

Secular pretensions, Communal aspirations

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Seventy-one years have passed since Nehru's iconic 'Tryst with destiny' speech, delivered from the Mughal Red fort in 1947 was broadcast throughout the newly formed Indian republic declaring its independence from British rule. Nehru had declared that,

All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations. We cannot encourage communalism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great whose people are narrow in thought or in action. (Roberts, 2018, 1)

Unfortunately, independent India seems to have severely failed on both counts and finds itself mired in the throes of communal passion.

The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of L.K Advani led the popular mass movement calling for the destruction of the Babri masjid in 1991. The destruction of the Mughal era Mosque, allegedly built atop a pre-existing temple purported to be the birthplace of Hindu deity Rama by the medieval Mughal Emperor Babur, plunged the country in the flames of communal violence and hatred so bitter that it stands to rival the memory of carnage wrought by the bitter partition in 1947. However, it must be noted that violence against India's Muslims with the tacit backing of the state apparatus has been an ongoing occurrence since partition and predates the BJP. The increasing mainstreaming of communal politics seems to have reached its pinnacle with the Modi wave sweeping the 2014 general elections. Since then, an increasingly tense atmosphere seems to have shrouded the region with minority communities, especially the marginalized Muslim community, being targeted by radical groups. The violence against Muslims in Modi's India is not a novel phenomenon as the 1969 Gujarat riots, 1987 Hashimpura massacre, 1991 Bombay riots, 2002 Godhra carnage and the 2013 Muzzafarnagar

violence are some examples among thousands of others where the state has failed the minority community.

The various cases of mob lynching in the name of cow protection (Imam, 2018, 1) and slanderous propaganda intended to demonize the community in the form of Love Jihad allegations and Ghar Wapasi campaign bear living testimony (Jain, 2017, 1; The Hindu, 2017, 1). Furthermore, pronouncements such as one made by Yogi Adityanath, the Hindu ascetic-politician recently made the Chief Minister of the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, encouraging Hindu youth to rape even the exhumed remains of Muslim women portrays the dismal state of affairs (BBC, 2017,1).

Growing up as a Muslim in the Northern India, I remember realizing early on that I was treated with a certain degree of scorn by some of my peers and educators. I remember clearly being told by a classmate that I belonged to Pakistan during a discussion about our native domiciles when I was in grade 2, aged seven or thereabouts. Soon after, this scorn came to be articulated through slurs such as Pakistani, Terrorist and Katwa (an insult directed towards the Muslim practice of circumcision).

In this paper, I take methodological direction from the work of Anishnaabe-kwe scholar, Lyn Gehl, particularly in her understanding of “heart” and “head” knowledge. Gehl describes her Debwewin journey regarding her experiences navigating the maze of the bureaucratic colonial paradigm of the Canadian State in order to secure the Land rights of her Algonquin Nation served as an inspiration for this paper. Her sharing of her ‘heart knowledge’, an essential way of knowing for the Algonquin particularly resonated with my heart and this paper is rooted in my own heart knowledge as well as academic research. What I have realized through my

journey is that just as the Canadian state does not have any problem with indigenous people but rather with indigeneity, the Indian State does not have any problem with Muslims but with Muslimness. I use the word Muslimness rather than Islam as I consider these to be two wholly separate yet related terms. When referring to Muslimness, I refer not just to the faith in Islam but a consciousness about the distinct South Asian Muslim cultural identity that has developed through the course of a millennia through the interaction of various groups. India seeks to erase this identity by perpetrating both physical and cultural violence against the community as it represents a hurdle to the homogenizing project of modernity it has inherited from the colonial state.

This paper seeks to explore the twin forces of communalism and secularism that have dominated Indian political discourse for over a century. It argues that these concepts are endemic to, and rooted in the Eurocentric nation state system were imposed by the Colonial state upon the region and readily lapped up and digested by the late/post-colonial elite. Moreover, it questions the Secularism practiced in India and argues that it has been the imposition of majoritarian Hindu paradigm garbed in the language of secularism.

### **Communalism and Secularism**

Communalism in the South Asian context can be defined as the tension between religious communities, often leading to violence. It is used primarily in the context of majoritarian Hindu communalism's unending war, usually with the approval of the state, against India's minority Muslims population in the present context (Giri, 2010, 130). However, it goes beyond simply religiously motivated conflict. Saroj Giri rightfully describes communalism as the "inner logic of the particular kind of modernity inaugurated by colonialism in India"

(2010, 133). While she articulates an elaborate understanding of the roots of communalism, she befuddles its definition by ascribing the natural expression of any cultural, religious, ethnic or linguistic difference under the rubric of communalism.

