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PREDICAMENTS OF SECULARISM: MUSLIM IDENTITIES AND POLITICS IN MUMBAI

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Most of the debate about secularism and the secular state in India has remained at a general level, leaving a great many gaps in our knowledge of the actual meanings and practices associated with secularism in India. This article argues that secularism in India is premised on an unstable separation of a realm of politics from a supposedly unpolitical realm of culture, where communities have been represented in rather static and undifferentiated terms. Discussing ethnographic material from Muslim neighbourhoods in Mumbai the author shows how the separation between 'pure' culture and 'dirty' politics is breaking down in the face of a new political assertiveness among ordinary, low-status Muslims. This challenges the position of religious leaders and it also questions widely held assumptions of the relative coherence of the Muslim community.

Most debates on secularism and its problems in various parts of the world are an unfortunate tendency to understand the secular state in rather differentiated terms: modern, homogenizing and driven by objectifying scientific modes of governance. But this view tends to ignore how the history and the practices of the state, as well as the connotations of secularism, differ substantially from, say, Algeria to India. Nowhere is the need for a historically specific understanding of secularism and the secular state more evident than in India. Protracted and intense public debates on secularism have taken place in India since the Hindu nationalist movement in the 1980s successfully mobilized political support by promising to recover what it claimed to be India's heretofore Hindu character, questioning the loyalty of the Muslim minority. These debates revolved around whether secularism was a Western import, how could coexist with democratic governance, and how it could sustain the protection of the rights of India's minorities.

Madan provoked many intellectuals by arguing that in so far as religious cosmology was constitutive of society in India, the very idea of secularism — even a fully worked out cosmology, but 'only a stratagem' (Madan 1987: 750) was bound to remain an 'alien cultural ideology' (1987: 754). Following Pumey, Madan argued that secularism was 'impotent' because South Asian religions were 'totalizing' and subordinated political power to religious authority (1987: 753).

In a series of articles Nandy argued that both secularism and communal violence (its double, according to Nandy) are built on imported Enlightenment ideas espoused by the urban middle classes who live in secularized
worlds marked by ‘distorted or perverted versions of religion’ (Nandy 1998: 284). Communal violence is an urban phenomenon, resisted in rural areas where ‘communities have not splintered into atomised individuals’ and where true tolerance derived from religious cosmologies of the ordinary rural dweller in India persists (1998: 285–6). Within the ‘culture of the modern Indian state’, Nandy argues, the discourse of secularism signifies the right to full citizenship, rationalism, modernity and cosmopolitanism of those who command it. Secularism also justifies excessive intervention of the state into the lives of communities, often in the name of national unity. The belief in secularism is at the heart of the dominant statist ideology in India and is defended with the utmost passion by the westernized middle classes because it upholds their privileged position and affords them ‘management of the fear of religion and the religious’ (1998: 292).

The debate on secularism has inevitably been structured by the historical preponderance in Indian academia of the kind of critiques of the West, modernity and science that are so evident in Nandy’s work. These positions also inform more recent Foucauldian critiques of secularism as a metonymy of a scientific project of the Indian state (e.g. Chatterjee 1993: 200–19; Inden 1995). It is, however, also indicative of the debate that neither in these contributions nor in other works by Nandy (1988; Nandy et al. 1995) are we presented with convincing evidence of the existence of such pristine and authentic tolerance, except as absence of violence, or of resistance to secularism and modernity. The entire debate has rarely touched on the actual secular practices of the Indian state, what secularism means to ordinary people in India, how it is practised on the ground and so on.

These omissions seem to fit into what Ortner calls the ‘ethnographic refusal’ to engage with the political complexities and ambiguities of the phenomenon of resistance at local levels. Ortner shows convincingly how this ‘bizarre refusal to know, to speak and to write of the lived world inhabited by those who resist’ (Ortner 1995: 188) has produced what she calls an ‘ethnographic black hole’ (1995: 190). In his call for a new anthropology of the world of politics, Spencer (1997: 13) suggests that the ‘spirit of sentimental radicalism that has swept the American academic scene’ has trivialized terms like ‘power’ and ‘domination’ and has ignored the complexities of the political world.

In the following I will seek to extend the somewhat abstract understanding of Indian secularism in two ways. First, I will try to show that the apparently radical critiques of Nandy and others largely remain within the conceptual structure that underlies and gives meaning to practices of the Indian state as well as to the wider public culture in India: an unstable antinomy between a morally questionable and potentially dangerous realm of ‘politics’ and a morally purified but also reified realm of communities and ‘culture’. Drawing on material from Muslim neighbourhoods in central Mumbai I turn, second, to address the ‘ethnographic black hole’ of Indian secularism by showing how the boundary between the realm of culture and community and the world of politics constantly is negotiated on the ground. I indicate how older discourses of a unified Muslim community are being subverted by more recent forms of plebeian politics. Finally, I reflect on the implications of this evidence may have for our understanding of secular practices in India.
cular politics and cultural ‘anti-politics’

The discourse of secularism in India never tried to challenge religious institutions as for example the policies of radical secularization promoted by Kemal Atatürk in Turkey (see Göle 1997: 61–82). Religious authority had already been circumscribed in India as colonial governance asserted the sovereignty of the state. The objective of secular discourse in India was, rather, to curbed control the sectarian and communal violence, especially between Hindus and Muslims, that escalated in the late colonial period and reached a climax the carnage around Partition in 1947. Indian secularism was conceived by the nationalist movement and practised by the postcolonial state as a continuous search for a non-antagonistic ground between religious communities, for toleration and respectful coexistence. This was translated into what today unts as widely accepted practices of secularism: restrained and balanced public utterances, even-handed allocation of governmental resources and official recognition to different communities. This presupposed, however, that manifestations of religious community remained highly visible in most aspects public life in India.

