in India, the predominant *secular* view in India is that the religious practices, personal and family laws if so desired by a particular community, and institutions of the separate communities must all be recognized. The more extreme view, which is held by the militant Hindus, is that this is pseudo-secularism: there must be only one united nation, not composite, but one unity of citizens, all to be called Hindus, wherein the sophistry of their argument is exposed.

Secularism and Party Politics

***There is a further element, just touched on above, in the secular/communal contours that frame Indian political discourse and practice, namely, the existence of political parties that describe themselves,* and are perceived by others, especially by the minorities, and most especially by the Muslims, *as secular political parties*. Several parties—as well as individual politicians—are identified in India by the label secular, and sometimes by the phrase, "left and secular," though some agrarian-based parties of the center and the right have also been considered secular. One can identify a spectrum of these**

parties in Indian politics, but their names do not provide an infallible guide to their stance. Few parties actually have had the term secular in their titles. However, in the aftermath of the split in the Janata Party—which defeated the Congress in the 1977 elections, formed the first non-Congress government in post-Independence India, and then broke apart in 1979 on the issue of RSS influence in the party—three of the splinter parties adopted that distinguishing label in their titles, all claiming to be the true Janata Party and all aiming to distinguish themselves from the Bharatiya Janata Party.[5] Normally, however, most secular parties carry the words, "Socialist" or "People" somewhere in their title (such as Samyukta Socialist Party [United Socialist Party], or Lok Dal [People's Party], and nowadays often carry the name, Janata (as in Janata Dal [People's Party]). But, this is not a foolproof method of identification, for the name of the militant Hindu party is the Bharatiya Janata Party, as noted above. The use of the term Bharatiya instead of Indian also does not necessarily indicate a party's communal character.[6] For example, one of the secular agrarian parties also used that designation in its title, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal, which translates as Indian Revolutionary Party. Here, however, the giveaway that the party is secular comes in the second term, Kranti, which means revolutionary.[7] Similarly, the Communist Party of India, in Hindi becomes the Bharatiya Communist Party, but the term Communist leaves no doubt that it perceives itself, and will be perceived by others, as secular. But a less fallible marker than a party's name is whether or not certain issues are mentioned as important by party members. Secular parties and politicians do not talk about the desirability of a uniform civil code.[8]

What's in a Name? Secularism and Communalism

This matter of naming also relates to political persons. Three sets of opposite terms stand as markers in political discourse on the subject of secularism and communalism in India. That names mean something is indicated by how far these terms are accepted in political discourse. There is a double triad of terms, if the term double triad itself is not an oxymoron! On the one side, the three terms are secular, progressive, communist; on the other side, the terms are conservative, traditional, communalist. Secular and progressive are almost universally acceptable favourable designations in Indian politics—that is to say, considered favourable by those who identify themselves as such—and the two terms go together. Communist, while not as pejorative a term as in the West, is a term of abuse from the other side when referring to so-called secular, progressive elements. Insofar as the other side is concerned, conservative and traditional are acceptable terms, but communalist is not. Indeed, and this is important, the term,

communalist is accepted by nobody in India as a designator of himself/herself or for his/her party.

On the contrary, as already mentioned, most militant Hindus insist that they are true secularists in contrast to the pseudo-secularists. But this is a kind of game of words and naming. Militant Hindu activists distinguish themselves from other Hindu politicians. They see themselves as "real Hindu workers" in contrast to "secular socialist Hindus." Such militant Hindus may even consider the term, secular, as pejorative, that is, they do not necessarily see themselves as "true secularists," as opposed to the pseudo variety, but see themselves as true Hindus, which is what really matters to them. The following excerpt from one of my interviews with an RSS man in Aligarh reflects that point of view and illustrates as well other points that I have already mentioned.

