



Ankur Yadav

A Contestation of the Western Liberal Script in India. The Rise of Cultural Nationalism

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The Rise of Cultural Nationalism

Ankur Yadav

ABSTRACT

Western liberal norms have been facing serious challenges not only from non-liberal, fascist, and authoritarian states but also from countries that hold democratic values in tandem with rising populism and religious nationalism. This raises legitimate questions on the universal validity of these norms, which are deemed detached from the historical-cultural setting of any country. An example of this type of contestation is the contemporary debate over secularism in India, an integral constituent of liberal democracy imposed by the Congress party and based on the borrowed Western concept of secularism. This has been contested by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) understanding of Bharat, said to be grounded in India's civilization, national inheritance, and cultural claims. This paper argues that the Congress idea of India is declining due to the left-liberal failure to stand by these principles and the rising adaptability of culture nationalism promoted by the BJP.

1 INTRODUCTION

On 3 June 2020, a man named Namah filed a plea in the Supreme Court (SC) of India to replace the word "India" with "Bharat" (cf. Clémentin-Ojha 2014), thus returning India to its original name "Bharat" or "Bharatvarsha" (originated from the Sanskrit language) and instilling a sense of national pride (Tribune News Service 2020). The plea states that naming the country with its original name would be more appropriate and will give a more concrete idea of "Indianness" to the people of India who come from diverse backgrounds. Article 1(1) of the Indian Constitution states that "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States" (Constitution of India Art. 1(1)). The demand for removing the word "India" mainly emanates from

the Hindu nationalist milieu who believe there is a basic philosophical difference between India and Bharat. The other argument for replacing "India" with "Bharat" is in the context of anti-Western or rather anti-English crusades. The plea contended the amendment to Article 1 of the Indian Constitution and removal of the word "India" would help the citizens of India move beyond their colonial past and cherish the nationality and freedom for which the freedom fighters had fought hard.

The emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Narendra Modi's ascension to power in 2014, and their landslide victory again in 2019 for the second parliamentary term gave a deafening blow to the Congress party. One key mandate of the BJP was Modi's vision of a new India and a new social compact which captured the attention of a whole new generation of one million globalized Indians born after the 1991 economic reforms who are unaware of Nehruvian India, the values of socialism or in fact those of secularism (Chandhoke 2014: 8). The success of the BJP debunked the popular myth that a party premised on a Hindutva ideology could not coexist with the centrist nature of India's democracy. This was further reinforced by the implementation of policies advocating Hindutva (Hindu-ness) that have brought into significance the cultural politics of Bharat – an India that has until today stayed marginalized (Singh 2019). Sanjaya Baru is convinced that the political and social change that supported the BJP's electoral success is the forerunner of India's second republic, which is less beholden to the legacy of colonialism and the partition. He opined,

I firmly believe this era with Narendra Modi at the helm is the birth of India's second republic. Lok Sabha 2014 marked the end of 'Nehruvian' dynasty [...] I don't see any constitutional changes but the political processes in the country have already begun to change (Baru 2014).

Similarly, Paranjape has stated that the second independence of India would be much more far-reaching with cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and indeed civilizational dynamism (Paranjape 2019: 22).

In its six years of premiership, the BJP led government has undertaken hardcore economic and political reforms that have brought about dramatic changes in Indian politics. It was predicted that Modi's success in India's 2019 election would profoundly affect the country's economy, foreign policy, and state politics, as well as its future as a secular republic (Vaishnav 2019). Modi's pro-market economic policies, tax reforms, defense modernization, and foreign-policy dynamism have not only improved India's international image but also augur well for the country's economic growth trajectory and increasing strength (Chellaney 2018: 47). In the economic realm, the reforms mainly focused on comprehensive economic development and growth by increasing investment in infrastructure projects, digitalization, an overhaul of agricultural and labor laws, financial inclusion, and so on (Butani 2019: 135-36; Virmani 2019: 89). The government is trying hard to rise from the communism-capitalism binary and implement a model that combines some of the largest and most expensive government programs to deliver goods and services with a simultaneous push to trigger mass entrepreneurship by introducing reforms such as major tax cuts (Sengupta 2019). A new and young India will change not just policy narratives but also actions and approaches to wealth (Debroy 2021: 51; Puri/Shah 2019: 249).

In the political arena, the BJP led government has enacted new legislation to bring reforms to

deeply contested areas. Among these reforms, the Abrogation of Article 370 (revoking temporary provisions with respect to the State of Jammu and Kashmir), the decisive verdict on *Ram Janambhoomi*¹ by the Supreme Court bench, and the annulment of *triple talaq*,² have been widely debated across different political spectrums, civil society groups, academics, and Indian audiences in general. Notably, these reforms have been called historic, bold, and courageous, backed by the fact that all previous governments recognized the need for reform but either sidestepped or avoided implementing reforms on the pretext of not achieving sufficient consensus. Earlier in 2017, the Supreme Court declared triple talaq as unconstitutional, and the BJP led government – by enacting legislation against triple talaq – has strengthened socio-economic, constitutional, and fundamental rights of Muslim women (BBC 2019). As observed by the Union Minister of Minority Affairs, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, despite opposition from the “so-called champions of secularism including Congress, Communist, Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samajwadi Party and Trinamool congress the legal remedy against triple talaq will ensure gender equality and strengthen democratic, fundamental and constitutional rights of Muslim women” (Naqvi 2020).

The Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid land dispute case has been politically debated for decades. In November 2019, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court delivered a unanimous judgment on the case backing the construction of a Ram temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya (Ayodhya Verdict 2010: 102ff.). This judgment has not been contested by left-liberal groups and indeed was

1 The Ram Janmbhoomi-Babri Masjid issue: Hindu nationalists believe that the site is the birthplace of Lord Ram and Babri Masjid was constructed over a Hindu temple by the Mughal emperor Babur.

