Chapter 9

Secularism, Popular Passion and Public Order in India

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Most writings on the idea and practice of secularism focus on how secular discourse and legal regulation can enable a space of tolerance and non-violent accommodation of religious minorities. This focus on words and text sits somewhat uncomfortably with the fact that political and religious attachments often are most powerfully mediated by non-discursive and sensory means. The flag, the streamer, the badge, the dress, the headscarf or the use of colours, are more powerful, accessible and unambiguous ways of making visible one’s identity, religious emotions and cultural predilections than, say, coherent statements of conviction and principled stances derived from them. The emotional force of symbols, artefacts and icons is fundamental to popular religion – Catholic relics, Muslims shrines and Hindu deities to mention a few examples. The modern and mass-mediated symbol, mark or icon, metaphorically condensing divergent interpretations and projections into what appears as an unambiguous mark of a community or nation, is a fundamental force in political life across the world, including the so-called modern West. The ability to hold and contain divergent meanings can also turn an object or image into a powerful negative force that creates a community by being perceived as outrageous and blasphemous. This was the case of the Danish cartoons in 2005,¹ and during the earlier controversy around Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* as the book (which few had read) and images of the author were ritually sacrificed by crowds in many parts of the world.

The life of the secular as a meaningful category in public life is inevitably embedded in particular public cultures of debate and confrontation between communities, and between communities and states. One of the hallmarks of secular government, the neutrality of the state in religious affairs, grew historically

¹ Saba Mahmood (2009) has recently argued in the context of the Danish cartoons, that icons and images indeed have authentic force in both Christian and Islamic traditions; that they produce strong emotion and belief, and by implication, also cause pain and hurt. I have no substantial quarrel with this rather self-evident proposition. Scholars of South Asian religious and political practices can only deplore the fact that the general understanding of religious belief in ‘the West’ and in the academy have become so impoverished and ‘logocentric’ that it has become necessary to belabour such a point.
out of attempts to supersede religious divisions in the body-politic (in France and Britain), to protect religious minorities from persecution (as in the Netherlands) or to protect political life from religious passions (as in the United States). In the United States, and indeed in India, where there is no ‘thick’ notion of the secular, the other of the secular has never been religion per se but instead excessively passionate attachments to religious identities that may take violent forms and disturb public order. The management of forces that may incite such potentially destructive religious and political passions, and the propagation of a certain public ethos of toleration, were here core tasks of secular modes of government.

In India, the long history of deadly clashes between Hindus and Muslims in the colonial period, with its culmination in the carnage following Partition in 1947, was rarely presented as a clash of civilizations or religions by contemporary observers. Colonial officers regarded these communal enmities as intrinsic to the irrational Oriental masses whose religious passions could be triggered by rumours, images or mystical fervour. This governmental attitude continued after 1947 when a substantial and often decisive part of India’s democratic polity was non-literate and political practice remained heavily reliant on visual and symbolic means, especially in the country’s multiple vernacular public spheres. To this day, a large number of Indian voters primarily identify political parties, and social movements and their stances, by their symbols, colours, signature slogans and highly developed visual representations. More formalized aspects of political and public life – public statements, programs, organizations, parties and the restrained and responsible conduct of their educated leaders – have throughout the twentieth century been expected to balance out these labile energies of popular excitability.

In independent India, religious plurality has been framed as a Hindu majority (however internally divided) being asked to accommodate a number of religious minorities. Those minorities were in turn expected to accept the gift of toleration on the terms defined by the state and the majority population. The debates around India’s constitution abounded with the rhetoric of toleration as a magnanimous gift to the minorities and the expectation that this was reciprocated as loyalty to the new nation. The Constitution extended many gestures of incorporation into the new nation towards the former untouchables and other social minorities, such as reserved seats and constituencies, and affirmative action in education and the labour market. Caste differences were seen as ‘social ills’ intrinsic to

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2 Here, I exclude of course the idea of the secular as a non-religious domain of substantial values and truth procedures grounded in science and humanistic thought that could supersede religious superstition. Asad (2003) has traced significant dimensions of this paradigm which had a rich life in post-revolutionary France, on the global Left, under communism and varieties of republican nationalism (as in Turkey, Nasser’s Egypt and so on) and among many intellectuals across the world. My interest in this context is on the public life of the secular under conditions of religious plurality and liberal democracy.

3 See Rajagopal (2001).

Hindu culture and the overwhelmingly Hindu-born Constituent Assembly felt entitled to address these ills. Religious and political freedoms were guaranteed but special efforts vis-à-vis non-Hindu religious minorities were assiduously avoided. It was clear, however, that there was one minority that could not be assimilated, the Muslim minority, a large part of which had opted to form its own state of Pakistan (Mufti, 2007).

The constitutional process revolved around this traumatic event and attempted to found a new India that in the image of the dominant Congress movement aimed at encompassing and accommodating all Indians, including millions of Muslims. The goal was a state that actually practiced what D.E. Smith (1963) called ‘non-preference’ towards religious communities, an ideal that the colonial state had professed but never lived up to. This foundational moment built on a colonial style of government where ‘reasonable’ English law and responsible public conduct were supposed to contain the large and always simmering cauldron of popular passion. It crucially transformed this older mentality of government into a reformist, paternalist and pedagogical project guided by a ‘secular’ norm, embodied by the educated modern citizen, expert and bureaucrat.

In the following, I shall try to show that the public life of the secular in postcolonial India is premised upon a constant, if highly imperfect, balancing between a realm of ‘culture and religion’ which is the site of entirely legitimate passionate attachments, and a realm of ‘politics’ which is to be governed by a measure of rationality or what in Indian political discourse often is called ‘responsible conduct’. In practice, the latter means an unequivocal commitment to national unity. This distinction between national reason and communitarian passion, between disciplined words in service of the nation and passionate attachment to discrete communities and their symbols, are mapped onto a fundamental distinction of colonial origin between those with education and culture capable of proper speech, and the poorer masses entirely governed by their passions.

I propose that the secular and secularism today persists as effective and widely accepted ideals in India because the realm of the political has been transformed by the enormous emotional investment by poor and marginal groups in winning political representation in the last few decades. This has not removed the balancing act between cultural attachments and political rationality but has redefined this balance. Indian politics is more unruly and violent but also vastly more ubiquitous in social life, capable of processing and encompassing a range of decidedly illiberal political and cultural passions while retaining its overall commitment to secularism, understood as tolerance of religious and cultural difference most often in the name of public order.