The official policy of ‘active non-preference’ towards any religious immunity practised since Independence (Smith 1963: 381) was a style of pragmatic management of religion inherited from the colonial state. Colonial governance distinguished between two realms of society. One was the political realm where appropriately propertied and educated representatives of the natives were allowed to enter what the colonizers saw as a sanitized space civilized disagreement in councils and representative bodies. The other as the realm of cultural-religious communities that were fixed and given a degree of autonomy in areas like family law, administration of religious institutions, ‘traditional instruction’ in religious schools and inheritance. This colonial double discourse depicted the political realm as that of representation of rational interests of elites that were supposed to represent, transform and control ‘their’ communities, that is the cultural realm of untamed passion and irrationality of the oriental masses.

The nationalist and cultural reform movements retained this bifurcation between culture and politics but reversed the valorization of the two realms. Gandhi and many others, the nation resided in India’s cultural communities, while the political realm remained a morally empty space, a set of fezless procedures and alien institutions which only could be given life and indigenous meaning by a vibrant national community beyond the political. This reversal inaugurated what I have called anti-politics, the production of culture (religion, tradition, ritual practices) as something elevated, perennial and pre-political, as sublime signs of the nation (see Hansen 1999: 44–57).

The relation between the political sphere and cultural communities changed somewhat after Independence. First, the Constitution, the Hindu Code Bill and other legislation passed in the 1950s regulated marriage and inheritance laws for Hindus. Although it encroached upon the rights of ‘Hindus’, however well-defined a category (see Chatterjee 1995: 17–21), it also marked a culmination of a long-standing desire among Indian nationalists to purge and modernize Hindu practices. Second, the secular Indian state began actively to promote an official discourse praising India’s cultural diversity in schools,
media and in the political realm. The Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, official tourism and countless local schemes now began to de-politicize religion and community by disentangling religious signs, rituals, buildings, sites and customs from their local or sectarian meanings and inscribe them into the emerging narrative of the diversity that officially defined India as a nation. Third, in keeping with this celebration of the nation as culture, political leaders established their secular credentials by attending different religious functions or by displaying their own religious convictions. Religious convictions were not a liability in public life, but rather a sign of moral consistency and patriotism.

Public institutions and the routines and discourses of government constituted the modern and secular space proper of the Indian state. But the discourse of secularism did not necessarily extend itself into the families and private habits of bureaucrats and public figures. This circumscribing of the secular to the state and the political realm had to do with the importance of reproducing its other, the realm of culture. Here, any community could celebrate itself and its own myths, and was entitled to exclude others. By asserting its own specificity, the community also celebrated and expressed the cultural diversity that was the foundation of the larger nation. This distinction between pure culture and dirty politics was, however, deeply contradictory and made it difficult to fix the meaning of secularism and secular practices. Let me mention a few key areas such as religious processions and education.

Religion and cultural activism

In the colonial period, festivals were widely regarded as recurrent displays of irreducible cultural differences between state and communities, or between communities, especially Hindus and Muslims. They condensed the problem of public order and were often sites of contestation of colonial rule. After Independence festivals and processions were de-politicized and turned into pure cultural events. If culture or religion were invoked at a political rally it had to be in the plural, as a praise of India’s diversity, or as equal apportioned critique of all religions. During religious festivals political comments could only be of a general nature, invoking the larger national interest, unity of the country, and other uncontroversial elements of the dominion political discourse. The thin line between the two realms was crossed if customs or practices of a community were criticized or abused unilaterally; if the confession of an individual was criticized. These rhetorical rules have been crucial to the official interpretation of secularism and secular practice in India over several decades, though unilateral invocations of religious community in the realm of politics, have become more widely accepted over the past decades. This promotion of a composite but unified Indian culture and people above and outside politics enabled the older cultural anti-politics to thrive. Gandhians and other cultural nationalists celebrated social work among the poor as ennobling and selfless service to the nation. The discourse of the (equal) cultural authenticity of communities also enabled a much w
age of cultural activism to flourish: religious entrepreneurs, reform movement and social and religious institutions grew large and powerful, among them also so-called ‘communal’ movements ranging from Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh to the Jamaat-i-Islami. The authority of such organizations depends largely on their distance from the world of politics, and their most important public code is that of selfless behaviour and asceticism. Hindu national-activists call themselves ‘self-forgetting volunteers’ (swayamsevak), most Muslim organizations demand that activists lead pious, ascetic and exemplary styles, just as the sincerity of social reformers is judged on the basis of their personal lifestyle and lack of mundane belongings.