2 Triple talaq: The Muslim practice of “instant divorce” allows a husband or wife to divorce their spouse by repeating the word “talaq” (divorce) three times in any form, including email or text message.

welcomed by the wider Indian population with the exception of a faction of conservative-fundamentalist Muslims (The Hindu 2019). Media reports stated that building a Ram temple in Ayodhya was a key objective and long-sought goal of Hindu nationalists in India, which was finally achieved (India Today 2019).

The Abrogation of Article 370 and annulment of the temporary provisions conferred to the state of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 35A has an even longer history of mired reform. Jammu and Kashmir now stand divided into two regions: (1) Jammu and Kashmir, and (2) Ladakh. The regions were each conferred the status of a union territory with separate capitals and administrative units (PIB 2020). These changes heralded a new beginning in Kashmir's history, promising its people a future of development and peace (Pandya 2019). The abrogation is considered much needed for the development of the region, curbing the growth of militant terrorism, and making Kashmir more stable, secure, and prosperous. Article 370 and 35A were the root cause of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir (BIP 2019). Subhash Kashyap commented that the order was "constitutionally sound" and that "no legal and constitutional fault can be found in it" (Pandey 2019). On the other hand, another constitutional expert, AG Noorani, said it was "an illegal decision, akin to committing fraud" (Pandey 2019). Despite the government's promising development and security narratives, the abrogation has drawn fierce criticism from the opposition, who consider it unconstitutional and an assault on their fundamental freedoms. As stated by Yogendra Yadav, "The step taken was not just an incorrect procedure but will also be regretted by the country in the years to come" (Singhal 2019: 1). This step is primarily a reorientation of the way India tackles diversity. He stated, "Modi is going for a failed European model of nation-building" (Yadav 2019). It is not about solving a predicament but "the warped psyche of a great civilization at its insecure worst" (Yadav 2019). "The BJP thinks

it is going to Indianize Kashmir, but, instead, what we will see is potentially the Kashmirization of India" (Mehta 2019).

These criticisms and counter criticisms over BJP led reforms have intensified the debate over secularism in India. After winning the 2019 parliamentary election, the re-elected Prime Minister Modi targeted left-liberals in India in his speech.

It had become fashionable to... wear a tag... The name of that fake tag was 'secularism', and there used to be chants of 'seculars, come together'. You have seen that from 2014–2019 that entire section stopped talking. In this election, not even one political party has had the guts to wear the mask of secularism to fool the country. They have been unmasked (Modi 2019, citing Journal of Democracy 2019: 185-6).

In the past 70 years, the Congress-left idea of India, which is based on Western ideas of secularism, has dominated Indian politics, whereas the BJP idea of Bharat remained peripheral in political discourse and could not be promulgated widely. It is only since BJP came to power that the idea of Bharat is taking concrete shape and has started to gain traction. The first section of this paper focuses particularly on defining the idea of Congress-Left political discourse in India, followed by BJP Bharat ideology, and discusses their underlying narratives. The second and third sections elucidate the contestation between two scripts with regard to secularism in India and the increasing acceptance of the script of BJP Bharat and cultural nationalism.

This paper delves into a vast amount of literature, particularly the writings on post-colonial theory, to understand the import of Western secularism in India since its independence in 1947. In post-independence India, secularism – advocated by the Congress-Left – was adopted as an integral part of parliamentary democracy. However, its meaning has constantly evolved and changed in the Indian

context in contrast to the West. This contestation over secularism that underpins the Congress-Left idea of India is analyzed based on diverse primary and secondary sources. On the other hand, there is a paucity of research on the BJP's alternative script of cultural nationalism, which is an integral part of a larger script – the idea of Bharat – which poses limitations of the literature available. To deal with such limitations, several structured interviews were conducted with officials and activists from the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organization that proved very insightful in comprehending the idea of Bharat and how it has ascended in contemporary Indian politics. Respondents were given the option to use either English or Hindi language. The empirical data collected provided significant understanding of how the BJP-RSS are defining the idea of Bharat and how its affiliates are coordinating the dissemination of Hindutva ideology and together contesting the Congress-Left idea of India.

2 THE IDEA OF INDIA AND THE IDEA OF BHARAT: BROADER NARRATIVES

Despite the fact that Congress and BJP hold different visions for India, their ideas of India and Bharat, respectively, are significantly rooted in India's past, its struggle for freedom, and national inheritance. Both ideas have provided parallel, though fundamentally diverse, narratives about India with the promise to make India a great nation with a fair, egalitarian society through the development of all social classes. Dominated by the Indian National Congress party, India's freedom movement had multiple strands, including atheists or secularists and also conservatives, socialists, and communists. As such, the Congress party can be described as an umbrella party or an encompassing party, spanning social class, ethnicity (race, caste, religion, language), region, and political leaning (moderate right, moderate left) (Farooqui/Sridharan 2016). All of these groups played

an active part in India's freedom struggle initially and shaped the Constitutional Assembly Debates (CAD) in later years. It was a party that united India and brought people of different religion and language into a single political project (Guha 2016: 3-4; Ganguly 2003: 13). While serious differences were perceived among the aforementioned political factions, one thing that loosely bound them together was their fight against colonial rule and their quest for India's independence.