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5 See for instance the very fine-grained and perceptive analysis of the place of different concepts of minority during the Constituent Assembly debates in Bajpai (2010, especially Chapter 2). See also Jha (2002).
The Secular, the Passions and Liberal Democracy

One of the most powerful ideas underlying modern democracy, argues Claude Lefort (1988: 228–9), is that of a society giving itself a new foundation. Such a society must continuously shape itself on its own terms, without relying on pre-given ethics, or a transcendental power. Such a quest produces a curious lack at the heart of the political and social order: ‘The being of the social presents itself in the shape of an endless series of questions … modern democracy is inaugurating an experience in which society is constantly in search of its own foundation’.

This search for foundations within the social itself has always been difficult. In France, it led first to the return of the theological as a semi-deification of the royal institution in nineteenth century France, later to the creation of a powerful national myth that both deified the French nation as immortal and eternal, and began to see the revolution not as an act of self-creation but as a revelation of an eternal people-as-nation. (Lefort, 1988: 213)

Modern liberal and secular politics revolves, in other words, around a self-referential emptiness that always needs to be supplemented and stabilized by some of the emotional intensities it has disavowed or superseded.

William Connolly puts it in starker terms when suggesting that imaginings of secular politics rely on an impoverished notion of ‘pure’ intellectual debate, that is, a realm that excludes most of the emotions and moral registers that actually move people in political life. He argues that we cannot understand the force of religious intensity and passion without recognizing that these are lodged in the body and in the ‘infra-sensible’ – the emotions, the desires, the unconscious dispositions, the ‘gut’ reactions – but also the fears and intolerant prejudices that often underpin manifest beliefs and stated opinions. Connolly sees a clear lineage from present-day secularists back to Kant’s attempt to develop a notion of the noumenal, or a supersensible form of public striving for truthfulness, that would displace the authority of religion and make conventional religious discourse into a ‘lower’ and incomplete form of reflection on human life. Connolly quotes Kant’s argument that common parameters of morality and reason are imperative:

For unless the supersensible (the thought of which is essential to anything called religion) is anchored to determine concepts of reason, such as those of morality, fantasy inevitably gets lost in the transcendent, where religious matters are concerned, and leads to an illuminism in which everyone has his own private inner revelations, and there is no longer any public touchstone of truth. (Kant 1979: 89; quoted in Connolly, 1999: 33)

What is clear in Kant’s remarks is that both the religious and the non-religious need to be suffused with reason and reasonableness, to be understood here more as
reflexivity rather than scientific rationality, in order to reach for a ‘truth’ that can be shared as a ‘public touchstone of truth’.

Against this thinking, Connolly identifies a broadly non-Cartesian tradition that recognizes the emotions, the desires and the embodied: Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson and Freud. This genealogy, drawn from Deleuze’s influential interpretation of Spinoza (Deleuze, 1988), is indeed questionable considering that both Spinoza and Freud as easily could be listed on the other side of the Cartesian divide that Connolly erects. Connolly’s tradition of the ‘infra-sensible’ is very close to a broadly ‘vitalist’ theory of the political. One of the unifying ideas in this tradition is a critique of institutionalized political life as removed from the real life concerns, a lifeless and bloodless bargaining and regulation that fragments and atomizes society and communities. Political vitalism received its most eloquent and radical formulation in the work of Carl Schmitt, for whom the political is ontological, an irreducible part of life, an impulse to divide the world, moral judgments and emotional attachment along lines dividing friends from enemies (Schmitt, 1921/2007). Vitalist thinking was historically prominent among many thinkers on the Left as well, from Sorel to Gramsci, and it appears in multiple forms in ethnic movements, in radical nationalism and in all kinds of populism – both conservative and progressive – as a valorization of collective and embodied sentiment as the source of authentic politics and community.

Let me qualify Connolly’s distinction between the infra-sensible and the suprasensible somewhat. Kant was fully aware that attachment to one’s own moral law required something more than mere reason. In Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, Kant (1960: 45) suggested that the predisposition towards embracing or creating a moral law is ‘incomprehensible’ and that it thus ‘announces a divine origin’ and exalts men to ‘sacrifice in respect of his duty’. Kant (1960: 54) later

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6 For Spinoza (1992: 211–5), all things are marked by their unique conatus (striving for being) and human beings are indeed under the influence of the passions (affectio), a form of Nature that possesses their bodies and their minds as powerful desires. However, the specific conatus of the human being is also to exercise the gift of reason and seek the highest forms of knowledge; and indeed to curb to the ‘human bondage’ imposed by the unrestrained power of the passions. Spinoza writes, ‘... men who are governed by reason, that is, men who aim at their own advantage under the guidance of reason, seek nothing for themselves that they would not desire for all of mankind’ (Spinoza 1992: 164). For Freud’s reliance on, and fidelity to, Kantian and neo-Kantian epistemologies, see for instance Tauber (2010).

7 In his later work, Neopoltics, Connolly (2002) develops his idea of the visceral further drawing inspiration from cognitive science and current Deleuzian work on pre-conscious forces of electronically and biologically mediated affect by Brian Massumi (2002) and Jane Bennett (2001; 2009).

8 In social theory, Henri Bergson’s philosophical vitalism influenced thinkers like Georges Bataille, the Negritude movement (see Jones, 2010) and the Surrealist movement, but also historical epistemologists such as Canguilhem and Foucault and, of course, most explicitly Gilles Deleuze.
admitted that the miracle of the will and the soul can never be fully known: ‘Not even does a man’s inner experience with regard to himself enable him to fathom the depths of his own heart’.

Kant also realized that a life in accordance with such an ethics of responsibility is difficult and even torturous because the inner law, the injunction to be reasonable and to reach for the transcendent and the noumenal, always feels like something alien in oneself, as something that does not fit. In her superb study of Kant through a Lacanian lens, AlenkA Zupancic (2000: 23) argues that Kant realizes that our deepest inclinations may not be for the good: ‘The defining feature of a free act is precisely that it is entirely foreign to the subject’s inclinations ... The self does not “live at home” ... and the subject’s freedom does in fact reside in a “foreign body”’.

Kant’s acknowledgement of the difficulties of constituting oneself as an autonomous self by extricating oneself from one’s inclinations, whether biological or cultural, run counter to the standard liberal idea of Kant as the author of an ideal of reasoned individuality, extricated from the force of culture and convention by his own reflexivity. Wendy Brown (2008: 170) puts this received idea succinctly: ‘In liberalism, the individual has culture or religious belief; culture or religious belief does not have him or her’. Kant realized that the self needs more than its own reason to function in the world. But is this ‘more’ simply the passions understood in Spinoza’s sense as affects, forces that make human beings act in ways they cannot fully control, or own? Or are they attachments to one’s community, culture or religious life?

