

## India's model: faith, secularism and democracy

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The reality of the “multicultural”, describing the mere presence of many cultures within a society, has been present in India for several millennia. But “multiculturalism [1]” is different: it is a special kind of relationship adopted by the state towards different cultural communities that fall within its sovereignty. In addition, it is the official, doctrinal articulation of this stance; and a label for theories of this doctrine, propounded and argued over by academics and journalists.

Rajeev Bhargava’s openDemocracy essays analyse and explain India in the world – and India to itself. Among the highlights:

- “India’s majority-minority syndrome” ([August 2002](#) [1])
- “Words save lives: India, the BJP, and the constitution” ([October 2002](#) [1])
- “Poverty and political freedom” ([August 2003](#) [1])
- “The political psychology of Hindu nationalism” ([November 2003](#) [1])
- “The magic of Indian democracy: questions for Antara Dev Sen” ([May 2004](#) [1])

While India might be invoked descriptively in treatments of the epiphenomena of multiculturalism, it is rarely mentioned in most theoretical discussions [2] of multiculturalism. This is testimony to the narrowness and parochialism of the dominant public cultures of the west, which still assumes that it houses the future, not the past.

To deepen our understanding of multiculturalism, to understand its internal tensions and foresee its problems - and accordingly to refine and focus public policies - the world needs to look to and learn from India.

### The emergence of an “ism”

Will Kymlicka [3], one of the foremost scholars of the subject, says that “multiculturalism” as a unique experiment started in Canada in 1971, and that it was followed in other countries such as Australia.

In a sense he is correct: as official doctrine and theory, it certainly began life in Canada [3], and was later adopted in Australia, the United States and Britain.

The reason why, as a doctrine, multiculturalism appears to have originated where it did was twofold. First, Canada was already a multinational state, one characterised by French-speaking Quebec’s refusal to “integrate” with its English-speaking neighbours on the model of the United States. Second, Canada was, like the US, a country of immigration.

Canadian governments, both fighting to avoid the break-up of their country and unable to insist that newcomers accept “melting-pot” integration into a powerful US-style nationality, embraced a policy that recognised the right of all its citizens to demand distinct kinds of identities. The unity of the country thus came to depend upon granting a constitutional right of difference to its own people within the framework of their nation-state. On this social and constitutional experience, which Canada and its western partners saw as unique, was built the doctrine of multiculturalism.

Canada, as well as the US and Australia [3], were formed by immigration, and came as a result to understand it - in their bones, as it were - as a permanent fact of life. Most other countries, by contrast, experienced it as an exception, an intrusion, a *crisis* in their composition.

But migration has gradually become a permanent fact of life everywhere, making the view of immigration as exceptional or problematic harder to sustain. The immense imbalances of wealth and population on a world scale, coupled with global technologies and transports, render mass immigration “normal [3]”.

The urbanisation of humankind is accelerating; hundreds of millions of people are moving from rural areas to the cities, and many of these journeys are leading people to cross and settle beyond national borders. In almost every country, new minorities and diasporas - often intensely self-conscious and interconnected thanks to information technology - are becoming normal components of the population. It appears that nothing can stop the process of “people flow” (as it was innovatively described in the debate [4] jointly hosted by Demos and **openDemocracy**).

This highlights a sense in which Will Kymlicka [5] is wrong to champion Canada as the homeland of multiculturalism. For as official policy and broader normative orientation based on social experience, its lineage is much older. It has been an integral feature of public debate in India for more than a century. Indeed, there is hardly a multicultural policy known to the world that, in one form or another, has not been examined, used or discarded in India.

All societies, it might be said, are today becoming like India. What can they learn from it?

### **Indian constitutional secularism**

Since 1950, when India’s lengthy constitution [6] was adopted, the country’s official, constitutional discourse has attended to the range of issues and arguments generated by a multiply diverse society. They include the cultural rights of minorities; the funding of minority educational institutions; the cultural rights of indigenous peoples; linguistic rights; the self-government rights of culturally distinct groups; asymmetrical federalism; legal pluralism; affirmative action for marginalised groups.

Moreover, several concerns have long been part of official state policy: public holidays that bestow official recognition to minority religions; flexible dress codes; a sensitivity in history- and literature-teaching to the cultures and traditions of minorities [6]; and government funding of especially significant religious practices.

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But perhaps the most important lesson India has for debate over and policies towards “multiculturalism” is the need to rethink and reform another “ism”- secularism. This term, originally non-Indian, is now part of the everyday vocabulary of Indian politics and society in a way that others could embrace.

The introduction of secularism into a discussion of multiculturalism should be no surprise. Secularism defines itself in relation to religion; and always, everywhere, even when they are understood to be conceptually separate, cultures and religions remain deeply intertwined. This is even more so in cases where the very distinction between religion and culture is hard to draw. Is the *hijab*, for a Muslim, a cultural or a religious object [7]? Is marriage among Muslims a cultural or a religious event? Is the identity of a Hindu or a Jew cultural or religious?