Consequently, their perspectives on Indian nationalism were different and their idea of India more so. According to Varshney, three competing narratives have been competing for political dominance since the beginning of the Indian national movement. These were the territorial notion, the cultural notion, and the religious notion based on the Hindu community (Varshney 1993). The territorial notion referred to India's "sacred geography" (Eck 2012), which includes the land between the Indus River to the west, the Himalayas to the north, and the seas to the south and east. The cultural notion was explained by the values of tolerance, pluralism, and syncretism and the religious notion was the India known as the homeland of the Hindu community. Sunil Khilnani (2012) observes that Indian nationalism included three broad contrasting narratives. The first was advocated by V. D. Savarkar, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo and saw Indian nationalism mainly as 'Hindu nationalism' and felt that only this cultural homogeneity could be the premise for nationhood. The second was Gandhi's idea of India rooted in the values of pluralism and secularism with some religious influence. The third was the Nehruvian idea of India ingrained in fundamental freedoms, secularism, equality, and democratic pluralism drawn on Western values (Khilnani 2012). Another assessment during the national movement was that the three noteworthy conceptions of secularism came from the nationalist Muslim, Gandhi's political-moral obligation (dharma), and Nehru's modernist thesis (Madan 2012: 89-90).

There existed diverse competing views of what Independent India should be: the Hindu nationalist, the Gandhian view, the socialist or communist view, the militant nationalist view (e.g. the radicals and Subhas Chandra Bose), the Dalit view, the Muslim League view (at least until the Partition decision), among others (Bajpai/Mallavarampu 2019: 9). But in post-independent India, the nationalist vision closely associated with Nehruvian ideas dominated Indian politics. Nehru's idea of India sought to coordinate within the form of a modern Indian state across multiple values of democracy, cultural pluralism, secularism, socialist economic development, and non-alignment in the foreign policy domain. As regards modernizing India, Nehru believed that the "process of modernity is not uniform, and Indians have different forms of wearing it" (Khilnani 2012: 8). Implicitly, these differences have manifested the ways in which India designed its own version of liberal democracy.

While some observers endorse the view that without pluralism, India could hardly have survived, others are skeptical about India's survival as a pluralist democracy. Despite India adopting a democratic Constitution in 1950, thus becoming the largest democracy both in form and in practice, there have been contestations over democracy as a framework of organizing politics in India since its very inception. A critical evaluation of India's democracy from the Hindu nationalist perspective at the time of the making of the Constitution and immediately thereafter, was that there is nothing Indian about it and that India has been aping the Western model of democracy without much respect for Indigenous democratic traditions (Palshikar 2017: 12). As commented by K. Hanumanthaiya in the Constitutional Assembly Debate,

[...] we wanted the music of Veena or Sitar, but here we have the music of an English band. That was because our constitution makers were educated that way. [...] That is exactly the kind of

Constitution Mahatma Gandhi did not want and did not envisage (Constitutional Assembly Debates 1949, citing Hanumanthaiya 1949).

Democracy based on the Westminster model is neither considered an ideal nor ultimate form of government by many (Vora/Palshikar 2006), and the Indigenization of democracy is a necessary condition of working out this idea (Yadav 2020a: 39). Complicating matters, the debate over the meaning of secularism in India has been heated as secularism in India undertook different connotations from the Western context from where it was borrowed. In the West, secularism refers to the strict separation between religion and politics, which evolved as the outcome of the struggle between Church and State. The Church was allowed to regulate religious affairs, whereas the state would manage and regulate political affairs. Secularism in its actual sense of the ideology of those firm on bringing about the decline of religion in human affairs (Madan 1997) was seen as unsuitable in the Indian cultural setting (Madan 2012: 87). Secularism in India does not represent state neutrality in a strict sense. Instead, it offers equal respect for all religions and embraces religion, caste, ethnic, and linguistic diversity (*sarva dharma samabhav*). This position was based on Gandhi's pluralist perspective on inter-religious understanding and became the state ideology in India after independence (Madan 2012: 90). However, in practice, religious and caste issues have always been part of the political agenda and "vote-bank"³ politics in India.

The secular character of India has been questioned on several occasions by both right-wing supporters and academics alike on the grounds that secularism has foreign origins and has been inappropriately applied to Indian society and often used as an instrument to appease minorities.

3 This is a pattern of voting on the basis of language, caste, religion, and sect. According to Oxford dictionary, "a group of people or a community who are likely to vote for a particular political party".

A radical critique of ideological secularism was published by Ashis Nandy, titled “An Anti-Secular Manifesto” (1985). Nandy critiques the modern, Western and state-centered version of secularism in contrast to his non-modern, non-Western, religion-centered conception. The failure of secularism to keep religion and politics separate reflects that people in non-Western countries have not accepted secularism to the point of giving up their religion or eliminating it from the political-public sphere (Nandy 1995: 36-7).

Such criticisms intensified when the Congress-Left – committed to secularism in theory – became actively involved in politics over religious matters (as witnessed during the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid case and the issue of triple talaq), yet condemned the BJP for being a Hindu nationalist or communal party. Arguably, the weakness of secularism lies in its very foundation. Though the Indian state professes to be secular, it has neither been detached nor impartial when interfering in religious matters. The notion of secularism in India is vague; it means different things to different groups, and it has been observed that the imposition of secularism on a deeply religious population failed to take root in society and has faced continuous backlash from Hindu nationalists (Roover et al. 2011). In this regard, historian Ronald Inden (1990) writes that it is “independent government implemented secularism mostly by refusing to recognize the religious pasts of Indian nationalism, whether Hindu or Muslim, and at the same time inconsistently by retaining Muslim personal law” (Roychowdhury 2017). This has continued to raise wider contestation and challenges to the Congress-Left idea of India.