The paradox in vitalist thinking is that while it undoubtedly captures essential insights into how politics and life actually work in the world it is both too strong and too weak as a framework for properly understanding political and religious life. It is ‘too strong’ because it simply accepts the singularity of any life or experience too readily. For instance the untranslatability of emotional stances grounded in subjective experiences of hurt; or the claim that specific cultural-religious and historical horizons are incommensurable with other historical and cultural experiences. In so doing, vitalism posits the proper representation of such emotions in institutionalized political life as an apriori impossibility. Such a gesture potentially naturalizes and endorses violence as an authentic, perhaps inevitable, form of political expression. Yet at the same time, vitalism is also curiously ‘too weak’ because its proponents, such as Connolly, too readily accept a simple binary, indeed Cartesian, opposition between the infra-sensible and the supersensible that caricatures the complex ways in which both secular-liberal and vitalist politics actually work in practice.9 As we shall see below, modern liberal and secular politics in India has constantly incorporated and ingested all that it also officially disavows in the name of the overarching national project.

9 See also Wendy Brown’s (1995) warning against the ethical pitfalls of identity politics that primarily relies on subjective grievances and feelings of hurt.
In India, emotional intensities and passions grounded in discrete communities or in religious beliefs and practices are officially inadmissible in the process of legislation and judicial deliberation. However, government officials, judges and political leaders are constantly trying to tame these passions, to translate them into consistent arguments, or simply to accommodate them in specific policies. Here, the Kantian ‘touchstone of truth’ appears not as substance but as procedure: as a hegemony of a powerful formula of equivalence whereby historical wrongs, disaffection and displacement affecting a wide array of groups can be compared, and remedies be discussed; ‘equivalence’ also allows the relative material needs, and degrees of ‘backwardness’ of communities (which in India means a relative lack of modern education and jobs) and their claim to affirmative action, to be calculated and measured against those of other communities.

This constant labour of translation and equivalence is driven by a fear of impending public conflict and thus invariably haunted by a spectre of public violence. This applies particularly to the historically deep, complex and deadly conflicts between Hindus and Muslims that perversely turn Brown’s formula on its head. In times of open conflict on the streets, no individual can escape from their ‘community of birth’ regardless of individual belief. One is ‘had’ by one’s community, and identified by it, regardless of one’s own individual will or convictions.

As will become clear below, it is the constant attempts to contain such violent passions and conflicts that in India continuously recast and re-define the distinction between what belongs to the political proper, and what is deemed outside it. This unstable boundary correlates with a historical distinction between civilized and uncivilized, the individuated versus those immersed in community, the citizen and the masses; but also with a spurious and yet powerful distinction between the realm of politics and the realm of the cultural-religious as two discrete universes of moral judgment.

State, Community and the Meanings of the Secular in India

The notions of ‘secular’ and ‘secularism’ evoke in India a wealth of largely positive connotations such as fairness, even-handedness, balance between communities and tolerance – but rarely science or reason. It is commonly assumed that individuals with higher education, good command of English and technical professionalism by virtue of their knowledge of the conceptual universe of the Western world have a largely secular orientation in the sense of being able to exercise good and fair judgement. In the more popular and vernacular universes, secularism connotes practices of toleration – to attend festivals of other communities than one’s own, maybe even to share meals with members of other communities, to have friends from other communities and to generally be known as non-prejudiced whether in
terms of caste or religion. If representatives of the state are seen as even-handed, upright and honest they are readily talked about as ‘secular’.

The discourse of secularism in India can in other words not simply be understood as a modernist attempt at erasing cultural differences in order to create space for a new homogenous national modern culture, as for instance Kemalism in Turkey. Secularism in India never attempted to challenge religious institutions, only to regulate social behaviour, some of which was derived from religious precepts. In official discourse, ‘the secular’ inhabits a location created by the colonial state as ‘an eye in the sky’, an entity above society, endowed with a broader responsibility for the entire population. This was based on an ideal of universality partially derived from emerging modern ideas of government as performing a measure of ‘humane responsibility’ for citizens, or stern paternalist care for subject colonial populations (Asad, 2003: 100–24). The other source was obviously Christianity which colonial officers saw as infinitely superior in ethical matters to any religion on Indian soil.

The gradual withdrawal of direct religious regulation by the colonial authorities was based on a long experience of resistance to such interventions. The first half of the nineteenth century saw examples of controversial colonial reform: attempts at detailed regulation of Hindu temples in South India as a method of rule by Hindu cosmological categories (Appadurai, 1981); and reforms of ‘barbaric customs’ inspired by missionary opinion such as the banning of sati in 1832, and later the banning of child marriage with the Age of Consent Bill of 1891. The latter became the centre of substantial political mobilization protecting the ‘Hindu family’ against colonial regulation and the bill was never seriously implemented. Christian missionary efforts in parts of the subcontinent were tolerated, and sometimes supported by the authorities until the rebellion in 1857 that was triggered by

10 In a new and interesting study, Priya Kumar has suggested that the Hindi translation of secularism, dharammirapeksata, should be modified to dharamnipakshata to encompass its vernacular meaning. Dharma can be translated as religion, and nirapeksata as being indifferent, whereas nispakshata means not choosing a side, being non-biased (see Kumar, 2008: 25). However, the standard practice is to use the English term ‘secular’ in vernacular speech, or on more festive and formal occasions to invoke Gandhi’s canonical formula of sarva dharma sambhava (equal respect for all religions).

11 After the legalization of missionary activity in 1813 and until the rebellion of 1857, the East India Company allowed missionaries to stage large and spectacular public debates in which British missionaries would engage learned Brahmmins in debates on the nature of the universe, morality and many other questions. Unsurprisingly, the very set-up of the debates and their presuppositions enabled missionaries to ‘win’ and to demonstrate the superiority of both Christianity and science to Hindu knowledge systems (on this phenomenon in western India, see for instance O’Hanlon, 1986). Interestingly, in the colonies, science and Christianity, so often opposed at home, merged into one compact known as ‘Western Civilization’. For a general argument on this phenomenon, see Viswanathan (1989). See also De Roover (2011).
hurt religious feelings among the local East India Company troops. After this time, the colonial state sought assiduously to avoid deep interventions into what educated local opinion was protective of as a culturally sovereign ‘inner’ realm of Indian society (Chatterjee, 1993). Interestingly, the powerful missionary societies actively supported this policy of non-interference and ‘religious freedom’, because they wanted once again to have a free hand in converting Indians to Christianity (van der Veer, 2002).

The pragmatic management of religion within the colonial state was enacted through a practical separation between, on the one hand, the political realm of the state, and, on the other, cultural-religious communities which were responsible for areas such as family-law and the administration of religious institutions. The latter realm was given substantial autonomy in the hope that this would control the outbursts of seemingly irrational religiosity and passion feared so much by the colonial officers. From the late nineteenth century onwards the political realm began to include small numbers of appropriately propertied and educated representatives of the natives who were allowed to enter into what the colonizers saw as a sanitized space of civilized disagreement and negotiation both in government and in the nascent civil society. Civilized and individuated by property ownership, English law and the English language, these individuals were supposed to represent and transform their respective cultural worlds of untamed passion.

