Nehru against Nehruvians
On Religion and Secularism

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Nehru's secular ideals are one of complexity and aim to harness the plural nature of the diverse range of religious beliefs and traditions in India. His secularism is in opposition to the framework of secularism found in Europe and America, and is of great importance to the country today—given the perversion of his ideology which has been routinely misrepresented by his successors.

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Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the central figures in the anti-colonial movement against the British and the first Prime Minister of Independent India, is widely believed to be a westernised intellectual, influenced by mainstream views of the Enlightenment—religion being a storehouse of falsehoods and superstition. As an atheist, religion raised some important questions about human existence, but at best, answered them incorrectly and dogmatically.[1] It petrified old beliefs and customs and encouraged an attitude against social reform and revolution. Science and philosophy, on the other hand, encouraged critical reasoning and self-reliance in intellectual matters, helped take a distant and detached view of things and opened the mind towards progressive change. Thus, Nehru pitted scientific reason against religious faith. No wonder then, Nehru also espoused for a secular state—a state that separated itself from religion and was indifferent, if not hostile, to it. Some have found striking similarities between him and Ataturk, except that, because of the constraints of democracy and diversity, he failed where Ataturk had succeeded (at least during his time in power).

In this article, I try to argue that Nehru's views on religion and secularism were unusually subtle and considerably more complex than is suggested by this simplistic portrayal. Besides, they remain acutely relevant in (to) India today. To be sure, some Nehruvians in the late 1960s and 1970s, encouraged by some of Nehru's own remarks, played more than a small role in constructing this picture. Nehru's views on religion and secularism, indeed even his considered political practice, were very different from those espoused under the "Nehruvian Secularism" that emerged soon after his death—a handiwork of intellectuals close to his daughter, Indira Gandhi. It is an argument of this article that Nehruvian views on secularism must give way to Nehru's own views on the matter.

On Religion and Plurality

To begin with, Nehru was neither comfortable with the terms, "Religion" nor "Secular." For instance, on religion, he says in his autobiography, "The word 'religion' has lost all precise significance (if it ever had it!) and only causes confusion and gives rise to interminable debate and argument. It would be far better if it was dropped from use altogether" (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 135).

To understand why Nehru thought so, allow me to draw you into a thought experiment—an eight-step longue durée—a speculative history of human beings! So assume that at some point of time in the distant past, we begin to develop a capacity for transcendence: that is, to step back and look beyond life as we see it today, to holistically examine our existence and the world, to dispassionately see its limitations and aspire to overcome them (Step 1). A gap then emerges between what we currently are and what we could be, when we are at our best. We then strive to overcome this gap, search for a vision—both a personal and collective vision—with which we can chart a journey of self-fulfilment/self-cultivation/self-development/and self-perfection. If the issue of death worries us, we seek an answer to the question: how can we be saved in the face of death (salvation)? In short, we are in search for a vision that helps us to clarify and sharpen our questions, provide answers to what these ideals should be and how are lives to be shaped by practices of self-formation, informed by such ideals.

One important condition for finding such a path is getting the right guidance, most likely from a teacher who has the requisite brilliance, insight and wisdom, a teacher dead or alive who has a deep influence in shaping our character, practice and perspective on life and the world. So let us pursue our thought experiment and imagine that (in Step 2)

people begin to follow the teachings of a great teacher. They become followers of a path towards self-realisation—Way (Marga, Dao). And in Step 3, let us say, that over time a fellow feeling develops, a loose sense of community amongst the followers develops—very important, as self-cultivation needs mutual learning, influence and reinforcement. So, self-development is a guided social activity. Teachers and other learners are crucial.

This lightly organised human endeavour, this gamut of practices, dispositions and characteristics, Nehru was prepared to accept as religion, in one important sense. Call it Religion A. In this sense, he says, religion "consists of the inner development of the individual, the evolution of his consciousness in a certain direction which is considered good. What that direction is, will again be a matter of debate. But as far as I understand it, religion lays stress on this inner development and considers outward change as the projection of this inward development" (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 135).