The fault line of secularism and Congress-Left’s occasional failure to stand by it provided a greater scope to right-wing forces to strengthen their script of Bharat. Evidently, Modi’s electoral victory in 2014 was largely attributed to the party’s return to a nationalist agenda with a progressive

undertone; his effective leadership and organizational skill appealed to a wider Indian audience. This victory is described as a “realignment in the social basis of politics and a shift in the spectrum of public opinion” and characterized as a hegemonic power because it “combines state power with street power, electoral dominance with ideological legitimacy” (Yadav 2020a: 351). From securing two Lok Sabha⁴ seats in the 1991 general elections to its stunning victory for two consecutive terms, BJP has managed to significantly expand its geographical reach and consolidate its political and electoral position (Kumar 2019; Misra 2018). The BJP has created new ideological cohorts that help the party transcend traditional caste lines and attracted new sections of the population among India’s churning demographic alterations (Rukmini 2019). The BJP has become India’s dominant party and, according to political scientist Suhas Palshikar, it is India’s second dominant party system (BBC 2020; Palshikar 2017). Against the left-liberals’ cherished idea of secularism, BJP espoused emotive nationalist rhetoric based on the protection of Hinduism and love for “motherland and patriotism”, thus gaining wider attention from different sections of society.

More precisely, BJP’s victory in the 2019 general election is widely attributed to its championing of nationalist causes with a sense of jingoism especially in the aftermath of the Pulwama terrorists attack and the subsequent counter air-strikes in Balakot. In contrast to BJP’s convincing alternative narratives of nationalism, inclusive development, and national security, the Congress idea of secularism and a multicultural India appeared weak which diluted India’s Hindu identity. While the Congress-Left regularly accused BJP

4 Article 79 of Indian Constitution mentioned two Houses of Parliament, known as the Council of States (Rajya Sabha) and the House of the People (Lok Sabha). Lok Sabha is composed of representatives of the people chosen by direct election on the basis of the adult suffrage. For more details see Parliament of India (2021).

of being a Hindutva or communal party, the party that sparks and organizes violence, ignites lynching and riots, and so on. Instead, BJP's pan-Indian vision (*sabka saath sabka vikas sabka vishwas*, which means (*everyone's support, everyone's development, everyone's trust*) that was not apparently mired with caste or religion, gave it wider support. Additionally, BJP's political tactic of calling Congress elitist and targeting the Nehruvian legacy and pseudo-secularism bode well during the elections.

Scholars (e. g. Sita Ram Goel, Arun Shourie, Bibek Debroy, Swapan Dasgupta, Harsh, and Rajeev) have largely reached consensus that, in contrast to the Congress-Left script of India – which is Anglophile, elitist and borrowed – the idea of Bharat is indigenous and more inclusive, symbolized as “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (meaning “one family”). The idea of Bharat embraced by the BJP is widely drawn on India's past civilization and cultural heritage. As argued by Paranjape, the first independence of India was seen as political and, to some extent, economic and social, and the second will be much more far-reaching affecting cultural, intellectual, and spiritual aspects, and indeed the entire civilization (Paranjape 2019: 22). It presents India as an ancient civilization which is an amalgamation of different identities and cultures represented under the common heritage of Bharat or “Bharatvarsha”. It is argued that constant foreign invasions and more than 200 years of colonial rule had subsided and overridden the idea of Bharat to a great extent (Deepak 2021). Hence, they emphasize the need to rediscover India's ancient past and new ways to understand contemporary India through its indigenous history and philosophical values (e. g. Puranic and Vedic texts and other epics). In this respect, the politics of naming, such as referring to India as “Bharat”, adopting Hindi as a national language, and giving due attribution to Indian culture and social values, becomes equally important. BJP nationalists consistently incorporate and eulogize these

values in their rhetoric. In one such example, Manu Goswami (2004) eloquently writes about the difference between the term Bharat which has an ancient Puranic origin and the term India, which is a few hundred years old. Interestingly, he argued that India referred to

[...] a political order, to a bounded territory under the control of a single centralized power structure and an authoritarian system of governance, whereas Bharat was conceived as a social order, a space where specific social relations and shared notions of a moral order prevailed (Clémentine-Ojha 2014: para. 18).

Further, advocates of BJP contested the Congress-Left idea of Western democracy based on secularism and perceive it as essentially a European construct that fundamentally lacked the essence of “Bhartiyata”, the principle of dharma, and traditional values of acceptance and assimilation. As explained by Paranjape,

We are not Western, modern, legalistic, techno-scientific, capitalist, socialist, secularist... Whatever our religion, ethnicity, language or region, we are Sanatanis, Hindus, Indians, Bharatiya, not just culturally, but also socially, politically, economically and most important, spiritually (Paranjape 2019: 27).

It is emphasized that since time immemorial, Bharat has had a rich history of accommodation where people coming from outside blended with India's Indigenous culture. In this process of assimilation, Bharat never compromised the fundamental spirit of respecting diverse cultures. The BJP largely based its foundation principle on Hindutva ideology (a major point of criticism by Congress-Left), and believe that India is no doubt a civilizational state rather than a nation-state. As explained by Gideon Rachman that a civilisation state is “a country that claims to represent not just a historic territory or a particular language or ethnic-group, but a distinctive civilization” (Rachman 2019). According to Amitav Acharya, in India,

the idea of civilization state is closely associated with the regime politics of the ruling party of the day and “should not be taken for granted as a permanent phenomenon” (Acharya 2020: 144). The right-wing idea of Indian civilization is anchored solely in the Hindu Dharma, with no place for diverse non-Hindu influences which have unquestionably contributed to shaping the Indian civilization (Tharoor 2020: 150). In this vein, V. D. Savarkar’s and Golwarkar’s nationalist agenda and their vision of making India a “Hindu Rashtra” propounded in the 20th century has been repeatedly cited and criticized by left-liberals. They allege that Golwalkar and the RSS usually ended up becoming passionate supporters of “cultural nationalism” and moved from their role as social reformer towards Hindu revivalist and fundamentalist which was directly opposed to the values of civic nationalism enshrined in the Indian Constitution (Tharoor 2020: 169-70).