> RESPONDENT: And these secular socialist Hindus are more dangerous than Muslims, so far [as] we Hindus are concerned. They are more dangerous. We cannot believe them. We cannot [accept] them as our leaders. They are our hidden enemies. They will never tell you the truth. They will abuse Hindus. They will defame Hindus. ... And this is the most unfortunate situation, that whenever outsiders or foreigners come to this country and they try to meet citizens of Aligarh through this university [Aligarh Muslim University], the university does not give them a chance to meet the real persons or the nationalists of the town. I'm surprised that you are sitting in the office of the RSS and talking to those people who believe that the country is facing perhaps a greater danger than they faced in 1946 and '47. They are openly calling their community for *jihad*. And nobody is taking action.[9]

It should here be noted that there is a division within the Muslim community as well concerning secular values and the place of Muslims and their institutions in an Indian secular state. Most of the self-proclaimed leaders of the Muslim community, whether they live a secular or deeply religious life, are communally oriented, if not communalists. Their focus is on the grievances of Muslims as a community and on the preservation of specifically Muslim institutions and their Islamic cultural character. However, there has also been a small minority of Muslim leaders, who attack the communal elements in their own community. These Muslims—many of whom, by the way, are Shi'as, which raises an entirely different matter—were, in the first decades after Independence, considered secular and progressive. Most were on the Left, including especially Muslim Communists and other Marxists. What they attacked specifically was what they characterized

as minorityism, alleged theocratic tendencies among Muslim clerics, and obscurantism, that is, unmodern thinking. There are a few others nowadays, including one or two who have become affiliated with the BJP, who come from different backgrounds—that is, not from the traditional radical left—and who share these views.

Secularism and communalism are also characterized by both Hindus and Muslims as "atmospheres." Hindus in general, and not only militant Hindus, also use similar terms to those used by Muslim "progressives" to describe the "atmosphere" and the "style of thinking" of Muslims in Muslim institutions such as the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). When, for example, Muslims at the AMU, with "a peculiar style of thinking,"[10] want the University education to reflect "Muslim culture," whereas Marxists oppose it, the atmosphere is communal, but some vice-chancellors, it is said, have changed "the atmosphere" and made it "become very secular." What this usually means is that the V-C either identifies with the secular, progressive, Marxist group or somehow refuses to allow the issues to become framed in these ways.

However, there has yet to arise within the Muslim community a considerable body of persons educated in secular schools and colleges, participating successfully in business enterprises, and expressing modernist views in politics. In short, there is a huge difference between the internal array of opinion and political practice among Hindus and among Muslims in India. The latter have been sorely lacking in effective, responsible, secular leaders.

Secularism and "Pseudo-Secularism"

The Congress, being originally the dominant party, proclaimed itself as the upholder of secular values, seeing itself as a secular force. But, at the same time it did not see society as secular; rather the country was divided by Hindu and Muslim communal forces that threatened the peace, which only a secular party, only the Congress could maintain. The Congress appealed in this way to the Muslim minority in the country that felt threatened by Hindu nationalists. Consequently, in many elections, in many parts of the country, Congress secured the bulk of the votes of Muslims who translated the Congress credo of secularism into a guarantee of protection of their lives, property, and right to practice their religion in India.

In appealing to Muslim fears and insecurities in this way, and successfully for a long time, the Congress has been accused of taking political advantage from the Muslims by proclaiming itself secular. However, it is also the case that, especially during the Nehru period, secular credentials were valued with respect to candidates for the

Congress nomination for Parliament: Muslims and Hindus were evaluated with regard to whether or not their credentials were satisfactory, that is, whether they believed in and worked for Hindu-Muslim amity and could win support from both communities. This is decidedly not the case with the militant Hindu parties, though there are some exceptions that can be pointed to; they are, however, exceptions—and of dubious authenticity. In contrast, whatever its shortcomings, Nehru's Congress at the national level was considered to be in principle and practice a secular political party.[11]

It is here, nevertheless, that militant Hindus found a place to undermine the Congress and its proclaimed secular values. They say that this contradiction between the Congress' proclaimed secularism and its specific appeal to the Muslim vote exposes the Congress as "pseudo-secularist." Not only did the Congress fail to produce a uniform civil code that would integrate the Muslims fully into the country as equal citizens, but they appeased and pandered to Muslim religious, communal, and presumptively separatist organizations and tendencies. But the militant Hindu stance is deceptive, if not deceitful. They do not want only a uniform civil code. They want to eliminate the Muslim character of Muslim institutions, and/or curtail the activities of what they consider to be Muslim communal forces operating within Muslim institutions, such as the Aligarh Muslim University. They also want to ban Muslim proselytizing activities that have been carried out for a century or more by Muslim institutions affiliated to the Deoband institution in western U.P. and by the Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat.[12]