Nationalists and cultural reformers retained this bifurcation but reversed the valorization of the two realms. To Gandhi and others, the nation resided in India’s cultural communities, while the political world remained a morally empty space that only could be given life by vibrant and ethical communities existing on their own outside of it. This amounted to a radical ‘anti-politics’ – an elevation of religion, tradition and ritual practices into sublime signs of the nation and communities as well as sites of permanent critique of the technical rationalities of modernity. Today, devout Gandhians, and even radical Hindu nationalists inhabit this space (Hansen, 1999). This conceptual structure that makes the realm of politics and state exterior to that of culture and religion is also fundamental to the well-known ‘anti-secularist’ argument associated with Ashis Nandy and T.N. Madan. Madan argues that the notion of the secular is intrinsically tied to Christianity and a Western experience of secularization of the wider social world. In India, Madan argues, religious ethics and practices define the lives of most

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12 Both Hindu and Muslim sepoys were outraged by the fact that they had to bite the top of a new type of cartridge which was rumoured to be greased using pig fat.

13 By the early twentieth century, questions of marriage, inheritance and religious property were governed by separate law complexes for each religious community: Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees and Jews. These were the outcome of a long process of codification of customary practices across the colonial space of British India. See for instance Anderson (1996) and Derrett (1961).

14 See Chatterjee (1993) for a comprehensive and influential analysis of the colonial state and civil society.
people except for a modern and Westernized minority dominating the state and the country’s modern institutions. Consequently, Madan (1987) argues, secularism remains an ineffective and culturally incommensurable proposition in India. Nandy operates with the same stark binary but concedes that a substantial part of the population in India lives in a world dominated by modern institutions, modern politics and modes of thought. The source of violence, Nandy argues, lies exactly in such milieus of deracinated Hindus and Muslims, alienated from traditional forms of tolerance and under the influence of modern and totalizing ideologies of nationalism and communalism. In that sense, communal ideology and secularism belong to the same conceptually modern world, different from the still ‘traditional’ or authentic Indian living in villages and marginal parts of society where tolerance draws sustenance from religious cosmologies and practices (Nandy, 1989; 2002).

In a recent essay, Nandy (2007: 115) argues that modern secularism ‘by itself has proven to be a relatively sterile source of social creativity’. All of the ‘secular icons’ cherished by secular Indians for their tolerance – Gandhi, the poet saint Kabir and the Sufi tradition, the Mughal emperor Akbar to mention a few – are all deeply religious people ‘who never heard of secularism’. While this latter argument is thought-provoking, the central weakness of both Madan’s and Nandy’s arguments is that they remain blind to the fact that most aspects of life of ordinary Indians are already fundamentally shaped by modernity, state and politics. They also do not acknowledge that they both operate within a conceptual schema of colonial provenance. As I will try to demonstrate with a few examples below, competitive politics and attendant ideas of what is secular, and what is not, have been integral to the public life of cultural values and religious attachments in India for a long time.

A Short History of Communal Balancing

With the triumph of the nationalist movement and independence, the construction of the political world began to differentiate. In the 1950s and 60s, high politics was widely regarded as a ‘virtuous vocation’ in which upper caste notions of proper public conduct merged with the ethos of selflessness which freedom fighters had promoted during the nationalist struggle. Many nationalists were wary of the colonial model of management (and manipulation) of religious difference that in their eyes had created a contradiction between the particularist political interest of communities and the overall interest of the new nation. In official discourse, the term ‘communal’ now meant ‘irrational attachment to pre-modern, sub-national identities of caste and religion’ (Tejani, 2007: 49). Communities now had to be encompassed by, and indeed submit to, a wider project of nation building by being transformed into series of cultural communities – all in principle equally worthy of respect and protection, all equally important as moral-symbolic foundations of the state. Now, a Friday namaz (prayer), a mosque or a Hindu procession and a temple were no longer simply manifestations of community and sectarian...
strength, but became articulated as picturesque and awesome manifestations of the very plurality of culture that defined the Indian nation. Religion became transformed into national culture and could in this form remain central to the rituals and procedures of a secular state, and secular democratic politics. Politicians could now consolidate their nationalist and secular credentials by visiting both temples, mosques and gurdwaras, and by attending ceremonies and processions of different communities. Religious manifestations were encouraged and revered as repositories of the cultural legitimacy that the state – routinely depicted by its own officials and by political leaders as mere technocratic machinery – could not generate. Public figures were not supposed to be atheists in order to prove their secular credentials. On the contrary, deep religious convictions of any persuasion were regarded as signs of moral consistency and national devotion, and thus potentially a basis for ethical conduct and secular practices of even-handedness. India’s second president, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, was not only an acclaimed moral philosopher but, like Gandhi, a devout Hindu. An entire generation of social reformers and national public figures in independent India embodied the non-contradiction between being publicly religious, and being equally devoted to even-handed secular practice. Rajeev Bhargava’s (2005) argument that Indian secularism is based on ‘equi-distance’ from any religion should perhaps be reformulated to be ‘equi-intimacy’, at least at the level of symbolic representation. Nehru (1980: 330) was very explicit about the fact that the Indian state should respect religion and faith but avoid ‘state religion’:

It is perhaps not very easy to find a good word in Hindi for ‘secular’. Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That is obviously not correct. What it means is that it is a state that honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; that is, as a state, it does not allow itself to be attached to one faith or religion, which then becomes the state religion.

In other words, the secular state was pursuing a continued separation of two discursive and strategic realms. One was a political realm wherein the interest of national unity, ‘non-preference’ and the rationalities and imperatives of the state compelled political actors to speak and act in certain ways – while at the same time praising the cultural diversity and depth in India. In the realm of the cultural, any community could celebrate itself and its own myths, and were entitled to exclude others. The political realm was not supposed to be ‘contaminated’ by the unilateral

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15 It was never clear, though, to which extent ‘Hindus’ constituted a community as such. Colonial law complexes pertaining to Personal Law remained in place while the sprawling Anglo-Hindu Law was subject to a series of sweeping reforms resulting in the Hindu Code Bill of 1956. It was clear that the equal respect for religious communities pertained less to that of the Hindu majority which the Parliament and the Congress Party felt entitled to subject to deep reforms of its most intimate practices. See Chatterjee (1997) for an insightful discussion of this process.
celebration of one community or the (open) representation of particularistic interests of one confessional group. Similarly, the culture of a community – and by implication the entire nation – would be contaminated if political forces openly interfered with it, thus injecting partiality and ‘communal consciousness’ which in turn would ‘poison the hearts and minds of the people’ as the well-known rhetoric in India still goes.