Among such organizations the discourse of politics must obey the tacit rhetorical rules of generality and vagueness: to encourage morality in society large, to criticize selfishness in public life, to deplore moral decay and divisive tendencies. If a cultural organization supports a political party or forms a particular community for the ills of the country, it crosses the line between cultural exhortation and communalism. The activist’s call for Hindu unity and social discipline, or the imam’s preaching austerity and obedience to the Koran as the path to a better society, are cultural statements. Identical arguments are employed at the polls for a political party catering to such values, the cultural gesture immediately becomes communal. So, what signifies communalism in the political part of the public realm may well pass for cultural activism in another part of the public realm. However, these tacit rules of public enunciation are no longer strictly adhered to, and the last decade has seen Hindu organizations engage in unrestrained anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Education and the cultural construction of politics

The colonial double discourse that divided Indians into those with status and education who could be governed by law and reason, and the broad masses who had to be governed through a mixture of community leadership and brute force, still informs many policies in India. Citizenship and the capacity for responsible, balanced and thus ‘secular’ conduct, are widely seen as produced in educational institutions rather than in the political process. The cleavage between citizens and communities governs the style in which political figures, bureaucrats, social activists and journalists talk about citizenship and secularism. The ‘educated sections’ are (re)produced as citizens through appeals to civic sense, the imperatives of national unity and responsible conduct in the sphere of politics. However, at political rallies, public events or little functions in slums and villages, the uneducated masses are addressed through religious parables, reminded of an old tradition of Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai (brotherhood) and told to trust their (educated) community leaders. The masses remain the undecidable element in discourses on public order, politics and nation. If irresponsibly manipulated, betrayed or too rapidly exposed to the complexities of the modern world, or ‘perverted versions of religion’, as Nandy would have it, the innocent people can turn into violent and faceless crowds. Politics should therefore remain in the hands of responsible, educated and virtuous leaders who can ensure secular tolerance.
Education in postcolonial India was seen as the road to eradication of bigotry and violence, and the aim of the nationalist pedagogy was to inaugurate a modern conceptual grammar in young minds, enabling them to transcend narrow bonds of community and identify with the nation. Community schools were free to promote and represent their own particular communal symbols and festivals as long as they adhered to the basic curriculum and honoured the nation. The main concern was that students received conceptual tools to escape the narrow and parochial outlooks that supposedly dominated the minds of the uneducated masses.

A recent example of the continued belief in education as the road to tolerance and citizenship was the government’s offer in 1994 to pay salaries to the teachers in Muslim madrasahs provided that they introduced science classes. It was assumed that modern secular education would instil ‘less parochial attitudes’ in the minds of children from poor Muslim areas (Times of India, 3 April 1994: 8). This scheme was indicative of the practices of the secular state. Instead of expanding and enhancing the quality of government schools in Muslim areas, the government chose to govern through religious institutions, ostensibly to give Muslims the same treatment and possibilities as other communities, while fixing and strengthening the authority of religious leaders among Muslims.

The older notion of culture and community life as a reservoir of moral morality represented by the educated citizen in the sphere of politics has, however, been undermined by the increasing ‘plebeianization’ of politics. Previously, politicians were drawn mainly from educated upper caste communities, but since the 1970s a growing number of individuals from low-caste and plebeian social backgrounds have been attracted to the political field, bringing with them styles of language and social practices which the eyes of respectable citizens, appear both crude and uncultured. For many, this indicates a disintegration of the moral fibre restraining the profane dimensions intrinsic to the world of politics. According to many columnists in the Indian dailies, a regeneration of public morality and decency can only come from a recuperation of the ethos of cultural communities, as if they were untouched by the larger transformations of Indian society.

The true predicament of secularism in India seems exactly to be the reification of the realm of culture and of community life. The official celebration of communities as relatively homogenous entities represented by the educated, or the religious specialists, has often stifled introspection and critique and has rendered representation of ‘the community’ a vital resource for largely conservative cultural entrepreneurs.

Predicaments of Muslims in Mumbai

The closure of the cultural realm seems particularly acute in the context of the Muslim minority in India. The Muslim Personal Law complex, for decades an eminent symbol of official religious tolerance, has become intensely criticized by the Hindu nationalist movement. The movement has made strident anti-Muslim rhetoric ever more popular, and thousands of Muslims have b
tiled and wounded in riots instigated by the Hindu nationalists in the last decade.

The riots in Mumbai in December 1992 and January 1993 organized by the Hindu chauvinist organization Shiv Sena were a traumatic experience for Muslims in Mumbai, an estimated 17 per cent of the city's population. Hundreds of thousands left the city, thousands lived in camps in older Muslim areas in the city, many chose never to return to their earlier homes in mixed neighbourhoods. The humiliation was complete when the perpetrators of violence, Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party, came to power in 1995 in the state and the city, and changed the name of the city to Mumbai.

Many Muslims felt betrayed by the state and the Congress Party. ‘Congress failed to protect Babri Masjid and now the police is killing us. Who can we believe in?’ as an angry man told me shortly after the riots. The anger and humiliation often translated into a general rejection of politics and of political leaders.

Muslims in Mumbai are very heterogeneous. The oldest Muslim communities in the city are small wealthy trading communities, the Bohras and Khojas, both Shi'a Muslims, and the Sunni Memons, who are well represented in Karachi and have extensive family networks in Africa and across the Indian Ocean. The city has also has large groups of Marathi-speaking Muslims from the Konkan region south of Mumbai, as well as smaller Urdu-speaking communities from the central plains of southern India.