In practice, the ultimate political determination of what constitutes a secular political party is made by Muslim voters. Today, as in the past, Muslim voters, notably in north India, continue to perceive some particular parties as secular parties: the Congress still and the Janata parties especially. The principle criteria for such a perception are which parties at the moment are to be considered the best protectors of their rights, safety, and security, and the parties most able to defeat the BJP.

How then can the BJP and the RSS proclaim that, contrary to Muslim perceptions, the secularism of the Congress and other parties is "pseudo" and only theirs is true secularism: the argument, as aforesaid, is that this pseudo-secularism treats Muslims as a separate category in the population, not included in the general population on such matters as participating in a uniform civil code, whereas the BJP wants to include them as equal citizens in the modern Indian nation-state. The catch, again as previously stated, is that the true Indian citizen, in their view, not only must accept the idea of a uniform

civil code, but must accept the RSS definition of the Indian nation, which includes Hindu religious and mythological as well as historical figures as part of the common national heritage.

So, secularism also refers to political speech: what issues are mentioned or not mentioned in party platforms or public speeches and what are ignored, as well as to political practices. Such political practices and forms of speech include the following: admission of Muslims into party positions, including leadership positions; speaking favourably on behalf of the Muslim community, especially in relation to communal riots, blaming them on militant Hindus; and favouring concessions for the teaching and use of the Urdu language.

But there is another issue that, from time to time in modern Indian history has provided a test of a party's or a person's secularism, namely the question of conversion. Secularists generally take the position, if they take one at all, that propagation of one's religion is part of both freedom of religion and freedom of speech. Militant Hindus and Hindu communalists, as well as anti-secularists who do not fall into either category, oppose both Christian and Muslim proselytization.[13] I cannot discuss the issue of conversion fully here for it would require a much longer essay. For present purposes, however, it is to be noted that the aversion of militant Hindus to conversion reflects their exaggerated and inordinate fear, mentioned earlier, that, if such activities continue, ultimately Hindus will become a minority in what they perceive as their own country. And it is not only the proselytizers and missionaries who threaten Hindu India that is Bharat in this way, but the pseudo-secularists, who, the militant Hindus say, have been responsible for the pandering and appeasement of Muslims by allowing them to have their own institutions and their proselytizing beachheads.[14]

Secularism and Population

Militant Hindus are as much concerned with the allegedly greater birth-rate among Muslims as they are with the issue of conversion. Indeed, it is their concern with the former that lies behind their focus on the latter. The political focus on conversion, however, probably reflects the fact that it is possible to convince many people and policy-makers that this is an undesirable practice that should be regulated, and even stopped. However, it is quite a different matter to impose birth control measures on a population that learned to associate that project with the forced sterilization that took place in India during Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule. And, of course, it can hardly be applied in a discriminatory manner to one segment of the population and not the rest. Nor is it practical for Hindu politicians to suggest increasing

the birth rate among Hindus, as, for example, has been encouraged among Israeli Jews to keep ahead of Israeli Arab population increases.