Beginning in the 1980s, politics became regarded as a more immoral vocation, a zone of unprincipled pragmatism, corruption, nepotism and greed – the profane anti-thesis to the sublime qualities attributed to the cultural realm. Moreover, the social backgrounds and cultural habitus of elected representatives and activists of political parties have changed. Previously drawn mainly from educated upper caste communities, a growing number of individuals from lower caste and ‘plebeian’ social backgrounds have now been attracted to the political field, bringing with them styles of language and social practices that in the eyes of ‘respectable’ citizens appeared both crude and ‘uncultured’ (Jaffrelot, 2002).

According to many a columnist in the Indian dailies, the massive political mobilization of previously silent or marginal communities through electoral politics has produced ‘excessive politicization’, runaway amorality, and a rampant criminalization of public life. Incidents of Hindu-Muslim violence or other kinds of violence in the country are routinely attributed to the instigation of criminal elements, land-grabbers and others who stand accused of manipulating an easily excitable general, plebeian public.

In this influential interpretation, a regeneration of public morality can only come from cultural and religious communities, as if they remained reservoirs of pristine values untouched by the larger transformations of Indian society. Public virtue cannot, it seems, be generated within the realm of politics itself.

The growth of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and affiliated organizations in the 1990s, the seminal conflicts around the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the ensuing decade of pogroms and attacks on Muslims, in particular, changed the political landscape in India and its political common-sense. Open Hindu majoritarianism and public abuse of minorities became more common and acceptable. There was no longer a tacit consensus around what public speech should look like, for instance. Still, however much the BJP attacked official secularism as hypocritical ‘pseudo-secularism’, the fundamental terms of debate and meanings of the secular changed very little. The force of the BJP’s criticism was not that secularism was worthless as a public virtue but that the Congress and others were not secular enough in the Indian sense in that they did not practice proper balance between communities and were accused of pandering to the minorities. While this argument obviously covered a blatant majoritarianism, it was striking that the general terms of discourse were so deep that the BJP never launched a frontal attack on secularism as an ethics of accommodation and communal balancing. It is also worth mentioning that the Hindu nationalist movement itself is structured around a structurally homologous divide between those who are wedded to cultural
activism as a means to consolidate the Hindu nation, and those in favour of political
and electoral mass mobilization to the same end (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996).

The distinction between the political and the cultural, however, is anything
but self-evident in practice. The viability of the distinction depends on a range
of mostly tacit rhetorical and performative codes in public life. Let me mention
just three key areas where these are played out: religious processions, elections
and education – all instances of where the great mass of the uneducated meets the
world of public representation and formal institutions.

Religion and Cultural Activism

Religious processions and festivals have historically occupied a paradigmatic
place in the governance of space and communities in India. The sponsorship of
large religious festivals and temples was pivotal to the legitimacy of the king (see
for instance Stein (1987), Appadurai and Breckenridge (1976)). During colonial
times, the recurrent public spectacles of fervour, passion and intense experiences
of community among different groups condensed the need to draw a line between a
modern, rational and ‘neutral’ state and the supposed sectarianism and irrationality
of community life. After Independence festivals and processions were largely
depoliticized and turned into pure cultural events. If religion now was invoked
at a political rally it had to be in the plural, as a praise of India’s diversity, or as
a critique of all religions. If political themes occasionally were taken up during
religious festivals they would be expected to be of a general nature, invoking the
larger national interest, unity of the country and other uncontroversial elements of
the dominant political discourse.

A good example is the evolution of the Ganpatiutsav in Mumbai, the mass
festival celebrating the elephant-headed god Ganesh. Initially a festival confined to
small Brahmin communities in western India, the nationalist leader Bal Ganghadar
Tilak transformed it in the 1890s to one of the most spectacular Hindu festivals in
the country, serving a dual purpose of anti-colonial mobilization and consolidation
of the Hindu community in the escalating confrontations with Muslims. The
central feature of the festival is still the construction of hundreds of small and
big tableaux, or mandap, by local community groups. These tableaux feature
comments on current events or mythological themes. Initially, the mandap were a
medium for critique and ridiculing of colonial power but after Independence the
themes became more purely cultural or mythological, increasingly sponsored by
large private firms, banks and public institutions. In the last decades, however,
mandap have again become more ‘politicized’ or ‘communal’ as Hindu nationalist
organizations have used the festival to represent themselves to large audiences
(Kaur, 2005).

The pertinent issue is in these mandap tableaux, as in other public cultural
events, remains whether other communities, but not the state, are derided or
abused. The thin line between the two realms is crossed if, say, credentials of
public figures are cast in doubt on the ground of their religious affiliations, or if customs or practices of an entire community are criticized or abused unilaterally. If one criticizes politicians or religious leaders, one must criticize both sides, both Hindus and Muslims, in order to remain ‘secular’. These tacit rules of public speech remain crucibles in the official interpretation of secular practices in India in spite of the obvious fact that the invocation of religious community in the realm of politics has become more widely accepted over the past decades with the rise of the BJP.

However, even the high-profile campaign conducted by the Hindu nationalist movement around reclaiming the supposed birthplace of Lord Ram on the exact site of the Babri mosque in the holy city of Ayodhya, was conducted as a campaign on a cultural issue, the supposedly hurt feelings of the Hindu community. The controversial aspects of this campaign was that it for a large part was conducted and promoted by elected members of Parliament representing the BJP — a fact roundly condemned even by many devout Hindus as a form of undue and excessive politicization of a cultural issue.

The recent split judgment of the Uttar Pradesh High Court in the matter of the contested site in Ayodhya clearly showed that the ‘cultural’ argument regarding Hindu sentiments and the imperative of communal balancing still were assigned more legal weight, and legitimacy, than the actual culpability involved in destroying the mosque, or the blatant political-electoral instrumentailities that drove the campaign against it. In their ruling that concluded a civil suit that began in 1949, the judges of the Allahabad High Court (one Muslim and two Hindus) ruled on 30 September 2010 that the disputed 2.3 acres should be equally divided between the three parties in the suit: the Muslim Waqf Board (which formally owns Muslim religious property); the Nirmohi Akhara, an organization of Hindu ascetics which has resided in Ayodhya for three centuries¹⁶ and is rumoured to be supported by the Congress Party and the government; and Ram Lalla Virajmaan, backed by Hindu nationalist organizations, which was the party representing the infant Lord Ram who Hindu devotees believe was born on the site.¹⁷ The verdict’s formula was to divide the land between Muslims, radical Hindus and moderate

¹⁶ The sect, also known as Ramanandis, is a militant, ascetic Hindu order set up in 1720 by Ramanandacharya to defend the followers of Lord Vishnu (vaishnavaites) against the growing influence of devotees of Shiva (saivaits) in the region. The order is recognized by many militant Hindus but not formally part of the larger Hindu nationalist family of organizations. See van der Veer (1988).