The Congress-Left idea of secularism has been called a Western construct that has been problematic to Indian society by actually creating a divide between religions in India that otherwise would not have existed. On the pretext of the failure of secularism, BJP has strengthened and apparently seeks to modify their narratives of Bharat by presenting it as a more progressive, inclusive, and tolerant ideology. In this direction, more concentrated attempts have been made since the BJP parliamentary victory in 2014. This can be evidently seen during BJP’s election campaigning speech which has apparently moved from “*sabkasaath, sabkavikas (support and development) to sabkavishwas (trust)*” with the motive to gain trust and eliminate fear among minorities. Moving from its explicit adherence to Hindu civilization narratives, the right wing has evolved to be more progressive than in the 20th century. It has not only developed techniques and organizational modalities but revisited its ideological formulations towards progressive politics. Yet, the Congress-Left that exists today remains the elitist Left of olden times.

For example, on LGBTQ community, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said:

Everyone is a part of society. How they are, they are, accept people for what they are. Society has changed. It is important that society prepare itself, so people do not feel isolated (Sethi 2018: 1).

In 2018, he explained the RSS new liberal and progressive approach to makeover the image created by the left-liberals during the conclave of the *Bhavishya ka Bharat-An RSS Perspective* (2019) “the time is changing, and society has to take a call on such issues” (Sethi 2018: 1).

In sum, it can be argued that the weakening of the Congress-Left secular vision of India gave wider opportunity to BJP to actualize its idea of Bharat. This section highlighted that the Congress-Left ideas of secularism have failed to take roots in Indian society. Based on these claims, the next section examines the contestation between the Congress-Left idea of secular India and BJP-RSS idea of cultural nationalism.

3 THE FAILURE OF THE WESTERN LIBERAL SCRIPT TO GAIN TRACTION IN INDIA

Secularism, an integral element of political liberalism, is a Western construct which has been adopted by non-western countries with completely different cultural backgrounds to that of modern Western societies. Yet Western liberal norms claimed as “universal” are not “freestanding” and thus largely failed to be replicated in the same manner as they developed in the West. A concentrated critique of political liberalism came about when it underwent an internal crisis in the form of the backlash against democracy and secularism in some countries and where a more “hybrid form of liberal democracy” emerged.

An eloquent critique of normative claims of Western liberalism and modernity had developed under

the “post-colonial” theory developed in the 1950s and 1960s that challenged the universal applicability of liberal norms, specifically in non-Western countries. Political theorists like Sudipta Kaviraj (2005), Partha Chatterjee (2004) examined the historical progression and asymmetrical development of liberal norms in non-Western societies. For instance, while tracing the process of modernity as it was developed in the West and later in non-Western societies, Kaviraj points out the “assumption of symmetrical development”, an expectation that modernity should follow similar stages of the development process as occurred in the West (from industrialization to scientific and technical advancement, to emergence of the middle class, education, and the modern liberal state). If it did not, it was considered imperfect or failed modernity or a failed liberal state. Similarly, Partha Chatterjee (2004), in his theory of “political society”, examines the certainty of liberal democratic theory and its limitations in favor of realist politics with the example of post-colonial states, mainly South Asian states tracing the evolution of liberal democracy in these societies. He observes that in some post-colonial societies, “Asian values” or “Islamic values” were preferred over liberal democratic norms, which were Western or bourgeois, therefore impracticable for non-Western society. Madan (1997) also expressed skepticism about an easy passage of the Western ideology of secularism to India and stressed the importance of taking religion seriously. Chatterjee, Nandy, and Madan have all argued that the external threat to secularism is only a symptom of a deeper internal crisis (Bhargava 2006).

In this context, the crisis of secularism in India and its contestation by cultural nationalism based on a Hindu majority also came under academic inquiry. Broadly, it is argued that the case of Indian secularism exemplifies the cultural limitations of liberal political theory and contests the claim of its universal significance. Balagangadhara and Roover argue that “the dominant notion of state

neutrality of liberal political theory threatens to collapse once it is confronted by a case like the Indian, where pagan traditions and Semitic religions co-exist” (2007: 90). The concept of secularism in the Indian context has deviated from its original sense owing to the historical and cultural setting of the country. There are internal weaknesses of the modern secular state to explain the crisis of secularism in India. Firstly, it is observed that secularism in India undertook a completely different form in that state politics has never been detached or remained impartial towards religion. Secondly, the rationale for secularism to separate religion and politics made sense where the dominance of the Church over politics led to oppression and subjugation of common people, but India’s history of religious diversity had no such dominant power. Thus, it is an alien import and failed to take root. In India, the state has regularly interfered in religious matters and promotes all religions equally.

There were two prominent perspectives, namely secularists and Hindu nationalists. The Hindu nationalist advocated that India’s identity was embodied in Hindutva as Hindus formed the country’s majority. On the other hand, secularists – embodied by the Congress-Left – held modernistic secular views, were less interested in such a stark ethnic view, and paid more attention to democratic pluralism. But the Congress’s political dominance started to slip in the late 1960s, and with it, India’s secular principles began to be sapped (Ganguly 2003: 14-5). Until the 1970s, India’s secular model seemed to work reasonably well as several legal safeguards were invoked prohibiting any form of discrimination based on gender, caste, religion, race, or language and providing equal freedom and rights to everyone.