There is some concurrence on this issue between militant Hindus and self-proclaimed secularists. Both have a problem with the alleged greater birth-rate and consequent population increase among Muslims than Hindus. Militant Hindus are terrorized by the prospect and have promoted the publication and distribution of a projective population atlas that envisions the transformation of the Hindu and other so-called Indic peoples into a minority in the subcontinent, and even in India proper.[15] Some self-proclaimed secularists express their concerns in double-mouthed ways. For example, they say that the higher Muslim birth-rate demonstrates that Muslims are thriving in India's "secular atmosphere."[16] It is likely, however, that, except among the most liberal, Left persons in the country, the fear lurks in the background. It is a common kind of fear that, as already mentioned, is afoot in Israel. It also used to be expressed in the former Soviet Union, with increased anxieties after each census about Russians becoming a minority in an ever-impending future. Even in the United States, the concern has been expressed by some that the so-called white population of the country will one day be reduced to a minority. Insofar as India is concerned, however, this fear lurks behind the demand for a uniform civil code and provides an only partly-hidden rationale for it in the minds of militant Hindus. The hidden assumption is that it would prevent Muslims from having four wives, which is somehow associated in militant Hindu minds with Muslim proliferation, as if the three extra wives would not be producing Muslim children if they were married to monogamous males.

Indian Secularism as an Attitude and a "Mentality"

Secularism in India is also sometimes said to be an "attitude." It is said, for example, that, in cities and towns that have been relatively free of Hindu-Muslim violence, traders and businessmen have secular attitudes, meaning that they will do business with persons from the other community. This is hardly a meaningful criterion, however, since some Hindu businessmen will do business with Muslims, while at the same time being avid members of the RSS.[17] Muslim businessmen can also be secular for the sake of business. My favourite example is a Muslim lock maker in Aligarh, whose products carry the name of the Hindu god, Krishna.[18]

Secularism is an historical attitude as well, as noted above, taking the form in daily life of whether or not one appreciates and heroizes both Hindu and Muslim historical figures. In this regard, there are in fact secular and communal historiographies and

hagiographies. Go to any major library in the world with a significant collection of books on Indian history and look up the great monarchs and warriors of Indian history, as I used to do for my classes. One can instantly identify secularist, Muslim religious, and Hindu nationalist historians by what they say, for example, about Akbar (favourite of secularists, but not of devout orthodox or communalist Muslims),[19] Aurangzeb (hated by secularists and militant Hindus, favourite of religious and communalist Muslims), Shivaji (favourite of late nineteenth-century Congress leaders, militant Hindus and Maharashtrian regional nationalists, but disliked by religious and communalist Muslims), and many other famous figures of Indian history. But, the best statement I have ever read on this matter came from a Muslim political leader, who launched a political movement on behalf of Muslims in north India, and who took the position that this kind of hagiographical writing was nonsense. He remarked rather that Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist so-called heroes of the past "massacred irrespective of religion, caste, or creed."[20]

More seriously with regard to this question of attitude is that politicians in India are identified by Muslims, in particular, in terms of their secular or communal attitudes, the measure for which is whether or not they speak out when Muslims are attacked and killed in riots and whether or not they attack Hindu communalists and militant Hindu parties and leaders and avoid political alliances and compromises with them. There have been many such politicians in India, who could easily be named and would be instantly recognized as such by an Indian audience. But some are hypocrites and others are mere vote-catchers. There are others, however, whose sincerity is clear from both their statements and actions. One such is a man whom I have quoted in my most recent article, on riots in Meerut city.[21] The great riots in that city in 1982 were debated in both Houses of Parliament, with every member who spoke on the issue casting blame in different directions. In the course of this man's speech, however, he made the following heart-felt remarks in Hindi to reflect his sorrow at the polarization that had developed among Hindus and Muslims in the city as a consequence of these riots. He spoke as follows.

> ***Aj merath shahar meN agar ap jayeNge to ap ko sach bolne wala koi nahiN milega. | Ap ko wahaN insan nahiN milega | Ap ko wahaN hindu milega ya ap ko wahaN musalman milega, lekin ap ko wahaN insan nahiN milega* | [Today if you should go into Meerut city, then you will not find anyone telling the truth. You will not find a human being there. You will find there a Hindu or you will find there a Muslim, but you will not find a human being there.][22]**

This gentleman said many other things in his speech that reflected his secular attitude, including some that I have characterized above as part of the practice of secularism and secular politics in India. He identified and castigated elements on all sides, Hindus and Muslims alike, the authorities and the police, who had been responsible for instigating and inflaming the incidents that led up to the riots, and for the killings, atrocities, and massacres that ensued. These are the marks of a secular politician.