¹⁷ One of the intricacies in this suit is that according to Indian law (Anglo-Hindu law) a residing deity in a temple can be regarded as a legal entity, though only as a perpetual minor which in this case corresponds unusually well with the traditional worship of Lord Ram in Ayodhya as an infant. Ram has since 1949 been represented by various ‘friends’ (sakha) or custodians and backed by organizations like the VHP. On the status of deities as legal minors, see for instance http://www.hindustantimes.com/This-tower-of-Babel/Article1-603070.aspx.
Hindus in order to strike a balance. Many commentators praised the formula and the General Secretary of the Congress Party Digvijay Singh stated: ‘I do not look at it politically. No one should do politics with such a sensitive issue. I do not see it in terms of political gains or losses’ (Times of India, 2 October 2010).

The attempted maintenance of such a spurious boundary between culture and politics has enabled the older genre of cultural ‘anti-politics’ to thrive anew. This genre of speech and practice derives its moral authority from being elevated above the supposed selfishness and immorality of the political world, and it is a form of authority routinely invoked by reformers, social workers, NGOs and so forth. The force of anti-politics as a genre depends squarely on its distance to the world of institutionalized party politics. The most important code within this genre is that of selfless behaviour and public display of asceticism. Hindu nationalist volunteers call themselves ‘self-forgetting volunteers’ (swayamsevaks); most Islamic organizations demand that activists lead pious, ascetic and exemplary lifestyles; and the sincerity of social reformers is judged on the basis of their personal lifestyle and lack of mundane belongings. This code of conduct draws on an older ascetic brahminical ethos which social and cultural nationalists, especially Gandhi and Vivekananda, transformed into a model for nationalist conviction that dominated the anti-colonial movement in the 1920s to 1940s (Basu, 2002).

If this code of asceticism is broken and signs of ostentatious behaviour are found, one forfeits one’s right to speak from the vantage point of the purity of culture or community. In the late 1990s, Anna Hazare, former army man turned Gandhian social activist became a high-profile critic of government policies and corruption in western India. Shifting governments tried to either smear his reputation, spread rumours about his personal life or to co-opt him into participating on government advisory boards, into an alliance with the Congress Party, and so on. They never succeeded in co-opting Hazare but the rumours nonetheless left lasting questions regarding his public stature.18 If cultural or religious organizations take a stand on social issues or current politics, as Hazare did, they are clearly expected to confine themselves to the enunciation of a generalized moral discourse of the good in society, to criticize selfishness in public life, moral decay and divisive tendencies. This was exactly what happened when Anna Hazare spearheaded a massive anti-corruption protest in the summer of 2011. The protest revolved around successive public spectacles of Hazare fasting (in an obvious gesture to Gandhi) in front of the Indian Parliament in Delhi. The movement generated massive support across India and among Indians across the world and its central symbolic force was the body and firm resolve of the 75-year-old ascetic who assiduously had remained aloof from any political party. Somewhat shaken by the strength of the movement, Hazare’s critics in the Congress Party surmised that Hazare was nothing but a front

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18 Anna Hazare is a former military man who retired to create a model village Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra. He was an important player in the campaign to pass the Rights to Information Act (2005) and was awarded the World Bank Award for ‘outstanding public service’ on 15 April 2008 (see Times of India, 15 April 2008).
for various opposition parties, particularly the BJP. Implicitly acknowledging the enduring moral force of the divide between the cultural and the political realm, they suggested that Hazare should shed his cultural garb, ‘come clean’, show his cards and start a political party.19

So if an organization framed as social or cultural steps out of this genre and openly supports a political party, or blames a particular community for the ills of the country, it crosses the line between cultural exhortation and communalism. This thin line becomes even clearer in the case of purely performative gestures. When groups of Hindu nationalist volunteers march through urban areas to call for Hindu unity and social discipline they will claim that this strictly speaking takes place within the realm of cultural and social activism. However, if they pass through a Muslim neighbourhood a bit too conspicuously and loudly the very same gesture can cross the line between culture and open politics. If an otherwise wholly traditional Hindu procession with its music and chants stops a bit too long in front of a mosque, this can also potentially turn into a political statement.

Conversely, if Islamic volunteers preach austerity and obedience to the Quran as the path to a better society, they are safely within the cultural realm. But if the same activists employ identical arguments in the presence of people from a political party, their gesture immediately becomes open to interpretation as political and thus ‘communal’. When Hindu nationalists embark on paternalist projects of education of tribal communities in India’s hilly regions and claim to ‘rescue’ these communities by turning them towards the general values of Hinduism, they can claim to conform with Gandhian ideas of inclusivist nation building. But when the very same movement uses anti-Muslim or anti-Christian rhetoric to further its cause, or when tribals play key roles in attacks on Muslims (as in Gujarat in 2002) or Orissa (2008), their Hindu educational program appears as a communal gesture. The gesture or performance that signifies communalism in the overtly ‘political’ part of the public realm may well pass for cultural activism in another part of the public realm.

Elections

Another great public spectacle in India is the election campaign, with its mass rallies, marches, ceaseless and loud campaigning, use of colours and images. According to the longstanding ideals of Indian democracy, political representation should take place through educated leaders who perform the necessary translations

19 In August 2012, Arvind Kejriwal, one of the key aides to Anna Hazare, announced that the so called ‘Team Anna’ indeed would start a political party. Hazare announced that he would support the party and its course but never run for any office on a ticket (Times of India, 3 August 2012). Many supporters bemoaned this gesture as a form of betrayal of the wider anti-corruption campaign because they believed that it was the realm of electoral politics that remains the very problem.
of various feelings and embodied passions into a language of proper, responsible
demands, recognition or even legislation and state regulation – in some ways an
Indian version of the secular supersensible.

This interpretation of a public secular ethics was authorized in 1995 by the
judges of the Supreme Court who in the case against Bal Thackeray, the leader of
the militant Hindu movement Shiv Sena, found him guilty of spreading ‘communal
enmity’ between Hindus and Muslims during election campaigns.20 The judges
emphasized the particular responsibility of political leaders: ‘... leaders (must be)
more circumspect and careful in the kind of language they use ... for maintaining
decency and propriety ... and for the preservation of the proper and time honoured
values forming part of our cultural heritage’. The judges had the following to say
about religious utterances in the public, particularly during elections ‘mention of
religion as such in a election speech is not forbidden ... when it is said that religion
and politics do not mix, it merely means that the religion of a candidate cannot
be used for gaining political mileage on the ground of the candidate’s religion or
by alienating the electorate against another candidate on the ground of the other
candidate’s religion.’

