

*THE CRISIS OF SECULARISM IN INDIA.* Edited by Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan. Duke University Press 2006. Pp. xii + 416. Paper. \$24.95. ISBN: 0-822-33831-9.

We live in a decade characterized by “wars on terror,” suspicion of minorities, particularly those espousing Islam, intolerance of dissent, and tolerance for the state’s infringements on fundamental rights in the name of security. A casualty of the 9/11 attacks was the global decline of tolerance for religious freedom. *The Crisis of Secularism in India* is a lively engagement by leading scholars on the causes, forms and solutions to the erosion of tolerance in India. The book, which evolved from a conference on Siting Secularism held against the backdrop of communal violence in Gujarat in 2002, seeks to engage in a self reflexive critique by interrogating and intervening in dislodging the entrenched communalization in India, which is not just restricted to the Hindu Right.

Unlike some western variants, official Indian secularism involves the “protection of all religions” by the state. (20) There is no separation of religion and public life, and no procedure to determine who would represent the minority community in their dealings with the state. This raises the problem, as the editors point out, of where boundaries of state secularism ought to be drawn, and are drawn in India.

The contributors are concerned about the rise of the Hindu Right. but differ on whether secularism is the best ground for meeting that challenge. All of the scholars see secularism as pertaining not to religion as a set of beliefs, but as a basis of identity and identitarian cultural practices. Some (including Tejani) even argue that secularism in India is not about religion as much as it is about the dilemmas of democracy. Most situate secularism in the hospital (Khilnani, Menon, Rajagopal, Baxi), some in the intensive care unit (Chatterjee), and others in the graveyard (Nandy). Except for Nandy, the authors seek to examine whether and why secularism did not fulfill its promise, and endeavor to evolve solutions that could recast the core values of secularism to serve the ends of a heterogeneous nation state.

So what is the crisis of secularism? The crisis could either stem from the inclusion, exclusion and contradictions of official nationalist imaginings induced by identitarian religious conflict (Needham and Rajan, Menon), or it could be inherent in the very concept of secularism

(Nandy, Madan). The editors point out that one of the problems was the high expectations of secularism as a political ideology and civil practice. Secularism was supposed to achieve several goals: a) unify a heterogeneous nation; b) offer religious freedom and protection to minorities; and c) set the nation on a modern path to progress. The latter two goals never really took off because of factors rooted in the nation's constitution-making history, particularly in the definitional tussles on who was a minority and what benefits they ought to have.

How does the crisis manifest itself? In a more benign form, it emerges as religious riots, and in a more virulent form, it appears as regime supported riots as in Gujarat in 2002 (Baxi). The casualty is the religious minority, particularly Muslims in India. Secular nationalism, as the editors argue, presents minorities with the choice of either dissolving within the nationalist mainstream and giving up the claim to be representative, or be branded as communalist.

What is the solution to the crisis of secularism? Here the contributors differ. Some want to give secularism a summary burial (Nandy) and rely instead on notions of hospitality among the communities. But it is less clear how such hospitality can expand beyond small pockets of citizens especially in a system characterized by majoritarianism. Others emphasize the role of the state in inducing more tolerance among the governing and the governed (Bilgrami) generated through statist reform and complete separation of faith and state (Khilnani); and some others propose more negotiated solutions between state structures and local sites (Chatterjee, Menon). Several essays deal with how minority communities themselves generate calls for reform (Chatterjee, Agnes).

The book is divided into five sections. The first set of essays deals with "minority" views on secularism. Tejani shows in a thoughtful essay that the classification of a "minority" hinged on whether one viewed the question in religious terms (as Mahatma Gandhi did though he only wanted Muslims and Sikhs to get separate representation) or political terms (e.g., Ambedkar, who wanted untouchables to be classified as minorities). This tussle, which Gandhi won, was about "the place of social difference in an emergent Indian identity." (58) But even if Ambedkar had won, one wonders whether secularism would have been robust. The essay is strongly tethered in historical debates and is a rich, nuanced study of the changing interpretation and reworking of secularism.