Secularism defined as the separation of Church and State formulated in Europe cannot be applied to the Indian subcontinent in the absence of a homogenizing, all-encompassing state sponsored Church. Instead, what was extant before colonization took root were various faith, caste, occupation and language-based communities that were granted a measure of autonomy by the pre-colonial Empire of the Mughals which concerned itself primarily with the collection of taxes. Sectarian identity refracted through constructs centered on caste, faith, language and geography defined life in the subcontinent and continues to do so. Therefore, contrary to its purport in the West, secularism in India does not create or seek to create a wall between 'church' and 'state', but rather claims to vie for the nurturance of all religious communities (Hardgrave, 1993, 65).

While Giri ascribes a historical continuity to communalism, suggesting that it emanated from the extant tension between Hindus and Muslims, a closer look at communal relations prior to the Raj paint a different picture. While religious tensions between the two religious communities existed, they were more localized and certainly did not take the shape of Communalism. A prime example of this pre-colonial communal solidarity was expressed through the first war of Independence, fought by largely Hindu soldiers who travelled to Delhi after mutinying and proclaimed the Muslim Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar as the rightful sovereign over Hindustan. Moreover, before partition Hindus and Muslims alike learned Urdu as it wasn't perceived as a Muslim language (Ahmad, 2015, 694). A sounder argument has been

presented by Upadhyay and Robinson claims that localized Communalism was "modified during the 19th century by the dual influences of modernization and Westernization" and transformed into the universalizing phenomenon afflicting the region today (Upadhyay & Robinson, 2012, 37).

### **Colonial reshaping of identities**

The presence of a homogenous religious identity in the precolonial period remains a topic of debate. It is clear that the British were baffled by the staggering diversity of South Asia and conceptualized it through the imposition of their ontologies, disregarding the indigenous reality by confining it to a Hindu-Muslim binary (Bhambhri, 1990, 22). Thapar's contention that communal perceptions and by extension hostilities were more localized due to limited means of communication stands to reason. Moreover, clashes between faith-based groups in the pre-colonial period were few and far in between and identity was defined more through constructs of language and caste as opposed to religion (Upadhyay & Robinson, 2012, 37). In fact, the rise in communal tensions on a massive scale can be juxtaposed with the advent of printing technology that was extensively used by communal organizations such as the Arya Samaj in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (37).

Essential to the communalist view of History is the colonialist construction of history with its orientalist fantasies meant to delegitimize the largely Muslim nobility the Raj had come to replace. It was this understanding promulgated by historians such as James Mills that projected Muslims as bloodthirsty, oppressive and forcibly proselytizing aliens to South Asia (Upadhyay & Robinson, 2012, 46). Moreover, his division of South Asian history into three distinct phases of ancient, medieval and modern, with a strong basis in religious identity birthed

the idea of an ancient Hindu golden age that was purportedly destroyed by the invasive forces of medieval Islam (39).

The religiously defined decennial census, conducted as part of the larger mission of the all-encompassing colonial state, served to further solidify and encourage communal tendencies. Its inception in 1870s created for the first time, a countable Hindu majority and a Muslim minority, sparking a juvenile numerical comparison and competition between the two communities defined by the state (49; 39). So far reaching was the influence of these forces that it can be argued that the way Hinduism is understood and practiced today is a result of the Colonialist reconstruction of indigenous knowledge in order to integrate the various faith traditions into a form of religion understood by them (40).

### **Muslim backwardness**

Out of all the communities inhabiting the region before the establishment of crown control in the aftermath of the tragic events of the 1857 war of independence, it can be argued that Muslims could most definitely articulate their collective religious identity cutting across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Upadhyay & Robinson, 2012, 37). The concept of the united Ummah or religious Muslim community, fundamental in all forms of Islam that held no regard for borders buttressed this awareness. If anything, the census revealing their backwardness in the face of imposed modernity served to strengthen this understanding. The birthing of an opposing communalism emanating from a newfound awareness of a manufactured and encompassing Hindu identity further strengthened its hold upon both groups.

Muslims in India had been reduced to a state of dispossession through the marginalizing influence of the Colonial Raj that saw them as the primary threat to its supremacy in the sub-

continent (Upadhyay & Robinson, 2012, 39). Moreover, in the purported attempt to uplift the Muslim community it had systemically dispossessed, the colonial state further aggravated and crystallized communal consciousness through the establishment of separate communal electorates via the Minto-Morley reforms of 1909 (40). This British 'carrot and stick' approach with the community, showing concern for its well-being by trying to provide institutional safeguards for Muslims once it had firmly established its hold in the country, led to a development of the appeasement narrative that dominates any discussion regarding Muslim rights in India to this day. Further fanning the embers of communalism that would set the subcontinent ablaze, with its fires raging to this day.