Beginning in the 1980s, Nehruvian secularism came under severe strain as the Congress party opportunistically began to appease or indulge one religious community over another to serve

their political agenda (Jaffrelot 2019). Examples such as the declaration of Aligarh Muslim University as a minority institution, de-establishing Akali Dal as the militant Sikh organization, Congress' reluctance to establish a Uniform Civil Code, and reforms of Muslim personal law are instances when the Indira Gandhi government sought to capitalize on the religious card. K. N. Panikkar argued that Congress, under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, falls into a category that uses communalism for political support; she tried to identify herself with Hinduism. Jammu and Kashmir, and Punjab were prominent examples of communalist politics to which the Congress party had succumbed (Panikkar 1991: 8-10). At the end of the Indira Gandhi era, there was a polarization of Indian society on sectarian and communal lines. Indira's Congress tried to manage votes from the political terrain, normally occupied by right-wing parties, without realizing the consequences (Hasan 1991: 143-4). She made an appearance as a devotee of Hinduism in Kashmir to gain the votes of the Hindus (Kolodner 1995: 241-2). After losing elections in 1977, she transformed the Congress Party from a so-called protector of secular values and religious minorities to a champion of Hindu interests. She made several pilgrimages to Hindu religious sites and supported Hindu hegemony in the Hindi heartland. Rajiv Gandhi followed the path of his mother's politics (Kolodner 1995: 241-2). The last phase of the Indira Gandhi era was notable for the breakdown of the secular consensus molded by Nehru (Ganguly 2003: 15; Hasan 1990: 29).

This became more explicit during Rajiv Gandhi's premiership, especially in the handling of the Shah Bano case on triple talaq and on the matter of Ram Mandir claims in Ayodhya. In the former case, Rajiv Gandhi supported sharia as the Muslim communal law in India to gain Muslim trust, while in the latter case, the government-supported construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya to mobilize Hindus in support. Rajiv Gandhi gained the endorsement of upper-class Hindus, who had

traditionally been supporters of the BJP (Nandy et al. 1998: 72). This political strategy of mollifying the religious community received severe criticism from Hindu nationalists claiming that the Congress party promoted "pseudo-secularism" or soft-Hindutva. The three episodes which most undermined the secular order in 1980s were:

[First,] Indira Gandhi's political courtship of a violent Sikh fundamentalist preacher in the early 1980s; Second the 1986 decision of her son and political heir, Rajiv Gandhi, to overturn a critical decision of the Supreme Court on Muslim personal law; the failure of the Congress government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to stop a Hindu nationalist mob from tearing down Ayodhya Babri Masjid in 1992 (Ganguly 2003: 16).

This erosion of secular ethos and growing polarization in Indian society gained wider attention from both academics and journalists writing since the mid-1980s. Several publications came out in India and Europe, which challenged contemporary understanding of secularism and its ability to deal with an increasingly pluralistic society. A remarkable literary shift occurred with Ashish Nandy (1985), a renowned social theorist who for the first time presented a systematic and anti-modernist critique of secularism by pointing out its Western and anti-religious roots, which is not suitable for India, with its religiously diverse landscape. Many critiques perceive these episodes of religious violence as displays of secularist intolerance towards religion. For instance, Partha Chatterjee (2004) writes that, rather than protecting and embracing religious diversity, secularism, and religious tolerance "work at cross-purpose" (Chatterjee 2004). Similarly, T. N. Madan perceives secularism as a Western construct which in its original form is "the ideology of those committed to bringing about the decline of religion in Human affairs" (Madan 2012: 87, see also Madan 1997).

More appropriately in the case of India – where 80 percent of the population follow the Hindu

religion and which also has a significant Muslim population (14 percent) – relegating religion to the personal sphere is nearly impossible. Therefore, one can see active involvement of political parties in religious matters manifested in different forms. While Congress capitalizes on minorities, BJP built its narrative on religious nationalism based on the Hindu majority. In this respect, Atul Vaze in interview 2⁵, on the question of the rise of populism and growing Hindu nationalist sentiments in India, responded that “it is not a unique phenomenon in India. It is happening all over the world, even in the European countries where the concept of secularism was espoused, is now facing backlash” (Vaze 2020). Citing the example of Europe, he argued during the refugee crisis that many Muslims were accepted in the past, but now nationalist sentiments are growing in Belgium, France, and the UK against their assimilation. Stating the case of the Muslim population in India, Vijoy Roy (2020) commented that

[...] the concept of minorities based on numbers does not apply to Muslims in India. Why do Muslims have fear in this country, but not other real minorities like Parsis and Jews? The government doesn't differentiate between majority and minority. It believes in sabkasaath, sabkavikash and sabkavishwas (Roy 2020).

Nevertheless, the Hindu nationalist lends itself to populist discourse in a way that garners high support from the Hindu Community (as seen in the case of mobilization of Hindus on the issue of Ram temple in Ayodhya). The advocates of Hindu nationalism implied that Indian secularism led by the Congress-Left is not an expression of people's common will and thereby lacks legitimacy. Substantiating this point, Anirban Ganguly, in personal interview 6, stated that

the idea of a secular India is challenged by Hindu majoritarianism which feels that Indian secularism is not based on India's civilization, its culture and values. He argued that Jana Sangh was created as an alternative to the then dominating Nehruvian narrative as Congress's secularism does not reflect India's needs, India's history and its temperament.⁶

Similar views were also expressed by Shiv Shankar in interview 5 that

[...] the left-liberal project of India came from outside and was based on Western ideas, not on Indian-ness. Not only in India but also in other parts of the world left liberals attacked native traditions, language, culture, and society. They tried in India, but India was an old civilization, and its roots are deep and are not easily removed ideologically. The British and then the Marxists were not able to replace this old civilization. The attempt to force Western ideas into the Indian society through biased history writing was not successful in India. India is different, people are different, but the left-liberals tried to take into the direction of Western ideas. Currently, the left-liberals are being defeated all over the world.⁷

The Congress-Left weakened position of secularism in contemporary India became one of the animating factors behind BJP's parliamentary victory for two successive terms. The BJP has long advanced the notion that Congress and other parties promote pseudo-secularism, which undermines the nationalism and unity of India. On the one hand, as argued by human rights advocates, the Congress party holds that their politics are above religious considerations; however, in reality, they have been cynically involved in religious

5 Interview 2 with Atul Vaze Anulom, Mumbai, interview by Yadav, Ankur (25 December 2019).

6 Interview 6 with Dr. Anirban Ganguly, the Director of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation (SPMRF), New Delhi, interview by Yadav, Ankur (17 January 2020).