A Genuine Perspective

No man can live without Religion A, here Nehru agrees with Gandhi, who "is using the term in a broadly ethical and moral sense," according to Nehru (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 136). He then goes on to quote John Dewey, the American philosopher, "Religion is whatever introduces genuine perspective into the piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence; or again any activity pursued on behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss, because of conviction of its general and enduring value, is religious in quality. If this is religion no one can have the slightest objection to it" (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 136).

Now these conceptions of a higher good and a path towards self-realisation may be gods or goddesses dependent (as in ancient societies such as in India, Greece and Rome), or be god-dependent (monotheistic religions such as in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths), or they could be independent of god—faith in the rightness of human action and human rationality (as in visions of an atheist/secular society). Such god-independent standards developed first in ancient Greece (Plato) and India (Buddha, Jaina, Mimamsa). India was home to many religions (Religion A), since ancient times, even though it neither had a word for religion nor a distinction between religion and philosophy. Some people lived their lives presupposing gods and goddesses, some presupposing one god and some, as if no god existed at all. Nehru understood and experienced this deep religious diversity, and its acceptance for Asian faiths displayed characteristic features associated with "polytheistic" societies.[2] In virtually all cultures of classical antiquity, each god performed a function based on his (or her) cosmic competence. Thus, there are gods of love, war, knowledge or of, craftsmanship, for example. Therefore, each god embodied an entity of potentially cosmic significance: there are gods of fire, rain, earth, time, sun, moon, sea and/or primal gods who can create, destroy, preserve and so on. The god of love in one culture could also then acquire the name of the god of love from another culture. This way differences continue to be viewed as irreducible, yet translatable. One might even call this feature of translatability a theology of recognition. The gods of each culture are recognised within the background of a common semantic universe.

Certainly, this implicit theology of polytheism and inclusive monotheism permit the easy movement across religions. If different names refer to the same god or if the same god has different cultural backgrounds, then why create a fuss about leaving one and embracing another? Indeed, why not embrace both?[3] Eventually, this theological mode of coping with diversity could be enlarged, to include perspectives or soteriologies that do not depend on gods. One can deploy the more general term, "ethic of self-realisation" that includes god-dependent, gods and goddesses-dependent and god-non-dependent ethics, pertaining to humans and even non-human selves. Each of these ethics can be treated as a way of being or relating to the ultimate, in whichever way the latter is defined or understood.

Nehru learnt from his own experience and from under the influence of Gandhi that this deep diversity was a major feature of the Indian religious landscape. Nehru himself embraced Religion A—a faith in modern humanism and rationality. He held it and the values yielded by it, as the highest normative ideals, but he also realised that this Religion A was one among many others. He accepted that while each of these were sufficient, none were necessary for self-realisation. Nehru uses quotes of Romain Rolland to make this point:

> It is the quality of thought and not its object which determines its sources and allows us to decide whether or not it emanates from religion. If it turns fearlessly towards the search for truth at all costs with single minded sincerity for any sacrifice, I should call it religious; for it presupposes faith in an end to human effort higher than the life of existing society and even higher than the life of humanity as a whole (this is what I have above called the capacity for transcendence). In this sense scepticism can also join the march of the Grand Army of the religious soul (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 137).

If so, Nehru concludes, "I am prepared to be a humble camp-follower of the Grand Army."[4]

Having demonstrated the importance of Religion A in Nehru's personal life and for human life more generally, and having shown the profound inescapability of Religion A's plurality, allow me to continue with my thought experiment and take the next step. Imagine now, that over time the community of Religion A develops an institutional structure, involving hierarchies of power and status (Step 4). Some of these grow, because a section of followers from within the community have taken upon themselves the responsibility to first, systematise the teachings and then, to give coherence to them. In short, these teachings are now turned into intellectual doctrines (Step 5). What was once a loose community now has a highly doctrine-oriented, bureaucratic structure. The pursuit of Religion A is now dependent upon one's belongingness to this tightly institutionalised community. A quality of human beings, religiousness (as Nehru defines it), that belongs to humans is reified and becomes external to persons—something to what humans belong to.[5]