Despite such caution during election times there are few instances of legal
intervention to prevent the dissemination of rabid propaganda outside election
times. No Hindu ideologue has been taken to court for defamatory statements about
Muslims or others, statements which in the 1990s became completely routinized
and widely circulated. Section 259a of the Indian Penal Code does provide legal
grounds for imposing legal strictures on speech and printed material. However,
such material or speech must be produced with ‘deliberate’ and ‘malicious intent’
in order to fall under this section.21 In 1998, a young magistrate in Pune explained
this apparent discrepancy to me:

On a day-to-day basis, many district magistrates are hesitant to use this section
against, say, an organization like VHP or Shiv Sena, although they technically
could. They are afraid of political consequences. Maybe they will be seen as too
keen by the Police Commissioner and they may be transferred very soon ... the
problem is how one can prove ‘malicious intent’? The Shiv Sena, for example,
always says that it is just talking straight (seeda), from the heart (dil se). How
can that be malicious? Or a crime? Only during election time can one argue that
whatever people do and say is done with the purpose of winning votes ... That
is the reason why we have all these cases around that time.

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21 ‘Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious
feelings of any class of [citizens of India], [by words, either spoken or written, or by signs
or by visible representations or otherwise], insults or attempts to insult the religion or the
religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for
a term which may extend to [three years], or with fine, or with both’ (Indian Penal Code,
Section 259a).
Public conduct and speech during election times are also more strictly regulated because of real concerns with public order. Magistrates care less about whether enmity prevails in everyday life, but focus on the moments where ‘the masses’ can be aroused into destructive action. Confronted with an ever more ‘plebeian’ and unruly electoral process in India, the India’s Electoral Commission has acquired a stronger and more heavy-handed role. High-profile Election Commissioners such as T.N. Seshan in the 1990s and J.M. Lyngdoh in more recent times have become heroes to the middle class because they are seen as stern bureaucrats acting as impartial voices of reason and fair play from the commanding heights of the central government. This, argues Nivedita Menon (2007: 120), reflects a ‘fantasy of clean politics’ in which the state imposes order on the unruly ‘public’. The celebration of the Electoral Commission and its belief that new technology can limit fraud shows ‘a[n] impatience with the messy realities of politics … contempt for the ordinary citizen, hatred of their rustic leaders … In short an ideological mask of I-love-democracy-but-hate-politics’ (Yadav, 1996: 60, quoted in Menon, 2007).

This is symptomatic of an emerging split in the realm of politics between, on the one hand, a tumultuous and energetic arena of electoral politics dominated by ‘plebeian’ forces and despised by many middle class Indians; and, on the other, a new love for the ‘neutral’ machinery of bureaucracy and the state proper by middle class activists who campaign for selective issues in the name of the aam admi (common man), a figure richly invoked in Indian political discourse, while hoping for direct, a-political and efficient technical solutions to India’s many developmental problems.22 Understood in this context, current apprehensions about the crisis of secularism and the decline of proper secular conduct also reflect powerful class apprehensions projected onto the field of politics in contemporary India.

Education and Politics

Higher education and instruction in English have historically been regarded as the means to instil a modern grammar into young minds, enabling them to transcend narrow bonds of community. ‘We try to teach our students to look at the bigger picture, that is, to look at the country as a whole. Only then will they see that there is more that unites us then what divides us’. This is how Sadjid, a high-school teacher in Mumbai, once described the purpose of teaching history and civics to young people in his school in a working class district marred by tense relationships between Hindus and Muslims. In this classical Nehruvian vision, higher education was the anvil wherein modern, national identities and a scientific worldview were produced. A large number of schools and colleges have remained ‘community-institutions’, run by churches and religious trusts of all faiths. To be recognized and receive grants, schools have to follow official curricula and they are expected

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to honour the founding fathers of the nation and India’s plural culture. Other than that, they are allowed to promote and represent their own particular community symbols, festivals and cultural heroes. Sajjid taught in one of the city’s many municipal schools but his two sons were both attending a local English medium school run by a Catholic trust.

It is the best school around here. It is very strict and that is what matters to me. They get a better education than they would get in one of the Muslim schools or even my own school. ... when the other children are taught their religion in school, all the Muslim boys just have time off. I see no problem in that.

Citizenship and the capacity for responsible, balanced and thus ‘secular’ conduct and decision, is widely regarded to be more effectively manufactured at educational institutions than in the political process, or in the public as such. The differences between those who possess this asset, and those who do not, constitutes a deep cleavage, more enduring and maybe more critical than even the rift between religious communities. To this day in India, divisions of class and caste tend to converge along a rift between those with a certain ‘background’, and those without. Secular tolerance is intrinsic to the pedagogical mission of the modern state vis-à-vis the masses who are too consumed by religious passion to fully govern themselves. This notion of an innocent people to be protected by enlightened middle class citizens is still perpetuated by the interpretation of riots and other collapses of civic order as the handiwork of ubiquitous ‘criminals’, land-grabbers and goonda (criminals). Shock is still feigned in the public realm when it appears, again and again, that middle class people were active participants in riots and atrocities.23

The deep gulf between the differential standards and concerns applied to the educated and the non-educated is glaringly obvious in Marc Galanter’s analysis of the criteria for legitimate conversions from one religion to another in a number of Supreme Court cases. Galanter shows that there exists a legal practice according to which the validity of a conversion among the (uneducated) ‘lower strata’ of society may depend on independent empirical evidence of actually changed ritual practices within a community, because rituals are assumed to be of utmost importance for people of this class’, as a judgment states. One must add that the judges also assume that the utterances and self-descriptions by ‘this class’ supposedly cannot be trusted. In the case of educated people, the required evidence is merely an unequivocal enunciation of intent ‘I am a Muslim and no longer a Hindu’. Only the educated can be entrusted with the right to speak truthfully and authentically about herself. It is noteworthy that in both cases it is not enough to say, for instance, ‘I am not a Hindu’, or to renounce all Hindu practices. One remains a Hindu or Muslim

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23 The latest example of this was the aftermath of the riots in Gujarat in 2002 where numerous reports indicated that middle class people had been generally active and complicit in the anti-Muslim pogrom. See documentation in Varadarajan (2002).
until one has proved in practice, or said unequivocally, that one is something else (Galanter, 1989: 237–58).