It is common in India also to refer to the secular-communal divide as a matter of "mentality." There is, in this view, something called a "communal mentality," a "popular mentality," embedded in the psyches of both Hindus and Muslims. Is there then also a "secular mentality"? Well, not necessarily in this view, for, by "mentality," one of my sources really means one's identity, how one identifies oneself, especially in a crisis, as in the following statement: "You can't find a hundred percent secular person in India; they are all Hindus or Muslims. And, in crises, every Hindu is a Hindu, every Muslim a Muslim."[23] The sense of this statement is also reflected in the speech of the secular politician just quoted in relation to the Meerut riots of 1982, bemoaning the communal polarization it produced. However, if there is such a thing as a secular mentality, it is expressed in that man's speech and behaviour and of others like him in politics and among India's intellectual elites.

But it is the communal mentality that produces the "atmosphere," previously mentioned, which becomes one of permanent hostility and mistrust. Who is responsible for the existence of a communal mentality that produces such an atmosphere? There are two diametrically opposed views. One extreme militant Hindu point of view is that the Muslim masses are ignorant, know nothing about the Qur'an and their religion, but are corrupted by their elites. The alternative view, stated to me most articulately by the Deputy Superintendent of Police, Intelligence, a Hindu intelligence officer in Aligarh, is the opposite: "By and large, the Muslim intelligentsia is nationalist and secular, but the illiterate and semi-literate classes are totally communal."[24]

Secularism as Wholeness

But to understand fully the intensity of feeling that lies behind the secular-communal divide and its manifestation in specific political parties, political speech, attitudes, and most especially the definition of the Indian nation, it is necessary to go back to the founding moment of the independent Indian state. For, the issues of citizenship and nationhood discussed above ultimately turn around, and back in time

to the question of the wholeness of the Indian nation and to Partition, which destroyed it, and on who was responsible for this catastrophe. Militant Hindus perceive Muslims, in categorical terms, as responsible for the partition and the violence associated with it; further, they insist that Muslims in India continue to start riots with the long-term aim in view of bringing about another division of the country. Aside from the fact that this is a travesty of the reality, in which militant Hindu elements have been mainly responsible for planning and implementation of the worst communal riots during the past several decades, this militant Hindu view does not fit into any simple category of secular or communal, but comes under the heading of group psychology, with a diagnosis as a pathology of the historical consciousness.

But, this psychological interpretation is an interpolation added on to the discourse of secularism and communalism by observers such as Sudhir Kakar and myself.[25] The symbolism that frames the question of secularism vs. communalism by political practitioners, journalists, and educated opinion generally is that of the body and its health.[26] The secular-communal divide is also a question of bodily health, the health of the body of the nation. The Indian body can become infected, and has become infected from time to time, it is said, especially in the aftermath of communal rioting. There is a "communal virus" afoot in the land, it is sometimes said, which is infectious: it is a communicable disease, a contagion, which may spread from one place to another. The disease has only one cure: secularism, which requires a change of attitudes. For militant Hindus and many non-militant Hindus, this cure must be applied to Muslims in the country as a whole, especially those infected by the communalism of its leaders and its leading institutions. For secularists, both Hindus and Muslims are susceptible to this disease.

Secularism and Communal Violence

But, to return to the question of secularism and communal violence, and to the final irony and paradox of secularism in India, both the secular and the Hindu nationalist parties have produced riots or, if they have not produced them, have found them convenient for purposes of political mobilization. The way it works is as follows: militant Hindus blame the Muslims for starting it and mobilize Hindu voters to vote for the BJP as the only party that can protect them; the secular parties blame the BJP and mobilize the Muslim votes for themselves on the grounds that only they (the secular parties) can protect them. Only the Communist parties, in West Bengal especially, have adopted a strict secular approach by preventing riots and, therefore, preventing any such mobilizations and counter-

mobilizations, and themselves avoiding any appeals on communal grounds to either Hindus or Muslims. So, secularism here means again state power, but state power directed against political uses of religious/ communal violence; again it has nothing to do with separation of church and state. Most secular parties, however, have made use of communal animosities and violence for their own advantage, partly in ways already mentioned, but in another way as well, namely, to use state power "to rein in or ban Hindu communal organizations," thereby, of course, giving themselves a distinct political advantage. Meanwhile, in the midst of all this manoeuvering and manipulation, of proclamations of secularism which all major parties claim to uphold, Hindu-Muslim animosities continue to be aroused and exploited and riots continue, and continue to be taken advantage of by most political parties. It is a deadly game, in which the issue of separation of church and state is an intellectual diversion, which has produced mainly a polemical literature.