We have already posited the plurality of Religion(s) A. If most of these religions

undergo Steps 4 and 5, then there would be many such socio-intellectual systems. Given the importance of doctrines, some within the bureaucratic structures become gatekeepers who keep strict rules of entry and exit (Step 6). Perhaps, some of these are proselytisers and so they view each other as rivals fighting for individual allegiances and slowly, they begin to define themselves in opposition to one another (Step 7). They even break each other's heads over differences of doctrine or practice. And even, the heads of their own who differ from the doctrines they define (Step 8). Let us say that Religion(s) A, which have taken Steps 4 through 8, have become religions, in another, second sense, namely—Religion B.

Now, because religion has come to refer both to Religion A (teachings of self-development) and Religion B (institutionalised, power-laden, status-ridden and doctrine-oriented), Nehru developed a deep ambivalence to it. He revered Religion A and found Religion B repugnant. He wished to disentangle the two, but since they had virtually become inseparable, he wanted to drop the term altogether. On the other hand, given its general acceptance, he obviously could not do so. Which is why he concluded that "the use of the same word with different meanings makes mutual comprehension still more difficult" (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 136).

To illustrate his point, Nehru engaged with Gandhi once again, after Gandhi had written, "No man could live without religion." "There are some who in the egotism of their reason declare that they have nothing to do with religion. But that is like a man saying that he breathes, but that he has no nose" Nehru said. "My devotion to truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation that that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means" Gandhi retorted. To which Nehru stated that "Perhaps it would have been more correct if [Gandhi] had said that most of these people who wish to exclude religion from life politics mean by that word religion something very different from what he means" (Nehru 1942). Nehru, here, clearly implied that by religion, Gandhi like himself, meant Religion A. And like Gandhi, Nehru could not see how politics could be conducted without Religion A and like Gandhi, he would not mix politics with Religion B. But as we see, both of them called Religion A simply religion or true religion or religion in the best sense and referred to Religion B as communal.

On Secular States and Secularism

Nehru stated that, "The word 'secular' is perhaps not a happy one. And yet for want of a better term, we use it and call our state a secular state" (Chandra et al 2001). So what was his conception of the secular state?

For a start, no matter how great one religion might be in the first sense (A), the state cannot identify with it or with any other. It cannot attach itself to any one religion and declare it as the state religion. The state may be nourished by *all or by none*. Even if the majority of a country owes their allegiance to one of the religions, so that the general climate is coloured, as he believed India's is, with the Hindu ethos, the state should not be Hindu (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 194–95). He was particularly critical of the "Hindu *Rashtra*" or a Hindu nation state.

> It may sound very nice to some people that we will create a Hindu Rashtra but I cannot understand what it means. Hindus are in the majority in this country and whatever they wish will be done. But the moment you talk of a Hindu Rashtra, you speak in a language which no other country except one can comprehend and that country is Pakistan because they are familiar with this concept. They can immediately justify their creation of an Islamic nation by pointing to the world that we are doing something similar.[6] … Hindu Rashtra can only reduce the status of those who are not Hindus. … You may say patronisingly that you will look after the Muslims or Christians or others … but do you think any race or individual will accept for long the claim that they are looked after while we sit high above them? (2003: 186).

Not only does it reduce the status of others, it marginalises them and makes them feel inferior. Thus, since all states in the modern era are nation states, Nehru opposed all narrow nationalisms, including religious ones. In religiously diverse societies, all religious nationalisms are exclusionary. He may have underestimated the power of such nationalisms when he said that they (religions) were "relics of the past and were backward" however, his critique was heading in the right direction. The nationalism that needs to be built in India, he argued, must have its doors and windows open to internationalism. But for this to happen, the state must not identify with even any Religion A. The ends promoted by any Religion A, no matter how valuable, cannot be the ends of a secular state.