To think about multiculturalism [8], then, is to be confronted with the (public, often conflictual) presence of *multiple religions* – something that has been a constitutive feature of social reality on the subcontinent. Since secularism defines itself in relation to religion, it must also see itself in relation to multiple religions. This is primarily how the term secularism works on the subcontinent (when indeed it is allowed to do any work at all!).

## **The return of religion**

This multi-religious reality of the subcontinent should become the starting-point for discussions of western secularism [9], which is now being challenged by three distinct processes.

First, it is now evident that a central aspect of the classic or western secularisation thesis is deeply mistaken. The projected privatisation of religion mandated by classic notions of modernisation has, even in western societies, failed to occur. Instead, two developments are visible: the continued public presence of religion, and what Jose Casanova [10] calls the “de-privatisation” of religions that formerly had retreated from the public sphere. (Two examples of the latter are the militant role of evangelical and “born-again” Christianity in the United States and the global impact of the policies of the Roman Catholic Church [11].)

Second, migration from former colonies and an intensified globalisation has thrown together on western soil pre-Christian faiths, Christianity and Islam [11]. The public spaces of western societies are reappropriated by people of one religion and its various denominations, and increasingly claimed also by people adhering to several other religions; the accumulative result is a deep, unprecedented religious diversity. As a result, the weak but definite public monopoly of single religions is being challenged by the very norms that govern these societies.

Third, the encounter between these multiple religions is not fully dialogic [12]; rather, it generates mutual suspicion, distrust, hostility and conflict. To some extent, this too is a “normal” reaction to a close encounter with the unfamiliar; and due in part also to the different understandings of individual and social selves embodied in the divergent cumulative traditions of each of these religions.

But there is also something troubling about the exclusions that mark the self-understanding of religions themselves, about their inability to form more benign and tolerant understandings of those outside their fold. The bigotry on one side is matched on the other by a demonisation that relentlessly legitimises denial of the other religion’s right to an equal space in public life.

The same point can be put another way. Different forms of dance or dress can have deep and abiding identity-significance for people, yet a classical liberalism that has been reshaped by the spectacle of the market and fashion can also easily incorporate them into a market-driven perspective. When, however, culture is organised by *religion* rather than politics, it is more usually accompanied by lasting forms of exclusion, bans and power-systems (often involving unaccountable rule by old men) as well as practices and procedures which limit freedom and have undemocratic consequences.

This raises the question: is western secularism equipped to deal with the new reality of multiple religions in public life or with the social tensions this engenders?

### **The problem of secularism**

The dominant self-understanding of western secularism [13], somewhat encrusted into formula, is that it is a *universal* doctrine requiring the strict separation of church and state, religion and politics, for the sake of individual liberty and equality (including *religious* liberty and equality).

The social context that gave this self-understanding urgency and significance was the fundamental problem faced by modernising western societies: the tyranny, oppression and sectarianism of the church and the two threats to liberty it posed - to religious liberty conceived individualistically (the liberty of an individual to seek his own personal way to God, an individual's freedom of conscience), and to liberty more generally as (ultimately) the foundation of common citizenship.

To overcome this problem, modernising western societies needed to create or strengthen an alternative centre of public power completely separate from the church. The rigidity of the demand here is unmistakable - mutual exclusion (a wall [14], as Thomas Jefferson famously put it) between the two relevant institutions, one intrinsically and solely public and the other expected to retreat into the private domain and remain there. The individualist underpinnings of this view are fully evident.

This classic, western conception of secularism was designed to solve the internal problem of a single religion with different heresies - Christianity. It also appeared to rest on an active hostility to the *public* role of religion and an obligatory, sometimes respectful indifference to whatever religion does within its own internal, *privatedomain*. As long as it is private, the state is not meant to interfere.

It is now increasingly clear that this form of western secularism has persistent difficulties in seeking to cope with community-oriented religions that demand a public presence, particularly when they begin to multiply in society. This individualistic, inward-looking secularism is already proving vulnerable to crisis after crisis. The rigid response of the French republican state to the *hijab issue* [14], and the more ambiguous response of the German state to the demand by Turkish Muslims for the public funding of their educational institutions, may be only harbingers of clashes to come.

Which way will these western societies go? Will they become even more dogmatic in their assertions about their strict-separation secularism; or, in view of changed circumstances, will they abandon it in favour of an unashamed embrace of their majoritarian religious character founded on an official establishment? Or could they not work out a better form of secularism which addresses these new demands without giving up the values for which the original was devised?

Most important of all, is it not worth asking if such an alternative exists *already*?

I think it does - a conception not available as a doctrine or a theory but worked out in the subcontinent and available loosely in the best moments of inter-communal practice in India; in the country's constitution appropriately interpreted [15]; and in the scattered writings of some of its best political actors.

### **The Indian model**

Six features of the Indian model are striking and relevant to wider discussion.