The majority of Muslims in Mumbai have come from North India since the 1920s, not least weavers (ansaris) who came to work in the textile mills. Until the 1960s, the local trading communities provided political and cultural leadership in the Muslim neighbourhoods in central Mumbai, but in the last decades religious figures, politicians and intellectuals of the Urdu public sphere became mainly of North Indian extraction. Lifestyles, religious tendencies and political identities of northern India are today an integral part of Mumbai's Muslim world. Some older residents of the city's Muslim neighbourhoods explore this 'invasion of bhaiyas' ('little brothers', rural bumpkins; a nickname for North Indians) who are also blamed for the congestion in central Mumbai.

The significance of conservative North Indian identities in Mumbai was demonstrated in 1985 when the Supreme Court ruled that a divorced Muslim woman, Shah Bano, was entitled to alimony. Conservative Muslim organizations accused the Supreme Court of undermining the authority and jurisdiction of the Muslim Personal Law Board and called for popular protests against the ruling. To everybody's surprise some of the largest demonstrations in the country took place in Mumbai.6

Many feared that the riots in 1993 would fortify such conservative identities, but in fact the catastrophic experience created two distinct responses. One was a largely conservative quest for internal purification and unity of the Muslim community and a return to the basics of the Koran and a withdrawal from political, legal and economic dependence on the larger society. The other was a more pragmatic strategy of 'plebeian assertion' that evolved from the entrepreneurial spirit and milieus of small industry and informal businesses. This was linked to a new assertiveness in the political field through the Samajwadi Party, a North Indian lower-caste political formation.
Purifying the Community

There was an impressive array of religious entrepreneurs in central Muradnagar all claiming to speak on behalf of the Muslim community. They all aimed at purifying the inner life of the community and to unite the different sects and interpretations of Islam on a common platform. The antinomy between business and politics discussed above was critical to their claims to legitimacy.

One of the most outspoken of these groups was the Ulema Council, led by Maulana Kashmiri who for years was aligned with the once influential Muslim political party, the Muslim League. In an interview, Kashmiri said to me: ‘This organization was founded in order to promote the interests of the Muslim community as such... all the different groups sacrificed their political interests for the larger welfare of the community.’ Though defined as a community organization above politics, another of its spokesmen explained to me: ‘Our greatest contribution has been to weaken people away from Congress and ensure their defeat now in two elections.’ The council attempted to present the Muslim community as such vis-à-vis the authorities, but clearly derived its authority from the non-political credentials of its members, their religious expertise and their generally high status.

The Ulema Council also promoted itself as an authority better suited to interpret Muslim Personal Law than any court and urged Muslim couples to come to them for counselling. A member of the council said in an interview:

> We tell the people – if you have a domestic problem, please don’t go to court – bring it together and we will solve it. Why should we go to them [the courts] – you know judges call for all these things, everything depends on evidence, cross-examination, circumstantial evidence, etc. – we have our own laws and we are capable of solving our problems.

The council claimed that its efforts not only had brought down divorce rates but also had taught people to bring disputes to imams in the local mosque. This picture was strongly contradicted by lawyers and social workers in the area who observed that divorce (talaq) was on the increase because the practice of getting a new and younger wife, or a second wife – always a mark of status of the ashraf (elite) Muslims – now was widely accepted as a sign of upward social mobility.

Maulana Kashmiri and the Ulema Council also opposed the grant-in-aid system for madrasahs proposed by the government and the idea of imams receiving salaries from the state rather than the community. The hostility towards the Congress Party and the state, and the desire to assert the community through self-enclosure was palpable when Kashmiri said:

> Does Narsimha Rao think that we are civil servants? Does he hope to control us with erosity... they break our mosques and then they offer imams a salary. If the sarkar [i.e. government] really wants to do something for the minorities give all the poor people suffered during riots a compensation and give us a less communal police force.

The upholding of Muslim Personal Law was also of paramount significance to preachers dispatched to Mumbai from the famous madrasah in Deoband, North India, the central institution in developing a scriptural and conserva
form of Islam in South Asia since the nineteenth century and known for close ties with the Congress. In Islamic countries Muslims are safe — here we need the Personal Law to protect ourselves. It is after all not just a law, it is the word of God ... it has to do with the customs of the community, it deals with very personal matters. It cannot be encroached upon’, one of them told me.

The Deobandi preachers held that the Personal Law was the only pillar around which the unity of Muslims could be recreated. Deobandi Islam, being the ‘natural form of Islam in the subcontinent’ must be at the centre of this endeavour, they argued. But the Deobandi mission was not just cultural unity, it was also doctrinal purity and a pedagogical effort to displace and refine the Islam practised by the common aql (Muslim. As another preacher put it, ‘we are much more educated, our Islam is more refined than that of the Barelvis who embrace all sorts of primitive practices and worship deceased pirs due to ignorance and superstition’.