Second, in Nehru's view, a secular state cannot be an anti-religious state (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 194). It is not a state where religion as such is discouraged, or pushed into oblivion (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 195). How could he indiscriminately oppose religion or espouse its absence, given his acknowledgement of the indispensability and value of Religion A? He also appreciated the fact that, since many faiths expressed themselves publicly, a secular state must accept the public presence of all Religion(s) A. There should, he insisted, be "free play for all religions (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 192)." A secular state must protect each of their places of worship and guarantee their religious practices. It must protect freedom of religion and conscience, including, of course, the freedom for those who have no religion (including atheists). Indeed, Nehru goes a step further and says that the state must honour all faiths equally and give them equal opportunity. Of course, this is a duty of a secular state, in a religiously diverse society and the duty of both minority and majority communities, to not jeopardise the ideals of the secular state.

But what should a secular state do in relation to Religion B—aspects of a religion in terms of status and power hierarchies, doctrinal matters, on inter-religious rivalry, on hate-speech and inter-religious violence? It might be worth recalling that all secular states must satisfy at least two requirements. They must (a) disconnect from the ends specified by the doctrines of any Religion B and (b) religious personnel—such as church officials or theologians—must not become state officials or at the least, they should not be guaranteed a place within the structures of the state, just because of their religious status or position (a common

feature in theocracies and even in states with powerful religious establishments).

In India, the second disconnection was not seriously on the table because one, historically imperial practice was largely shaped by secular considerations of power and wealth accumulation and two, democratic ideas did not entertain any substantive or automatic connection between religious and political personnel. So, a secular state must disconnect from Religion B at both these levels, of doctrines, institutions and personnel. But it is claimed sometimes that a secular state must meet another, third condition—it must also disconnect at the level of law and public policy. Nehru might have been tempted to take this view; given that he opposed any state hostility to religion as had happened during different phases, in France, Turkey and under various communist regimes. If states do not negatively and indiscriminately intervene in religions, should they not keep off? Show their respect by altogether disconnecting from them, even, in terms of state policy and law? He must have been aware, that this was how the first amendment in the United States (US) (American secularism) was and is frequently interpreted. A wall between church and state means that both, the church and the state, must not interfere with one another—that they have their own well-demarcated areas of jurisdiction and that the religious domain cannot be the object of state policy and law. The US Congress is not supposed to legislate on any matter pertaining to the church. However, given, Nehru's views on Religion B, such an option was not available to him.

So, what was his stance on Religion B? For a start, he had to acknowledge that India's religious landscape had changed considerably. Religion A had begun to more closely resemble Religion B, with the result, that religious coexistence in India could no longer be taken for granted. However, religion in this new avatar had morphed into something worse and was entirely responsible for, what I have referred to elsewhere as, the majority–minority syndrome. Religion had become a diseased network of neurotic relations, so completely poisoned and accompanied by a vertiginous assortment of negative emotions (envy, malice, jealousy, spite, and hatred) that the collective delirium and cold-blooded acts of revenge, sent groups on a downward path of deeper and still deeper estrangement—which were mindlessly, alternately and cyclically generated. This was reminiscent of Europe where in the 16 century "the other" was viewed as an existential threat, where doctrinal differences were not just mere intellectual disagreements, but were cast in a way, that undermined basic trust in one another. "The other" could not be lived with, and simply had to be expelled or exterminated.

Tasks of a Secular State

It is a feature of this syndrome, that groups make demands of one another that can rarely be fulfilled: they conjure up imaginary grievances, insist precisely on that which hurts the other most, at times obsessively desire the very same thing that the other wants and at another time, the exact opposite and always negate the claims of the other. In this condition, animosity between the groups circulates freely, adding layer upon layer of grievances, while antagonistic games are played with no end in mind other than the defeat and humiliation of the other. Nehru's contemporary, the great Dalit leader, B R Ambedkar provided several examples:

> Hindus and Muslims make preparations against each other," he tells us, "without abatement, reminding one of a race in armaments between two hostile nations. If the Hindus have the Banaras University, the Musalmans must have the Aligarh University. If the Hindus start a *Shuddhi* movement, the Muslims must launch the *Tablig* movement. If the Hindus start sangathan, the Muslims must have the *Tanjim*. If the Hindus have the RSS, the Muslims must reply by organising the *Khaksars.* (Ambedkar 1945)

A group of Muslims had psyched themselves into a state of paranoia that was only partly grounded in fears of inter-religious domination, but which got exacerbated and became a very real prospect, after the formation of Pakistan. An important task of the secular state then, given that there were severe doubts about religious coexistence, which had forced itself into the public arena, was to ensure that all religious communities lived at peace with one another and that there be, to use Gandhi's term, "communal harmony."

To generalise even more, secularism came to be used for a certain comportment of the state, whereby it must distance itself from all Religion B in order to perform its primary function; to ensure trust and confidence between religious communities. Put more generally, a secular state must promote sociability and foster a certain quality of relations among religious communities. The term Nehru uses for this is "cooperation."[7] To foster cooperation between different religious communities is a constitutive objective of a secular state.

Furthermore, the prospect of this inter-religious domination—when members of one religious community with or without the help of state power discriminate against, marginalise, exclude, oppress, degrade or humiliate members of other religious communities—played a very important role in Nehru's conception of secularism. It is the duty of a secular state to protect religious diversity and to undermine inter-religious domination. Much of the motivation for this domination comes, as we have seen above, not from Religion(s) A, but from Religion(s) B. The state cannot simply keep off or separate itself from Religion(s) B. If it is necessary for the state to intervene in Religion B, by law and public policy, it must do so. For Nehru, communalism meant the domination by one religious community over other religious communities (2003: 173). If this is so, a secular state must oppose communalism, regardless of whether it stems from the minority or the majority (2003: 192–3). If that community is in a minority, it goes against the grain of all ideas of democracy. But if that community is in a majority, its dominance over other communities is undemocratic.

In order to protect minorities from majoritarian domination, it is crucial that these communities be given community-specific minority rights so that they are able to procure all those benefits that come routinely to the majority community. In a religiously diverse society, where the prospects of inter-religious domination loom large, a secular state's

respect for all religions manifests itself as a commitment to minority rights. A state then may have to intervene in the majoritarian acts of a religious community, which it cannot do if the separation between the two is strict or "perfect."

In fact, Nehru's conception of secularism was broader still. For Religion B was also ridden with intra-religious domination—a condition in which some members of a religious community oppress, exclude, discriminate against, humiliate and degrade other members of the same community. This happens because of the hierarchies of status and power, already embedded in Religion B. He provides three stark instances of such domination. The first one is religiously justified as inter-caste domination, the ugliest expression of which is the practice of untouchability—the exclusion and stigmatisation of a group that is made to work and perform jobs that no other person is prepared to, but they are also systematically treated in a sub-human manner, offending any sense of dignity and equality.

Nehru says that "the word secular conveys something much more to him, although that might not be its dictionary meaning—the idea of social and political equality." A state that encourages or tolerates such deeply inegalitarian and casteist practices, is not a secular state (2003: 192). Nehru found casteism to be as dangerous as communalism, because both are effective barriers to democracy and equality. So secularism is pitted against religiously grounded casteism. Second, although he does not use the term religiously grounded "patriarchy," secularism is also pitted against this form of intra-religious domination. As early as in 1934, addressing Prayag Vidyapeeth, he said

> Our civilisation, our customs, our laws have all been made by man and he has taken good care to keep himself in a superior position and to treat the woman as chattel and a plaything to be exploited for his own advantage and amusement. Under this continuous pressure the woman has been unable to grow and develop her capacities to her fullest and then man has blamed for her backwardness. (Nehru 2007: 18)

He continues,

> For all of us, therefore, the first problem that presents itself is how to free India and remove the many burdens of the Indian masses. But the women of India have an additional task that is free themselves from the tyranny of man-made customs and laws. They will to carry on this second struggle by themselves for man is not likely to help them. (Nehru 2007: 18)