* This essay is a slightly revised version of a lecture prepared for the seminar on "Paradoxes of Secularism in South Asia," presented at the University of Copenhagen, December 9, 2004. The essay will be published in Paul R. Brass (ed.), *Communalism, Secularism, and Collective Violence: Riots, Pogroms, and Genocide in Modern India* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, forthcoming 2006).

1 As Peter van der Veer has put it, "The organization of religion, the place of religion in society, and the patterns of recruitment are so different that not only does secularization theory itself become meaningless but so, too, do the empirical and theoretical problems derived from it in the context of Western Christianity. This has not prevented social scientists from universalizing this ill-founded story about the West to include the rest." See his *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 15.

2 Rather than define these terms precisely, it is my purpose in this essay to consider how they are meant and used in practice in India. Since their uses are often contradictory and paradoxical, and competing definitions are polemical, a neutral social science definition is not practical.

3 However, this practice has declined in many places in India as a consequence of Hindu-Muslim divisions. Yet, as these lines were being written, I received from Asghar Ali Engineer, whose life and work stand preeminently, consistently, without internal contradiction, for all the secular values identified herein, an e-mail sent round to all recipients of his articles. The e-mail noted the near-simultaneity this season of the Hindu festival of Diwali and the Muslim festival of Id, and offered his greetings to all persons of both faiths.

4 This argument has been most effectively demolished insofar as Bengal is concerned by Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

5 Stig Toft Madsen has reminded me of this development. There were actually six nationally recognized splinters of the original Janata Party that fought the 1979-80 series of elections. The three that took the name secular in their titles were as follows: Janata Party (Secular), Janata Party (Secular)-Ch. Charan Singh, and Janata Party (Secular) Raj Narain; Election Commission of India,

Report on the General Elections to the Legislative Assemblies ... 1979-80, Vol. II: Statistical, Vol. II-A, Parts 1 to 4 (New Delhi, 1983), p. ix.

6 As Gyanendra Pandey pointed out in discussion on this matter of labels.

7 Though that party was not at all revolutionary!

8 See, for example, a comparison of the election manifestoes for five major parties for the 1996 General Elections in India, in J. C. Aggarwal and N. K. Chowdhry, *Elections in India, 1952-96: Constituency Profiles, Results and Analysis Focussing Poll 1996* [sic] (Delhi: Shipra, 1996), pp. 50-51.

9 Interview with RSS members, Aligarh, November 21, 1997, from Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003 and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 326.

10 In the words of the DSP, Intelligence in an interview in Aligarh, July 30, 1983.

11 As Gurharpal Singh has put it, "Nehruvian secularism, for all its flaws, was an integral part of an effort to build a plural conception of nationhood in difficult political circumstances." See his article, "State and Religious Diversity: Reflections on Post-1947 India," in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Autumn 2004), p. 220.

12 On these institutions and organizations, see especially Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) and Mumtaz Ahmad, *Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia*, in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 457-530.

13 The anti-secularist position, though it is also against conversion, is not the same as that of the militant Hindus; it is more complicated. The exponents of this position are well known: Ashish Nandy in the forefront, along with T. N. Madan, and Veena Das. See Ashish Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 69-93; [originally published in *Alternatives* XIII (1988), 177-94]; Ashish Nandy, "The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism and Other Masks of Deculturation," in Veena Das, et al. (eds.), *Tradition, Pluralism, and Identity: In Honour of T. N. Madan* (Delhi: Sage, 1999), pp. 401-20; T. N. Madan, "Secularism in Its Place," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLVI, No. 4 (November, 1987), 747-60; and, for my own earlier views in this debate, see Paul R. Brass, Secularism Out of Its Place," in Das, *Tradition, Pluralism, and Identity*, pp. 359-80. The most recent anti-secularist statement on the question of conversion is again by T. N. Madan, "Freedom of Religion," in *Economic and Political Weekly* (March 15, 2004), pp. 1034-41.