First, multiple religions are not extras, added on as an afterthought but present at its starting-point, as part of its foundation.

Second, it is not entirely averse to the public character of religions. Although the state is not identified with a particular religion or with religion more generally (there is no establishment of religion), there is official and therefore public recognition granted to religious communities.

Third, it has a commitment to multiple values - liberty or equality, not conceived narrowly but interpreted broadly to cover the relative autonomy of religious communities and equality of status in society, as well as other more basic values such as peace and toleration between communities. This model is acutely sensitive to the potential within religions to sanction violence.

Fourth, it does not erect a wall of separation between state and religion. There are boundaries, of course, but they are porous. This allows the state to intervene in religions, to help or hinder them. This involves multiple roles: granting aid to educational institutions of religious communities on a non-preferential basis; or interfering in socio-religious institutions that deny equal dignity and status to members of their own religion or to those of others (for example, the ban on untouchability and the obligation to allow everyone, irrespective of their caste, to enter Hindu temples, and potentially to correct gender inequalities), on the basis of a more sensible understanding of equal concern and respect for all individuals and groups. In short, it interprets separation to mean not strict exclusion or strict neutrality but rather what I call principled distance.

Fifth, this model shows that we do not have to choose between active hostility or passive indifference, or between disrespectful hostility or respectful indifference. We can have the necessary hostility as long as there is also active respect: the state may intervene to inhibit some practices, so long as it shows respect for the religious community and it does so by publicly lending support to it in some other way.

Sixth, by not fixing its commitment from the start exclusively to individual or community values or marking rigid boundaries between the public and private, India's constitutional [15] secularism allows decisions on these matters to be taken within the open dynamics of democratic politics - albeit with the basic constraints such as abnegation of violence and protection of basic human rights, including the right not to be disenfranchised.

### **A lesson in democracy**

This commitment to multiple values and principled distance means that the state tries to balance different, ambiguous but equally important values. This makes its secular ideal more like an ethically sensitive, politically negotiated arrangement (which it really is), rather than a scientific doctrine conjured by ideologues and merely implemented by political agents.

A somewhat forced, formulaic articulation of Indian secularism goes something like this. The state must keep a principled distance from all public or private, individual-oriented or community-oriented religious institutions for the sake of the equally significant (and sometimes conflicting) values of peace, this-worldly goods, dignity, liberty and equality (in all its complicated individualistic or non-individualistic versions).

Some readers may find in this condensed version an irritatingly complicated collage and yearn for the elegance, economy and tidiness of western secularism. But, alas, no workable

constitution will generate the geometrical beauty of a social-scientific theory or a chemical formula. The ambiguity and flexibility of the conception of secularism developed by India is not a weakness but in fact the strength of an inclusive and complex political ideal.

Discerning students of western secularism may now begin to find something familiar in this ideal. But then, Indian secularism has not dropped fully formed from the sky. It shares a history with the west. In part, it has learnt from and built on it. But is it not time to give something in return? What better way than to do this than by showing that Indian secularism is a route to retrieving the rich history of western secularism - forgotten, underemphasised, or frequently obscured by the formula of strict separation and by many of its current articulations!

For the image of western secularism I outlined above is just *one* of its variants, what can be called the church-state model. Another equally interesting version that deepens the idea of western secularism flows from the religious wars in Europe and can be called the religious-strife model.

Yet, in its attempt to tackle the deep diversity of religious traditions, and in its ethically sensitive flexibility, there is something unparalleled in the Indian experiment - something different from each of the two versions. If so, western societies can find reflected in it not only a compressed version of their own history but also a vision of their future.

But it might be objected: look at the state of the subcontinent! Look at India! How deeply divided it remains! How can success be claimed for the Indian version of secularism? I do not wish to underestimate the force of this objection. The secular ideal in India is in periodic crisis and is deeply contested [15]. Besides, at the best of times, it generates as many problems as it solves.

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But it should not be forgotten either that a secular state was set up in India *despite* the massacre and displacement [16] of millions of people on ethno-religious grounds. It has survived in a continuing context in which ethnic nationalism remains dominant throughout the world. As different religious cultures claim their place in societies across the world, it may be India’s development of secularism that offers the most peaceful, freedom-sensitive and democratic way forward. At any rate, why should the fate of ideal conceptions with trans-cultural potential be decided purely on the basis of what happens to them in their place of origin?

A final point - or rather a question. India in May 2004 witnessed an election [16] in which the Hindu right was democratically ousted. At least part of the credit for this goes to the way the secular constitution helped transform the caste system from being an integral part of a sacral, hierarchical order to a political and associative formation tied to secular interests. As “lower castes” fight to get their share of power, wealth and dignity, the friction created in this struggle thwarts the majoritarian ambitions of the dominant religious group.

Will the American constitution play a similar role in removing the vastly more dangerous takeover of the state by the Christian right? Or have the privatising ambitions of the “wall of separation” model backfired, leaving Americans exposed to yet another term [17] of the same devils?

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