He provides many examples of this particular form of intra-religious domination. Addressing the young girls of the Vidyapeeth, he says,

> The purdah, that evil relic of the barbarous age, which imprisons the body and mind of so many of our sisters—will you not tear it to bits and burn the fragments? … Our marriage laws and many of our out of date customs which hold us back and especially crush our womenfolk, will you not combat them and bring them in line with modern conditions? (Nehru 2007: 17)

The third instance of intra-religious domination that drew his attention was the domination of ordinary persons by religious clerics, from bigots to fanatics, and how, the orthodox among Hindus and Muslims frequently came together in order to ensure the continuation of women's oppression. "Brahmins are prepared to march shoulder to shoulder with the Maulvies, the priests from the Ghats fraternise with the mullahs from the mosques against any freedom and equality-oriented internal reform" (Nehru 2006). Given this socially oppressive and politically meddlesome stance of religious elites, Nehru argued, that the "high priests of religion cannot take decisions on social and political questions." A stance against social reaction and in favour of freedom in the social sphere, against all those religious organisations and collectives that work against individual freedom, must be strengthened in order to regulate their power. Religion B is the "fountainhead of authoritarianism and meek submission," he claimed. Thus, a secular state must also inhibit and regulate the continuing attempt by the high priests of religion to impose their views and norms on ordinary men and women (Nehru 2006: 141).

Nehru's Secular Framework

So, Nehru's views on secularism were subtle, complex and distinctive. Unlike the model that often operated in Modern France and Turkey and approved by some post-Nehru Nehruvians, it was not anti-religious. In this model, call it model 1—(a) religion is not officially recognised; (b) it becomes a target of active disrespect by a state that excludes religion from its affairs but retains the power to intervene in religion; (c) it is removed from the public domain, that is, it is privatised; (d) qualification of citizenship, both membership in the state and all rights, is made wholly independent of religious affiliation. Similarly, Nehru's views were unlike another model—model 2 which is seen in the US—in which (a) the non-recognition of religion is often accompanied by a different understanding of what separation means. Here, religion and state are mutually excluded from each other—neither has the right or the power to intervene in the affairs of one another; (b) the state has no power to intervene in religious affairs; (c) there is no active disrespect but rather there is continuous favour and an unqualified passive respect for religion; and (d) qualification of citizenship, both membership in the state and all rights, are made wholly independent of religious affiliation. Nehru's views on secularism are also different from the model 3 that operates in Western European states where many states, remain weakly but constitutively linked to one, dominant religion. While individual rights are independent of religious affiliation, the state, in all kinds of ways, favours one dominant religion. All "western" states grew out of the need to respond to the challenge posed to individuals and non-religious groups by a politically meddle some and socially oppressive church, in a context of virtual religious homogeneity.

For Nehru, India needed another model in which (a) a distinction is drawn between the identity of the state which is made entirely independent of religion and an important but limited sphere where religion is officially recognised (for instance in Articles 25 to 30 of the Indian Constitution); (b) given the new reality of the interlocking of Religions A and B, and the potential of conflict between different religions, the state must be vigilant in trying to remove conflict and must foster cooperation instead; (c) a distinction must be made between being anti-religious

and being anti-institutionalised religious domination. A secular state respects Religion A and the diversity within it, including the diversity of atheisms, but under some conditions it can attack the vicious power and status hierarchies within Religion B, as well as their potential to unleash a host of un-freedoms.

Furthermore, (d) since religion is understood to be a complex, morally ambiguous phenomenon, some aspects require negative state intervention—ban on untouchability, the order that all temples be opened to all sections of Hindus or the law that seeks to keep religious restrictions away from the exercise of basic individual rights of women (state against intra-religious domination). While some aspects require positive intervention—exemption to Sikhs from wearing standard headgear in the army or the police, and other aspects that require that the state keep entirely away from religion—a space must exist where religious individuals and communities are entirely free to do as they believe is required by their religion. Unlike models 1 and 2, (e) the state is not strictly separated from religion. Instead, the state keeps what elsewhere I have called a policy of "principled distance" from all religions. (f) There is neither blanket disrespect towards religions nor an unqualified respect for them but rather, an attitude of critical respect. (g) The qualification for citizenship qua membership in the state is made wholly independent of religious affiliation and although most rights are independent of religion, some are dependent on the membership to a specific religious community.