A few hundred yards away, the All India Tabligh-e-Seerat also claimed to work for Muslim unity. Its president, Syed Ashraf, argued that in the present situation it was imperative that religious authorities intervene directly in politics in order to infuse a ‘purer spirit’ and to create a ‘decent generation of Muslim politicians who are actually willing to work for Muslims, to get Muslim ministers, reserved jobs for Muslims, more Urdu schools — remember, ours is the second largest language in the country — more public investment in Muslim areas’. His organization was created in 1989, he said, to give the majority of Sunnis in this country a voice in the nation’s politics. . . . we declared that we are saying goodbye to Congress and instead we supported the Janata Dal’. Syed Ashraf is also a spiritual head among the many Barelvi Muslims in Mumbai, the amorphous, folkish, but also conservative variety of Sunni Islam wherein many Sufi practices such as reverence for saints (pirs) remain important elements. Ashraf’s rethinking of Muslim strategies of identity and representation was clearly informed by India’s larger democratic revolution:

Politics has for such a long time been the monopoly of Deobandis and Wahhabis [a purist form of high Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia] now it is time that we, the Barelvis who are 85 per cent of all Muslims in India, come out and stake our claims for political influence, and demonstrate that we no longer can be taken for granted, neither by Congress nor by the so-called Muslim leadership.

In January 1998 the tensions between elitist and more popular forms of Islam resulted in a violent clash with several casualties between Deobandis and Barelvis in front of the Jama Masjid in Mumbai. The immediate cause was a disagreement regarding the exact date of the beginning of the holy month of Ramzan, which determines the date of celebration of Iid. The Deobandis began their fast one day before the Barelvis, who saw this as yet another sign of the arrogance of the Deobandi clergy. Matters worsened when the Deobandi demand, that Barelvis should fast an extra day after Iid in order to conform with the Deobandi interpretation of the ritual. Political leaders from both the Janata Dal and the Samajwadi Party promptly took the side of the Barelvis in the conflict and brought about a truce that ensured that Iid was celebrated on the same day for both communities (Asian Age 20 January 1998: 1; The Indian Express 19 and 20 January 1998: 1).
In the Urdu newspapers the sectarian clash was denounced as yet another example of the divisive effects of politics on the inner cohesion of the Muslim community. Yet this criticism only confirmed the impossibility of separating culture from politics. The fact that Barelvis no longer accepted the theocentric and political leadership of high forms of Islam was not only an effect of interventions by powerful political formations. This subversion of older hierarchies was one of several effects of a broader assertion of *ajlaf* (non-prescriptive) modes of being Muslim, often rather conservative and patriarchal in their forms, rooted in identity formations of North Indian rural politics that by the late 1980s had merged with long-standing notions of solidarity in working-class neighbourhoods. But also in these robust discourses on politics and identity the imaginings of a united and pre-political religious community as a reservoir of morality and purity remained crucial.

More unequivocally anti-political notions of purification of the community informed the *Tabligh-e-Jamaat*, a worldwide organization propagating a pious lifestyle among Muslims (for a discussion of the *Tabligh* movement, see Hasn 1981; 1996: 196–202; see also Ahmed 1991). The regenerative, quietist project of the *Tablighis* was presented in this way by a local cleric:

> We are missionaries through our own examples, by showing that it only is by turning to the Creator you can realize your human nature. Without the Creator you are only worldly desire and greed and lust... We are not political people, we show that through total sacrifice and devotion you can turn criminals and pickpockets into respectable citizens.

*Tablighis* promised a regime of self-discipline that would command moral respect and social success than crime or politics. The *Tablighis* have expanded their influence in big Indian cities like Mumbai over the last five years. *Tabligh-e-Jamaat* had its largest *isthama* (gathering) ever in the subcontinent in the early 1990s, when a couple of thousands of Muslim men in 1995 assembled in Mumbai for a series of functions and collective prayers. *Tablighi* practices fed into more enduring models within South Asian Islam of how high status and upward social mobility was displayed through outward signs of piety and purity, such as women wearing *burqahs* (veils), sons being sent to *madrasas*, the undertaking of pilgrimage to Mecca (*Haj*). As the domain of politics increasingly become occupied by individuals from lower caste, or *ajlaf*, communities despised by many respectable *ashraf* Muslim families, the *Tablighi* movement seemed to provide a public articulation of Muslim identity and sensibility that appealed to the educated Muslim middle class.

The strategy of purifying Muslim practices in order to renew and reinforce the community has found a more radical form within the Student Islamic Movement (SIM), ideologically close to *Jamaat-i-Islami*, a revived Islamic movement that is marginal in India but plays a certain role in Pakistan (see Ahmed 1991; Hasn 1996: 202–10). The main goal of SIM was the creation of a *bhiyah* (character building) and the building of a dedicated cadre of *azadi* (helpers) who are morally regenerated through intensive studies of the Koran, *Hadiths* and Islamic scholarship in history, ethics and other fields. Their ideal was radical, youthful and attracted bright students with excellent academic prospects and self-discipline. A young SIM activist from a modest family background in central Mumbai, now a successful student of natural science at elite college, told me:
I spend all my time studying. In the daytime I study natural science. I am taught Darwin’s evolution theory, the big bang theories and theoretical physics. I learn it but I don’t believe any of it. In the evenings and Saturdays we study our own SIM syllabus and we discuss the Islamic teachings of how Allah created everything.

In 1996, SIM ran a campaign against nationalism, for a ‘New Khilafat’ and a new brotherhood through universal worship of God. Part of the campaign was explicitly directed against politics in general, and in particular democracy. SIM advised supporters to abstain from any political participation. A campaign newsletter read: ‘God and not the demos has the right to rule . . . the Prophet has given guidelines for a proper political system, and man-made laws are never very helpful to mankind. God who has created Mankind knows better its true interests.’