We then shift to an icon in the South, E.V. Ramasami, who saw secularism less as a political ideal and more as a desired social good.

The thoughtful essay reflects the ways in which the definition of secularism changes based on the goals that are to be achieved. Ramasami's views were an amalgam of the rationalist and Buddhist discourses distilled in the Tamil word *paguttaviru*, the intelligence that is born out of discernment and experience, and could be used to examine one's own context critically. Ramasami launched the self-knowledge and self-respect movement among the non-Brahmins of South India using the notion and practice of a "right to dissent." Religious freedom, Ramasami argued, was a tool to reify the Brahmin stranglehold over the downtrodden non-Brahmin majority. What Ramasami perceived as enshrining the status quo and intensifying conflict, Gandhi saw as ensuring religious neutrality and neutralizing conflict. There is a disconnect, however, between Ramasami's means (such as breaking images of popular gods) and the religious practices of the majority. Not surprisingly, he was unsuccessful in his campaigns. The essay is a superb and insightful account of one path not taken, but does not adequately reflect the point that Ramasami's solution to the crisis was still elite-led and top-down.

Khilnani discusses a third icon, Jawaharlal Nehru, and argues that Nehru's importance today lies in his struggle to base public life on a reasoned morality "to reconcile instrumental reason with those of moral reason." (99) Nehru's solution, which Khilnani agrees with (and for which he is criticized by Nandy), was to keep faith separate from the state because of religion's "ineliminable" force in Indian society. (102) Nehru's choice emphasized instrumental rather than moral reason. Whether this would be perceived as a just solution by those wedded to a religious way of life, and whether this could work within the Indian constitutional framework, are questions that the author does not tackle.

The second set of essays discusses the difficult relationship between secularism and democracy. Some authors say to dispense with secularism. Nandy's obituary of secularism is not undeserved but his solution—"principles of neighbourliness, principles of hospitality encrypted in the various religious traditions, and the persistence of community ties,"—emphasizes citizens as autonomous agents but does not sufficiently guard against inaction or even collusion during riots. (114) Menon's account of a Hindu housewife who watched as toddlers looted a Muslim grocery shop during the Gujarat riots is a chilling reminder. Menon, who adopts Chatterjee's distinction between civil and political society, argues that secularism has to learn to function effectively in the domain of political society (or democracy). She advocates a radical political practice "characterised chiefly by a

relentless focus on the everyday as opposed to the restricted goal of changing or controlling state institutions” (120) as a way to allow secularism to survive the functioning of democracy. But radical political practice assumes the pre-existence of free will, which is debatable because one always has to negotiate with coercive structures (state/legal/cultural or religious practices).

As Partha Chatterjee points out in his incisive essay, the dilemma is how to shift the point of view to those sections of the minority group who are most affected by the crisis of secularism. His solution, discussed through a fine analysis of a tussle over the management of *madrasahs* in West Bengal, is to generate reforms through the political representatives of the minority community by inducing protests at the grassroots level among the non-elites. This allows one to avoid an excessive reliance on either the state and elites, or the masses. But as Pandey and Gyan Prakash rightly point out, representativeness is highly problematic, as is the unequal power of the negotiators (state and minority community). Pandey’s solution is to dispense with the notion of a majority (all communities are to be recognized as minorities)—laudable but quite unworkable in the current context.

The third set of essays discusses the changing forms of secularism in history books, media and cinema. Thapar’s essay, which outlines how Hindu religious nationalists used a selective version of the past to politicize and mobilize the electorate, is a plea to retrieve plurality in studying history. (207) Rajgopal examines the use of print media and national television by Hindu nationalists to produce a national identity. Two essays on Hindi cinema are very thought-provoking. Benegal’s essay allows the reader to shift from a political to a filmmaker’s point of view in reflecting on representations of secularism in popular cinema. He argues that films shifted from patronizing secularism in the Nehruvian era to alternative forms of minority representation by the “New Cinema” in the 1970s and 1980s, to a situation in the 1990s where cinema was simultaneously anti-Pakistani (*Gadar*) and Nehruvian secularist (*Lagaan*). But Benegal treats cinema as a medium that primarily reflects the state’s view rather than forging a new syncretic secularism, though he does mention historical moments (such as the post-1971 period) when New Cinema treated the Muslim in a more realistic fashion. In Benegal’s narrative, the state looms large through the Censor Board. In contrast, Vasudevan’s fascinating and nuanced essay explores ways in which cinema opens up fissures, creating opportunities for transcending bounded identities “where we may insert our own subjectivity.” (263) Vasudevan’s analysis shows how cinema

challenges the state's representation of secularism.