Regrettably, most Nehruvian secularists have frequently defended, not this complex and sophisticated conception of Nehru's (also found in the Indian Constitution), but instead they have espoused a very limited and partial version of it or worse, one of the other Western variants. They have alternatively defended a secularism that is anti-religious—alienating the religious by failing to treat them as citizens worthy of equal respect and sometimes putting their force behind an areligious secularism—failing to understand that no modern state can keep itself aloof from religion, especially in a country like India where religion cannot easily be separated from the social and the cultural. They have also sometimes chosen to support a multi-religious secularism that has a high propensity to tolerate indefensible socio-religious practices and cries foul every time the state tries to intervene in religion.

This has put defenders of secularism in a mess. They have intervened in religion when they should not have, intervened when restraint was desperately needed, and frequently they respected aspects of religion not worthy of respect and disrespected those facets that deserved respect. An acute understanding of the complex and variegated ways in which inter and intra-religious domination persists in the interstices of Indian society has been elusive and therefore has been challenged, if at all, only half-heartedly.

Lessons from Nehru's Secularism

One manifestation of this misunderstanding is the complete and exhaustive identification of secularism with a defence of minority rights, as if the only purpose of secularism is to equally respect all religions and to provide support to all of them—my third proposition. On this view, fighting inter-religious domination seems to be the only raison d'etre of secularism. But this forgets that, an equally important purpose of Indian secularism and indeed, the primary purpose of all Western secularisms, has been to counter intra-religious domination. The functions of a secular state to encourage freedom, equality and justice enhancing reforms within every religion, to protect individuals from oppression by their own fellow co-religionists, indeed, to rescue ordinary Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs from their own religious extremists and to liberate religion from bigotry and fanaticism, simply slips off the radar of secularism, as espoused by Nehruvian secularism. The marginalisation of socio-religious reform from the agenda of Indian secularism and the resulting exclusive focus on minority rights lends credence to the mostly unjust charge of minorityism. If secularism is seen as concerned solely with the defence of minority rights, it can be viewed as a tool to protect the interests of Muslims and Christians and having little to do with the interests of Hindus. It can then be twisted to appear as pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu. But secularism is needed as much to protect Hindus from their own extremists and homogenisers, and from the exclusionary instincts of Hinduisms' traditional power wielders, who have cared little in the past for Dalits and women.

Put differently, the reduction of secularism to a minority-protection device and the disconnection of minority-rights discourse from feminist and Dalit discourses, has led to the politics of all vulnerable sections of society to be weakened. Instead of standing together and complementing one another, today secular, feminist and Dalit discourses in many contexts, confront one another as competitors, if not opponents. The strength of Indian secularism—its defence of minority rights—is easily made to appear as its weakness and the burden of its defence, rather than for it to be shared by all citizens, falls on the minorities and "pro-minority" secularists.

A second lesson to be drawn from this is that the misunderstanding of Indian secularism, especially as an anti-religious doctrine, has meant that Nehruvian secularists have not maintained a proper distinction between the communitarian and the communal. A communitarian position is one wherein an individual is, at least partly, defined by his or her religious/philosophical commitments and traditions (community) and therefore, there is nothing inappropriate in proclaiming that one is a Hindu/Muslim/Sikh/Christian/Marxist/Jew/Advaita and so on. Indeed, in some instances, a person may even take legitimate pride in one's community and community identity—as long as the person is also prepared to be openly ashamed when there is good reason to be.

A communitarian position is different from a communal one. A communal perspective is one, where a particular community's identity is defined in opposition to and not in dialogue with another community (recall the modern conception of confessional religion that I alluded to earlier)—such that their mere existence and interests are necessarily

viewed as being at the expense of other communities and community identities. It is communal to believe or act in a way that presupposes that one cannot be a Hindu, without being anti-Muslim, or vice versa. Communalism are communitarianism gone sour. Perhaps, very much in line with the tone and substance of this article, communal is also a term that can be legitimately used for communitarian excesses that thwart individual interests and autonomy.