Like its parent organization, SIM’s main concern was the generation of Islamic ethics fit for modernity. The organization published elaborate career planning material for its members, it encouraged hard work and discipline in order to qualify for leading and powerful posts in the state bureaucracy and the private sector. Much like other radical conservatives, SIM activists advocated stronger government and protection of family values, they admired China for its discipline and developmental results, and hailed women who embrace their proper role as mothers instead of demanding equality.

These cultural-religious organizations all shared a profound discomfort with the chaotic, transient and increasingly plebeian nature of the political world. Some organizations took stands on political issues but the main thrust of their work remained informed by the project of piety (tabligh) and community organization (tanzim) that has been pivotal to Muslim politics of identity in South Asia throughout the twentieth century.

Plebeian politics

Another way of approaching politics and community had emerged amongst the large groups of ordinary ajlaf Muslims who until a decade ago largely held manual and skilled jobs in mills and smaller industries. The working-class neighbourhoods of central Mumbai so vividly portrayed by Chandavarkar (1994: 168–238) were now dominated by petty trade, small industry and a variety of self-employment strategies (see Hansen 1997). From the 1970s onwards, labour migration to the Gulf countries provided important alternatives to shrinking employment opportunities in the dying textile mills and the considerable wage gap between India and the Gulf enabled low-income families to improve both their standard of living and their social standing quite dramatically (see Hansen forthcoming).

An indication of the new strategies was the declining enrolment of pupils into the extensive system of Urdu schools run by the Mumbai Municipal Corporation. Many boys were enrolled at private English-medium schools, where teachers complained about the workload and the immense pressure put upon these boys from parents. ‘Now we get many parents from modest backgrounds who save everything they have just to keep one boy in our school . . . Their expectations to these children are completely
unrealistic. In many cases boys are beaten when they return home with low marks’, a teacher told me. As elsewhere in India, instruction in English has become the single most important key to escape the life in the mohalla, and is further undermining the status of Urdu as a primary signifier of identity among Indian Muslims.

The grey sector of smuggling, drug peddling and petty jobs as local tout, collecting rent, debts and ‘donations’ also provided avenues to money and recognition in these areas. The unemployment rate among young men is very high and to hang out with the local dada (elder brother, used colloquially as a label for local strongmen who command respect) was a well-known though far from cherished, part of the everyday experience of young boys and men. The local das provided effective role models and access to many of the signs of the good life: cellular phones, Maruti-Gypsy jeeps, air conditioning, visits in the nearby Kamathipura red-light area, and respect in the local hierarchies. As the son of one of these localfixers and fighters told me:

People will tell you that my father is a criminal, that he is not a good Muslim. But not a single one of them will dare to challenge him face to face. And they all come here when they are in trouble. To be a dada is to have this reputation, to command this respect.

His father, K, had come from a North Indian village as a child. Later he became the best pehlwan (wrestler) in the neighbourhood gymkhana and gradually established himself as an able and tough fighter and businessman. Inevitably he became involved in a conflict with one of the already reigning dadas and ultimately killed him in a knife fight. K appeared reconciled with this act, narrated how he served time in prison and was well aware that this act, that in his own words was ‘wrong but necessary’, was crucial to his current reputation. Now he was a successful businessman, and president of the local unit of the Samajwadi Party. His was a truly ordinary success story in a social environment where the narratives of the deeds of gangkings provided ambivalent representations of the other side of the Muslim community.

Dawood Ibrahim, the expatriate gangster king of Dubai, grew up in the neighbourhoods in central Mumbai. His mythological status had grown into a self-perpetuating narrative of a mystical hero incarnating the stigmata of all stereotypes and fears attributed to Muslims by Hindu middle classes, the police and the police. Dawood and the complex of danger, impurity and power of the dada obviously attracted young toughs. ‘It is better to be respected as a dada than to be neglected as a fool’, as one of them said to me. To have a reputation for being affiliated with ‘Dawood’s men’ was an ephemeral but cherished and yet deeply ambivalent mark of importance and identity in the streets. In the eyes of religious activists and respectable families, Dawood symbolised the inner rot and the contamination of the Muslim community by material desires. Local leaders and ordinary people admitted, not the least, that dadas do perform important functions. A local resident of Dawood’s native territory, put it succinctly: ‘We have to respect these people — in times of crisis who else will fight for us in the street? There the
advocate or doctor is no good... but that does not mean that we trust them, that is something else."

According to K, the hope that Dawood or other big men will help Muslims was naive. Muslims had to fend for themselves: "One who thinks should think about himself, he should have guts in himself... I have no hope of receiving help from Dawood. According to me, everyone should have guts, believe in himself, they should think of themselves as Dawood."

The new prominence of dadas and ajlaf Muslim entrepreneurs, also in local politics, was not dependent on religious or cultural institutions. Most of these men had established themselves and their reputation through extended kinship structures (biraderis) and wider clientelist structures. Similar patterns of social mobility and links between local businessmen and plebeian politics had also emerged in many low-income neighbourhoods in other parts of Mumbai and had been crucial to the rise of Shiv Sena's populist politics.