One of the recent examples of the continued belief in education as the road to tolerance and full citizenship was the scheme proposed by the Government of India in April 1994 to include Muslim madrasahs into the existing grant-in-aid structure that funds a large number of educational institutions in India. Inspired by an already existing scheme run by the West Bengal government, the Union Government indicated that it was willing to pay salaries to the teachers in madrasahs provided that they introduced science classes. The reasoning behind the scheme was that ‘modern secular education’ would instil different attitudes in the minds of children from the poor Muslim mohallas (neighbourhoods), and would help these children to be equipped to cope with the requirements of the modern labour market and thus eventually break out of the narrow-minded attitudes supposedly perpetuated by madrasahs.

This scheme, which was never implemented fully because of widespread resistance among imams running the madrasahs, captured central features of the practices of the secular state in India. Anxious to promote inter-community peace and curb the reproduction of sectarian identities, the government decided to implement reform of and through the religious institutions of minority groups. Instead of expanding and enhancing the quality of government schools imparting ‘modern secular education’ in Muslim areas, the government chose to govern through religious institutions, ostensibly to give Muslims the same treatment and possibilities as other communities.24

Every year, millions of young people graduate from educational institutions across India, some of open religious provenance, others supposedly secular by virtue of being run by the state. The latter are often imparting very strongly Hindu majoritarian ideas of the nation and history, as Veronique Benei (2008) has shown for western India. All school leavers have probably acquired some scientific knowledge but neither necessarily the secular, balanced and nationalist outlook praised by Sadjid, nor the inclination towards reasoned argument that is believed to be intrinsic to such an attitude. Modern technology does not equal modernist teleology. Graduates with technical skills have in fact proved to be some of the most receptive audiences to both Hindu nationalism and modern Islamist ideology.

The governmental support for madrasahs in West Bengal was thrown into a prolonged crisis when supposedly Islamist gunmen attacked the American Center in Calcutta. The minister of education in the state was quick to blame certain madrasahs as sites of ‘anti-national’ ideology and thus, by implication, co-responsible for the bloody attack. In his discussion of his political crisis, Partha

24 See reports and interviews on the scheme in Times of India (3 April 1994). In keeping with the underlying rationality of ‘communal balancing’ of resources and entitlements, one of arguments for the scheme was that since most of the Christian and Hindu educational institutions receive grant-in-aid from the government, this ought to apply to the Muslim community as well.
Chatterjee (2007: 153–6) argues that it revealed constitutive weaknesses of Indian secularism: firstly, there are no protocols for identifying proper representatives of religious and cultural minorities with whom the government can interact and negotiate. Secondly, there is no agreement on where and how public debates on change within minority communities can take place. However, Chatterjee concludes that the madrasah itself is good example of how the ‘political’ and the ‘cultural’ are inextricably linked in what he has famously termed ‘political society’ – the interface between community institutions and governmental agencies. A madrasah requires both community support and active intervention from political leaders to sustain itself. ‘It can potentially democratize the question of who represents the minorities’ (Chatterjee, 2007: 155). It is clear, once more, that however spurious and contradictory the boundary between politics and culture, it consistently structures public debates and political interventions across India.

Conclusions

All of the binaries defining the field of debate around the secular – feeling versus reason, culture versus politics, religious passion versus educated restraint – seem in India to boil down to the same thing. The problem lies squarely on the side of the poor and uneducated, and the irresponsible educated men and women, supposed to know better, who instigate violence and produce intolerance, who push a narrow and backward looking ethos of community into the shared ground of the national public that ideally should be governed by an ethos of ‘responsibility’, care for the greater good, the nation and the welfare of all subjects. Violence between Hindus and Muslims is at this level of discourse seen as a form of infection and is routinely addressed in official prose in medicalized terms as ‘malignant’, as ‘cancer’ and so on.25 Many Indian intellectuals are despondent about the future of secularism as older styles of attachments to the Nehruvian nation-state ideals and its project of modernization have ceded ground to a vitalist politics of the religious right which has few qualms about using emotions and passions to the full in their often violent political practices.

The return of the Congress Party and its allies to power in 2006 on a platform of social justice and redistribution seemed to suggest that the inclusive Nehruvian ideals of the nation remain powerful. However, Indian politic life has changed with the deepening of democracy in ways that blur the boundary between ‘culture’ and ‘politics’. The language of ‘injury’, hurt and victimization, and claims to entitlements flowing from past injustices has become victorious among lower caste communities and other historically marginal groups. The presence of these claims and the communities they mobilize in the heart of the political process represent major achievements for democracy in India. It has also given a new centrality to passions grounded in embodied experiences of defined social and

25 See Hansen (2001) for analysis along these lines.
cultural communities, and a hard-won collective and cultural pride. Many of the political formations based in lower caste communities have opposed the Hindu nationalist majoritarian agenda which they regard as brahminism in another guise. As a result, they have attracted substantial electoral support from Muslims and other minorities.

This process has also confirmed the logic enshrined in the Constitution: ameliorating the effects of social and historical injustices, such as caste, that can be said to be intrinsic to Hindu culture remain a legitimate problematic in India whereas questions of religious minority status are not. In 2006, a comprehensive report on the status and living conditions of India’s Muslims in 2006 recommended that the community’s marginality and poverty would be best remedied by acknowledging the detrimental effects of caste practices among Muslims. By accepting this, the majority of Muslims who belong to lower caste categories could access the various educational and occupational entitlements that are available to those defined as lower caste in India. This indicated that the constitutional framework still holds: religious passions and attachments must remain in the ‘cultural’ realm while only those passions that emerge from shared historical inequalities can be admitted into the realm of electoral politics.

Another lesson one can draw from India is that secularism is neither a bloodless, legal protocol taming the passions, nor a substantial ideology with its own religiously inflected rituals of worship of the political community, as Bellah (1967) argued with respect to ‘civic religion’ in the United States. The secular in India has usually developed as a constant juggling of the possibilities and spaces opening between more hardened and reified positions of non-negotiable moral registers, some of them routinely expressing their passions by violent means. The actual secular ethics in contemporary India is probably much less substantially secular than Nehru had hoped. Rather, the secular is predominantly an effect of irreducible pluralism and the manufacturing of agile compromises and coalitions in multiple spaces of tactical agreements, most of the time laboured over by privately partisan men and women in the name of the nation, or the prudence of public order. The real stumbling blocks of the secular are therefore the elements that limit such agility: the deep fear of the popular passion, and the prejudice that popular politics intrinsically is prone to violence, including sectarian violence. Indian democracy is indeed full of hard, enduring and often violent conflicts but it is also becoming ever more socially inclusive, constantly challenging emotions, entrenched privilege and cultural certitudes in new domains. This amounts to an enormous storehouse of political skill and experience in democratic politics, and the tactical spaces it opens for secularity of many kinds. It certainly makes Indian secularism perpetually imperfect in the eyes of those committed to substantive secular values, but also annoyingly persistent in the eyes of the avowed enemies of the secular.

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