The conflation of communitarian and communal in India has often meant that secular persons with a Hindu background or identity have not found a way of articulating the legitimate religious or socio-religious interests of Hindus without feeling guilty that they might appear communal (say, defending that the *Bhagwad Gita* is a text of great literary and philosophical value), and have often appeared to have defended even illegitimate Muslim interests in bad faith (say aspects of Muslim personal law), as if in doing so, they were really not being communal because the vulnerability of minorities in a representative democracy dominated by Hindus justifies overriding every other concern or value. The fact is that there is nothing wrong in articulating and defending some Hindu, Muslim and Christian interests especially, when they do not come into conflict with one another. This can be done without guilt or shame. However, sadly, thanks to Nehruvian secularists, India has rarely sorted out this issue and dispelled this confusion. The lack of clarity and honesty has bred indefensible swings from one communal position to another and a lot of avoidable hypocrisy. Proponents of secularism have managed to avoid this problem occasionally, sporadically, inconsistently, somewhat superficially and half-heartedly, but had to and will have to do so, with a greater understanding of each other's religious traditions, consistently, all the time.

This brings me to the third lesson to be drawn from our discussion of Nehru's secularism, one that I make with less certainty but feel compelled to put on the table all the same. A general ignorance of our religious and philosophical heritage and traditions, both belonging to one's own and of "the other's" continues to plague our education system. We have universities in India where there are no institutes of religious studies and universities without departments of comparative religion. This means that students come out of the university system without a deeper, critical understanding of the great religious traditions of the world. As a result, both the critique and defence of our own religion and that of "the other," are at best shallow and frequently, mischievous. It is sad that some of the best studies of ancient Hindu traditions and medieval and modern Hinduism have emanated from university departments in the West.[8]

I have personally drawn the following lesson from Nehru—defenders of secularism need to do three things simultaneously and consistently. Their (a) defence of minority rights must always be accompanied by (b) a robust critique of minority extremism and all forms of communalisms and both of these must always reflect (c) a deeper understanding and defence of the best of every religious tradition. Our critiques of minority extremism and majoritarianism must reflect that we know both, minority and majority religious traditions from the inside.

NOTES

1 There is enough evidence of course that Nehru also held these views. For example, he says, "Religion tries to give a complete and dogmatic answer to the question what has been the quest of man …," p 10. The various religions have especially helped in petrifying old beliefs and faiths and customs which may have had some use in the age and country of their birth but which are singularly unsuitable in our present age.

2 For an illuminating theoretical discussion of this, see Assmann (2009): *The Price of Monotheism,* Stanford University Press.

3 This lay at the heart of another feature that Nehru deeply liked, the propensity to develop what he called "composite culture" (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 173).

4 Again, "the good things in life suffer, the very basis of a decent approach to life-call it religious, call it spiritual, call it scientific. They are submerged in the deluge of hatred and violence. Fear, hatred, violence are the worst companions of an individual or a nation. And yet today these probably are the dominating urges in many countries and people. I do not know what an individual or a nation can do to fight this menace or to face it. In the final analysis one has to reply on some kind of a basic faith in the future of man. Without the basic faith in something in man, it would be difficult enough to see or save a world which is drifting apparently towards an almost irretrievable disaster." (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 436–37)

5 On the reification of religion see Smith (1963): *The Meaning and End of Religion,* Fortress Press.

6 He noted that "one of the biggest obstacles to the creation of the general (regrettable) atmosphere that prevails is the repeated declaration that Pakistan is an Islamic state."

7 "I believe in India being a secular state with complete freedom for all religions and cultures and for cooperation between them" (Gopal and Iyengar 2003: 173).

8 See Nehru's thoughts on India's rich heritage more generally and in particular on the value of Sanskrit, in accessing India's past.

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