The popularity of the Samajwadi Party among Muslims in Mumbai should be seen in this light. The party moved into Mumbai in 1994 through alliances with a number of prominent Muslim business people and their extensive informal networks of petty entrepreneurs. The party's Mumbai president was a major businessman who was imprisoned for one year for alleged proximity to Dawood Ibrahim, and many of the party's local leaders and elected representatives were known as local fixers, brokers and businessmen. Several religious figures denounced it as a "goonda party" and kept a distance from its unapologetic pragmatism. Local party leaders preferred to portray themselves as men hardened by the life in the mohalla, and therefore undaunted by the treacherous and often violent world of politics: in other words, as men who neither needed excuses nor religious sanctions for their political work.

As put to me by a local candidate running for the municipal elections, 'If you want to fight in politics come with us. If you want to be a pious Muslim only, then go to the masjid (mosque). We are not religious people, we are in politics.'

Such representations of the Samajwadi Party as independent of religious authorities were, however, shot through with ambivalence. Local supporters often mentioned that maulana Kashmiri and his Ulema Council of learned people were backing the Samajwadi Party and that educated Muslims had joined the party. Similarly, the resolute stance taken by the party in favour of the Barelvis in the clashes with Deobandis in January 1998 indicated that the party was not indifferent to religious sensibilities.

This oscillation between representations of a plebeian identity and invocations of the Muslim community as such was evident in the Samajwadi Party's campaign prior to the Municipal elections in Mumbai in February 1997. Most candidates promised to protect the dignity and self-respect of Muslims. As one of the campaigning MLAs asserted again and again, 'our demand is simple - we want identity'. Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh's consistent opposition to Hindu nationalism in North India vouched for his desire to protect Muslims, argued the local candidates. At a public meeting late in February 1997, Mulayam Singh addressed a large crowd in central Mumbai. He promised that the Hindu nationalists would 'not be allowed to touch the seat
of power in Delhi', and promised with strongman bravado that he, as a Minister of Defence and as a man, would guarantee the safety of Muslims in India. At the rally, a man said triumphantly to me, 'See, who said that we Muslims are not in the mainstream? We are right here in the mainstream with the Defence Minister of India.'

Many local candidates addressed ordinary Muslims as small folks, as marginalized and impoverished and unjustly neglected by Congress, the state and the Muslim leadership. This departed in important ways from the religious-cultural discourse that demanded recognition of Muslims as the second largest community of the Indian state. In central Mumbai voters seemed increasingly to recognize themselves through this plebeian discourse: 'We have to look at ourselves, see who we really are. We are no longer rajas or big people, we are as poor as the backwards [i.e. lower-caste Hindus], and even worse as another local candidate put it. Several of the candidates running for the party in these neighbourhoods proudly referred to themselves as ansaris jualahas, the Muslim weavers that form a very substantial part of the population.

This articulation of lower-caste identities among Muslims had been in gestation for some time. Muslim communities who fall within the category of ‘Other Backward Classes’, and thus are formally entitled to certain benefits and reserved jobs in many states in India, have organized themselves in Northern India for a number of years. In 1990, the Association of Julahas-Ansaris in central Mumbai sent a petition to the state government. The petition argued that for centuries jualahas had not even been recognized as proper Muslims, an attempt to earn proper recognition from the Muslim elite they had taken the name ansaris (referring to the helpers of the Prophet). This had not worked well, it was argued, and the community wished therefore to return to its original name as jualahas, and to be entitled to 'the grants and concessions availing to the Backward Classes of society'. Although clearly motivated by an instrumental interest in resources flowing from the government, the document none the less signified an emerging horizontal fissure in hitherto dominant representations of Muslim identity.

The general style and self-representation of the Samajwadi Party in Mumbai was drawing on registers of ordinary language as well as the reputation of a masculine style of their local leaders. Samajwadi leaders and activists stressed their willingness to confront Shiv Sena or the Congress directly, and to stand up for the Muslims. This strategy was indeed successful in the municipal elections in Mumbai in 1997, when the party won a considerable number of seats in Muslim areas. In the general election in 1998 a pragmatic electoral alliance was made with the Congress Party in Maharashtra, and as a result the rulers Hindu nationalist coalition suffered a resounding defeat in several constituencies it had dominated for years. To many Muslims this confirmed that the brash style of the Samajwadi Party could counter Shiv Sena, and further consolidated its constituency in Mumbai. The party challenged paternalist discourses of Muslim identity but did not necessarily promote a more progressive or modern form of Islam. The novelty was that less-respectable, less-educated Muslims, adhering to popular forms of Islam, now represented and spoke for Muslims, not as a cultural community, but as ordinary and small people of mohalla who only have themselves to trust.
Communities and politics

The evidence from Mumbai indicates a subversion of both pillars of Indian secularism, the separation of a realm of politics from that of culture and community life, and the representation of communities through educated representatives. Religious authorities styled themselves as gatekeepers who contain what is seen as a political pollution of the community and who upholds Muslim Personal Law. At the same time the desire for recognition of ordinary ajal Muslims and the broader dynamics of democratic politics in India produce a plebeian politics structured by class as well as sectarian distinctions. This politics is premised on the powerful emotions attached to Muslim identity in contemporary India while it also questions the very notion of a unified Muslim community by expanding into religious and cultural practices previously not politicized, such as sectarian and caste differences among Muslims.

In view of this, does it make sense to regard communities as bounded entities that can negotiate with the state and sort out their own inner affairs, as was the classical, and colonial, premise of Indian secularism? Recent work by Chatterjee and Das seem to suggest that communities indeed should be regarded as political actors. Both authors do, however, derive their arguments from a rather abstract understanding of the state as opposed to community.