14 Partha Chatterjee has characterized the militant Hindu position (or Hindu right, as he calls it) on this issue aptly: "The term 'communal', in this twisted language, is reserved for the Muslim, whereas the 'pseudo-secular' is the Hindu who defends the right of the Muslim citizen." See his "Secularism and Toleration," in Partha Chatterjee, *A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 230.

15 P. Joshi, M. D. Srinivas, and J.K. Bajaj, *Religious Demography of India* (Centre for Policy Studies, Chennai, 2000). The atlas, published with a foreword by L. K. Advani, was strongly criticized in a review by Rudolf C. Heredia, "Demography as Ideology: Weakness in Numbers," presented at the conference of the International Association for the Study of Religion in New Delhi, 18-21 December, 2003. The 2001 Indian census data on religion and fertility are analyzed carefully in a collection of articles published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (September 25, 2004) under the heading, "Census 2001 and Religion Data," pp. 4,292-305

16 *Times of India*, June 20, 1972, commenting on the results of the 1971 census. The matter of "atmosphere" has been discussed above.

17 Consider, for example, the following quotation from one of my interview respondents in Aligarh, from interview on July 3, 1991, cited in Brass, *Production of Hindu-Muslims Violence*, p. 210.

> There was one businessman called _____ Kumar, he was a top businessman of locks and entire force, manufacturing force, was Muslim, and he was an RSS man. And the reason [for his RSS affiliation] I could not understand. ... And he used to say to us, "Oh, I'm so secular, my entire business is because of them and whatever I am is because of Muslims and whatever money I have is because of them." But he was a man of RSS.

18 It reminds me of a meeting I had in June, 1961, outside St. Peter's in Rome, with one or two Jewish manufacturers of idols of Jesus; they told me that all the Jesus idols in Rome were made by Jews. I think I actually stood in a warehouse, owned by Jews, full of these idols.

19 Just to cite the example of the varied treatment of Akbar, compare the following statements about this great Mughal ruler. First, from Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *Ulema in Politics* (Karachi, Ma'aref Limited 1972), pp. 62, 72, 76: he held "ridiculous opinions," could not "be described by any stretch of imagination as possessing learning in the highest degree," "was hardly literate"; "his attitudes and beliefs were far removed from Islam, and were essentially even its antithesis"; he was responsible for "the persecution of Muslim religious leaders and scholars," even of Islam itself. Second, from Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Meridian, 1960): "It was in his reign that the cultural amalgamation of Hindu and Moslem in north India took a long step forward. Akbar himself was certainly as popular with the Hindus as with the Moslems. The Mughal dynasty became firmly established as India's own." (p. 256).

20 A. J. Faridi, *Communal Riots and National Integration* (Lucknow, 1962), p. 49; cited in Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 223.

21 Paul R. Brass, "Development of an Institutionalised Riot System in Meerut City, 1961 to 1982," *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 30, 2004), pp. 4839-48.

22 Statement of Satya Pal Malik in Rajya Sabha, October 5, 1982, cols. 219-23.

23 Interview with District Magistrate, Aligarh, at his residence, Aligarh, July 30, 1983; cited in Brass, *Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence*, p. 341.

24 Interview, Aligarh, July 30, 1983; cited in Brass, *Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence*, p. 342.

25 See Sudhir Kakar, *The Colours of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) for a systematic psychoanalytic, social-psychological approach to the study of riots in India. My own views on this aspect of riot production are in *Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence*, pp. 28-9 and 345.

26 See Paul R. Brass, "The Body as Symbol: History, Memory and Communal Violence," in *Manushi*, No. 141 (March-April 2004), pp. 22-31; also available on my website, paulbrass.com.