7 Interview 5 with Dr. Shiv Sahkti Bakshi, editor Kamal Sandesh, The National Mouthpiece of BJP, interview by Yadav, Ankur (15 January 2020).

pandering, particularly with Muslims, to expand their political base.

The above discussion so far suggests that Congress-Left's legacy of secular nationalism has fallen out of favor due to their capitalizing on religion, and the BJP has saturated this ideological space by providing an alternative to secularism in the form of more progressive, inclusive, and religious nationalism. Secularism was defeated because it has failed to renounce our culture, language, our traditions, and religions writes Yadav (2020b). Further, he points out that

[...] secularism was defeated because it chose to mock Hinduism instead of developing a new interpretation of Hinduism suitable for our times. The secular ideology was defeated in India because it failed to distinguish itself from knee-jerk pro-minorityism, even as it learnt to turn a blind eye to minority communalism. Secular politics was discredited because it turned from conviction to convenience and then to a conspiracy to keep minority voters hostage (Yadav 2020b).

It should be noted that while representatives of the BJP-RSS reject the secular idea as an alien concept, they argue that India has historically followed its own way of secularism. For instance, Sankar Anand stated that in its pure meaning, the Hindutva itself was secular and Hindus need not be taught how to be secular, especially from those who only know secularism in its Western understanding. In interview 3 Ratan Sardha also expressed a similar viewpoint:

[The] Indian ethos always knew the concept of secularism; it just did not use the Western terminology. In India, we always say that all the paths to truth are the same, and that we respect all the paths. Yours or mine are equally true. This is the better version of secularism, because people who teach us secularism of Western kind believe that Western culture is better than any other

culture. [...] But in our case that is not true. We don't need the western concept of secularism.⁸

These arguments suggest that "secularism" under a different name was part and parcel of Indian society since time immemorial. Indian society has always been tolerant and accommodating towards diversity. The recent resurgence of religious and cultural nationalism, which claims to be plural and inclusive, poses a robust challenge to Western secularism, which is old and ethnocentric.

The next section of this paper delves into the question of how the BJP script of Bharat, based on Hindu nationalism, is gaining legitimacy and acceptance in contemporary Indian society.

4 THE PROPOSED BJP SCRIPT: CULTURAL NATIONALISM WITH RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

The rejection of Western secularism in India leaves great leeway for the state to interpret secularism in their own way and selectively interfere in religious matters. The incoherent and contested understanding of secularism has enabled advocates of cultural nationalism (i. e. Hindu nationalists) to call on and strengthen their alternative idea of secularism. Given this dual contestation between the Congress-Left idea of secular India and the Hindu idea based on religious and cultural nationalism, it is important to assess how the BJP's alternative script of Bharat is securing acceptance in India.

It is not only in India that Western democratic norms face challenges, but many democracies worldwide are witnessing an emergence of cultural or religious nationalism that may display significant variations (Bieber 2018; DeHanas/Shterin 2018; Neo/Scharffs 2021). Nevertheless,

8 Interview 3 with Ratan Sharda writer of two books on the RSS, Mumbai, interview by Yadav, Ankur (27 December 2019).

they appear to hold some common attributes. First, while espousing religious-nationalist sentiments, political parties (the BJP in the case of India) draw upon religious-cultural and civilizational ethos that resonate with the majoritarian sentiments who are in some way or the other attached to those values. In the case of cultural nationalism in India, which is primarily premised on Hindu identity, attaching the “civilizational or moral greatness” to it provides more legitimacy to these claims. In this sense, the religious claims appear to be more Indigenous and integral to the society in contrast to the borrowed concept of western secularism.

Secondly, in order to gain more ascendance, nationalist political groups seek to avoid overt public allegiance to religion, which in practice may differ. For instance, in India, the BJP claims to be a secular party, though not in “Western terms” but the one that believes in religious tolerance, pluralism, equality, and the dignity of individuals, and for whom nationalist sentiments are supreme. Mohan Bhagvat, chief secretary of RSS, stated that the Sangh called every “Indian a ‘Hindu’ but this has a civilizational connect, not a religious one” (Sethi 2018) as India, since ancient times, refers to “Hindos or Hindu” in territorial terms, as the area that lies between the Indus-Himalayas and the oceans in the South. Further, he affirmed that “Hindu Rashtra does not mean it has no place for Muslims, the day it is said Muslims are unwanted here, the concept of Hindutava will cease to exist” (Sethi 2018). This shows that while asserting the idea of Hindu nationalism, the BJP and its proponents remain cautious of undermining or negating other minorities while not letting its own interest be overlooked. The BJP-led NDA government policies toward religious minorities are far from marking a radical departure from the UPA government; there are more continuities with previous administrations than discontinuities in these policies (Kim 2017). This poses another challenge to the Congress-Left secular state

credentials since they allegedly undermined and even negated the Hindu cultural heritage while selectively getting involved in religious matters to shore up their political base. Therefore, Hindu nationalism, which speaks of innate tolerance and plurality, and draws upon the heterogeneous, liberal notion based on the principles of karma and dharma, guarantees absolute freedom to individuals regarding their religious choice. This garners more attention from the wider public, which often has difficulty understanding “secular nationalism” backed by complex legislation.