Chatterjee analyses a whole series of cases where the Indian state has legislated religious practices and in other ways violated the secular ideals that he derives from a United States Supreme Court judgment. Somewhat unsurprisingly, this leads him to conclude that 'the universal forms of the modern state turn out to be inadequate for the postcolonial world' (1995: 27).

To Das, the state is a hegemonic entity that legislates not only individual conduct but also the boundaries and forms of communities, 'cultural symbols have been appropriated by the state, which tries to establish a monopoly over ethical pronouncements' (Das 1995: 92) through legislating not only individual conduct but also the boundaries and forms of communities. In her discussion of the Shah Bano case and the question of sati, Das does, however, register the tenuous unity of a 'community' and she admits that if women were publicly recognized among Hindus as well as Muslims, 'it would become necessary to address questions about the heterogeneity of the community and the multiplicity of identities' (1995: 115).

What I have tried to argue here, however, is that meanings of secularism in India are not negotiated between reified cultural communities with fully formed notions of morality and public ethics and a state driven by 'reason', but in much less orderly forms. To be constantly thrown back upon a supposed unity of the community, and the constant rehearsals of notions of an elevated unpolitical cultural community based on the values of the Koran, Hadiths and the Personal Law complex have been the predicament of secularism for Indian Muslims. My suggestion here is that if we study the actually existing forms of identity politics as they unfold, say in the mohallas in central Mumbai, we may be able understand the intrinsic instability of these reified and ultimately colonial notions of culture and community, upon which Indian secularism is constructed.
An earlier version of this paper was presented at the symposium 'The Crisis of Secularism in India', London School of Economics, 2–3 May 1997, where I benefited from comments from Chris Fuller, Raj Chandavarkar, Jonathan Spencer and Peter van der Veer. I am also indebted to comments from Partha Chatterjee and anonymous Journal referees. Responsibility for faults and inaccuracies in the text remains solely mine.

1This public secular ethic was reiterated by the judges of the Supreme Court in 1995 when they found Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray guilty of spreading 'communal enmity' between Hindus and Muslims. The judges emphasized the particular responsibility of political leaders to maintain decency and propriety...and for the preservation of the proper and time-honored values forming part of our cultural heritage' (P.K. Kunte v. Bal Thackeray, A.I.R. New Delhi, S.C. 1995: 613).

2See landmark studies such as Freitag (1990) and Pandey (1990). For explorations of the festivals turned into anti-colonial politics, see Cashman (1975). Less attention has been paid to this phenomenon in postcolonial India. For a recent discussion of riots and processions, see Jaffrelot (1998); and of public rituals and nationalism, see Kaur (1998).

3In the case against Bal Thackeray in 1995, discussed above, the judges state these in their rhetoric: 'mention of religion as such in an election speech is not forbidden...when it is...not religion and politics do not mix, it merely means that the religion of a candidate should not be used for gaining political mileage on the ground of the candidate's religion or by appealing the electorate against another candidate on the ground of the other candidate's religion' (P.K. Kunte v. Bal Thackeray, A.I.R. New Delhi, S.C. 1995: 610).

4Kaur (1998: 250–301) shows how political themes were represented in mandaap tables throughout the colonial period; how the festival turned 'cultural' after independence, and how mandaap tables have once again in the last decade have become politicized and communal, especially in Mumbai, where Shiv Sena for years have represented their brand of nationalism through this festival.

5In keeping with the underlying rationale of 'communal balancing', it was argued that most Christian and Hindu educational institutions receive grant-in-aid, this ought to apply to Muslim institutions as well (Times of India 3 April 1994: 8).

6For a compilation of the debates, see Engineer (1987). For a good analysis, see Das (1988: 93–107). The Muslim Personal Law Board claims to administer Islamic law derived directly from the Koran, but Muslim Personal Law in India draws mainly on what Anderson (1983: 205–23) terms an 'Indo-Muslim legal complex' developed since the latter half of the nineteenth century.

7A biographical sketch of the founder of the Barelv school of thought, Ahmad Riza Khan, and a discussion of the practical worship of Barevis can be found in Sanyal (1995; see also Jamaluddin 1981).

8In a campaign pamphlet Jamaat-i-Islami members were told prior to the 1996 election to vote for candidates opposed to gambling, liquor, corruption, prostitution and 'reputed to be gentlemen...sympathetic to the Muslim viewpoint on education, personal law, home and language'.

9Ordinary people in Mumbai say that the bomb blasts in March 1993 were a retaliation against Hindus executed by Dawood Ibrahim in order to protect 'his people' in Mumbai.

10'Memorandum' submitted to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra by the Julaha/Arman Community Service Centre, Bombay, 11 August 1990.

REFERENCES


Les conjonctures difficiles du sécularisme: les identités Musulmannes et la politique à Mumbai

Résumé

Dans son ensemble le débat sur le sécularisme et l’état séculaire en Inde est resté à un niveau général, laissant de nombreuses lacunes dans nos connaissances des significations et des pratiques qui sont actuellement associées au sécularisme en Inde. Cet article soutient que le sécularisme en Inde est fondé sur une séparation instable entre un domaine de la politique et un domaine de la culture qui est soit-disant apolitique, ainsi que sur une représentation des communautés en termes plutôt statiques et non-différenciés. Par une discussion de