The fourth and fifth sets of essays discuss two controversial sites of secularism—personal law and conversion. Indian constitutional law allows religious communities to practice their own religious laws in the area of personal law. Upendra Baxi's provocative essay raises several difficult questions arising "from the complex connection between two related but distinct discourses," (269) Indian constitutional secularism and the Uniform Civil Code (UCC). By focusing on the aftermath of a successful challenge of sharia law by a Muslim woman, Shah Bano, Baxi mulls the question: what denial of a right to difference may "uniformity" legitimately ordain? He sees Shah Bano's wish (expressed after the case) not to be seen as an impious woman as defying the dominant (religious and feminist) ways of silencing women's agency. The essay highlights the problem facing human rights and feminist activism, namely how to escape the shackles of "partaking of hegemonic logics not dissimilar to those that inform state and law constructions of social and human identities." (284) Flavia Agnes too explores this problem by highlighting the ways in which Muslim divorcees used the Muslim Women Act of 1986 to implicitly reform their personal laws. Akeel Bilgrami takes the debate back to a philosophical level, where he raises deeper issues such as the nature of the law underlying the debate between secularists (who by and large want uniformity in law) and multiculturalists (who want religious sentiments to be taken into account in formulating exemptions from general law).

The final section explores the breakdown of secularism through an analysis of the Hindu Right's opposition to religious conversion. Gauri Vishwanathan argues that the failure of relativism and pluralism enables the return of conversion. "To see conversion less as an endpoint than as a starting point, a method of knowledge and communication, is the challenge of the moment." (354) Sumit Sarkar continues on this theme in his historically informed essay that debunks two assumptions of the Hindu Right's suspicion of Christian conversion, namely that Hindu is a nonproselytizing religion and that Christianity is an alien and imperialist religion. He adopts a liberal solution that acknowledges and respects difference, echoing the old eighteenth century liberal maxim of "disagreeing violently with the opinion of another but being ready to defend his right to express his views." (366) It would have been interesting to examine analogous moves made in the contemporary era within the dominant Hindu community, focusing on positions contrary to the Hindu Right.

The essays, however, treat the populace as a mass to be acted upon by the state/regime/political parties/charismatic leaders rather than seeing citizens as autonomous agents. Except for Nandy and Chatterjee, who emphasize the power of hospitality inherent in citizens or political society as the most viable route out of the crisis, the others tinker with different ways of reforming the state or the attitudes of the minority's elites. For instance, Gyan Prakash's solution is to shift the point of view to minorities, but presumably it is the view of the elites within the minorities that would count.

The most interesting essays are those that emphasize the empirical reworking of notions of tolerance by cinema, political figures like Ramasami and Ambedkar, and groups such as Muslim women. The authors often disagree completely or partially with one another—a positive attribute of the book. Romila Thapar argues that globalization creates new communities that tend to be based on religious identities (206), but Menon rightly points out that the forces of globalization can work against the religious right. (133)

Previous works on secularism focused more on the political, constitutional and philosophical domain (Bhargava, 1999; Sen, 1999; Chandoke, 2003; Jacobsohn, 2005). This volume is important because it updates existing scholarship on secularism in three interesting ways: a) it provides a rich empirical (contemporary and historical) basis for the debates on the crisis of secularism; b) it highlights other sites of secularism such as education, cinema, media, and non-mainstream ways of thinking about secularism; and c) it provides us with alternative solutions that focus on the actions of non-state actors generated in the grey zone between the state and citizen.

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