Thirdly, by the dual combination of religion and nationalism, political parties seek to redefine the basis of collective national identity. For instance, in many countries, religious-nationalist narratives are evoked to gain wider public support, particularly during elections. For example, a populist Brazilian candidate campaigned on the slogan, “Brazil before everything, and God above all” (Osborn 2019). In India, while scrapping Article 370, Modi’s government has repeatedly expressed that the government wants to bring Kashmir closer to the rest of India, notwithstanding Pakistan’s claims. With this blend of Hindu nationalism and territorial unity, the BJP has sought to saturate the ideological void of “collective identity” when the left-liberal legacy of secular nationalism had fallen out of favor due to their self-imposed injuries (Palshikar 2018).

Lastly, the RSS and its affiliates have grown in organizational strength, and their nature of work has also grown substantially from primarily being an organization that stressed Hindu sentiments. Now, the BJP-RSS and its affiliates are increasingly getting involved in “sevakaryakram” (social service work), strengthening themselves as a civil society organization that claims to work for the national cause (Thachil 2014). Talking about the effectiveness of affiliates, in interview 1, Dilip Karambelkar observes that

[...] the RSS has developed a procedure to coordinate with its affiliates. The RSS will deal with the swayamsevak working in the affiliates and not try to control the organization. All affiliates are free to work within the broader national interest.⁹

Not surprisingly, the affiliates of RSS conduct door-to-door campaigns extensively to build support for the nationalist party, BJP. Whenever the BJP supported Hindu Rashtra in the past, the RSS with its affiliates has mobilized its constituents to vote for the BJP (Kulkarni 2017). The RSS and its affiliates are deeply rooted in society and communities and have great influence on the outcome of elections. The BJP's victory, including an absolute majority in 2019, was the result of the joint efforts of the RSS and the BJP.

Initially, the RSS was not willing to expand its role from being a "character-building" training to more relevant activities like social service and charity work (Andersen/Damle 2018). Through the experiences and continued expansion of the RSS and BJP, institutionalized coordination between both organizations has developed (Kulkarni 2017). Additionally, by including members from different religious and caste backgrounds, the BJP-RSS has expanded its political base and now looks more inclusive (Jaffrelot 2011). Over the past decade, the RSS has increased its presence in various areas of Indian society. However, the RSS claims to be a social-cultural organization, and its several affiliates are led and operated by trained RSS activists. Shri Niwas, National Joint Organizational Secretary of ABVP, explained in interview 4, "the RSS will not do anything, but the Swayamsevak will not leave anything"¹⁰. The RSS works

[...] for the 'character building' through shakha and according to the need of the nation, these trained people will lead the country in various fields. They will create organizations for a range of movements. When looking at it from the outside, different affiliates work in different fields with different techniques. However, they all work for the same ideology and for the same aim: for the glory of the Hindu Nation".¹¹

This prediction of people with an RSS background attaining leading positions in the country has already come true. The most prominent example is India's Prime Minister Modi, who was an RSS member for more than 20 years.

5 CONCLUSION

Western liberal norms that were considered "universal and certain" have been facing challenges in both democratic and non-democratic countries. The Indian debate on secularism reveals cultural limitations of liberal norms. The idea of secularism adopted by the Congress party deviated from its original meaning owing to the socio-cultural setting of Indian society. Secularism in India has never developed into its idealized form as a "separation between religion and politics" that provides legitimacy to the state to interfere in religious matters to protect any form of discrimination and ensure equality of religions. This incoherent understanding of secularism provided a wider scope for political parties to manipulate secular ethos to support their own interests. This has been evident in the latter decades of the Congress rule since the 1980s when it started capitalizing on minority issues to gain political support. The Congress government's decision to recognize "Sharia" law as a basis of "Muslim Personal law" is one such example.

9 Interview 1 with Dilip Karambelkar, Chief Editor of Tarun Bharat & Managing Editor of Vivek Weekly, Mumbai, interview by Yadav, Ankur (21 December 2019).

10 Interview 4 with Sri Niwas, RSS Pracharak & Organizing secretary ABVP, New Delhi, interview by Yadav, Ankur (12 January 2020).

11 Interview 4 with Sri Nawa, RSS Pracharak & Organizing secretary ABVP, New Delhi, interview by Yadav, Ankur (12 January 2020).

In this context, the BJP, a religious-nationalist party, has sought to replace secular nationalism with their alternative script of the idea of Bharat that is based on Hindu nationalism. The religious-nationalist vision of the BJP is markedly different from its secular counterpart. It starts with the notion that the secular vision of India promoted by the Congress-Left is a false Western imposition enacted by the Congress elites at the time of independence. It obscures India's true identity, which is based on India's rich Hindu civilization, more sensitive to the cultural and religious diversity of the Indian landscape. Proponents of Hindu nationalism emphasize that India's civilization, of which Hindutva is an integral part, has always embraced secular and plural society in its own way. Therefore, they believe that India's identity based on Hindu nationalism is important because it has the potential to create a more coherent national or "collective identity", which is needed for the social and political stability of India.

This contestation of the Congress-Left secular nationalism by the BJP religious and cultural nationalism has come to the fore with the strengthening of BJP's political power since 2014. The increasing debates and interference from both parties over religious issues have weakened people's trust in democracy. If secular nationalism has failed to deliver its promise of protecting and embracing India's plurality on many occasions, then Hindu nationalism has its own weaknesses. The rising Hindu nationalism causes fear among minorities as they believe their interests would be overlooked by a party that prefers one religion over others. Even though Hindu nationalism claims to be secular, progressive, and liberal, it can only be seen in the long-term how these claims will be manifested in government policy decisions.

Nevertheless, fixing the "idea" of India to a particular framework – either secular nationalism or Hindu nationalism – is misleading. India is a dynamic society that has undergone multiple

social-political developments since its independent existence. The vision of its development cannot be permanently fixed to one idea, one party, or one ideology. Therefore, the need of the hour for both the Congress-Left and the BJP is to design an idea or make changes to their idea that responds to the needs of the people, an idea that delivers comprehensive social-economic development and truly embraces diversity.

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