### **The Freedom Movement**

The Indian Freedom movement was largely driven by a colonial elite that found meaning in the colonial state and strove to control state power rather than dismantle its machinery. Thus, fired by the ideal of the modernizing European Nation states, it saw South Asia's staggering diversity an impediment to its project and sought to forge a homogenizing overarching Indian identity (Hardgrave, 1993, 54-68). In working towards this idea of modernity, the Congress began fantasizing of the Indian 'Nation' as one inhabited by equal and secular citizens rather than as a jumble of multiple communities represented by elites that had dominated politics in region and was more indicative of its reality (Sankaran, 2002, 193-217).

This culminated in the propagation of an essentially Brahmanical worldview refracted through the working of the Congress party that readily dabbled in such communal motifs such as Tilak's Ganapati pooja and Shivaji festival among others to foster 'national pride' amongst the populace (Upadhyay & Robinson, 2012, 35-37). Prominent Congress members were active

in the often-violent and essentially communal movement for the protection of the Cow and were some of the fiercest proponents of Hindi imposition as the 'national' language at the cost of other language groups.

Such gross contradictions between what it preached and practiced laid bare its secular pretensions and heightened the sense of suspicion amongst the Muslims regarding its intentions." (Sankaran, 2002, 193-217). To the well informed non-Hindu inhabitants of India, the Congress seemed representative of mainstream upper caste Hindi speaking Hindus that hid its majoritarian agenda behind the aegis of 'secular nationalism' (Sankaran, 2002, 203).

Unsurprisingly, the various *détentes* between the Congress and the Muslim League such as the Lucknow Pact brokered by Muhammad Ali Jinnah were short lived due to the assimilative agenda of the Hindu Nationalists who were unwilling to recognize the legitimacy of the League as representative of India's Muslims. Although it can be argued that the younger leadership of the Congress after the 1920s as characterized by the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru represented a break from the sectarian politics of its forebears, its assimilative agenda is unquestionable (Sankaran, 2002, 206). The Congress's hegemonic agenda can be gauged from Nehru's assertion post the 1938 provincial elections that: "There are only two forces in India today, British imperialism and Indian nationalism as represented by Congress." (Krishna, 2002, 207). It is clear that to the Congress leadership, it legitimately held monopoly over Indianness and by extension, Indian nationalism.

The Congress adoption of 'secular' nationhood based on citizenship and its insistence regarding the same as opposed to any other way of being, was flawed from its very inception (Krishna, 2002, 203). More than being an imposition upon a region dominated by various

diverse communities dotting the landscape, its very conception of secularism was problematic in that it did not and could not carry the same meaning it did in the European context. There was no single, cohesive and institutionalized state Church as could be found in Europe. Thus, the separation of Church and State was impossible in the absence of such a reality. The more localized faith traditions had found cohesion through the all-pervading institution of caste by 1947 and held sway with the forward castes holding a disproportionate portion of power in the colonial administration, wealth as well as the electorate.

Consequently, it brushed aside Muslim voices along with those of other marginalized groups as, “parochial, divisive, sectarian, anti- national, and communal” and actively worked to bring them on board the Congress agenda through piecemeal concessions aimed at assimilation (Giri, 2010, 142). However, such treatment was not limited to the Muslims as the demands of the leaders of the Dalit and Dravidian movements such as Ambedkar and Periyar also fell upon deaf ears (Sankaran, 2002, 205).

### **Partition and the laying of blame**

Seervai argues that the accepting of the Cabinet Mission plan by the Muslim league under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah bears testimony to its willingness to work within a federal union, provided that minorities were provided with adequate safeguards to ensure their rights. However, it was the opposition to such parity for the Muslims by the radical Hindu lobby supplied by the Mahasabha along with Congress leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru and Patel that the plan ultimately failed. Their refusal in accommodating a view of democracy beyond the ‘one man, one vote’ formulae that buttressed their inherent majoritarianism led to its eventual failure. He goes on to argue that, “It is reasonably clear that it was Congress which wanted

partition. It was Jinnah who was against partition but accepted it as second best.” (Krishna, 2002, 208-209)

The homogenizing project of the Indian National Congress culminated in the partition of the British colony of India into ‘secular’ India and ‘communal’ Pakistan. The Nationalistic Congress narrative laid the blame squarely upon the ‘communal’ politics of the League, a construct that gave the new supposedly pluralistic and secular Indian state with a degree of moral legitimacy (Giri, 2010, 138). The laying of such blame upon the League was not compartmentalized to the political elite that had vied for the creation of a separate Muslim homeland but was extended to the larger Muslim community, a third of which was left behind in the ‘secular’ India. The polarity of national and communal essentially came to represent the imagined community of the ‘Indian Nation’ pitted against the Muslims. Thus, delegitimizing the very existence of Muslims in the new polity and relegating the vast majority of them to its fringes (Krishna, 2002, 197). While the demonization of Muslims helped achieve a sense of National consciousness defined by the other, its manifestations have been the cause of immense human suffering.

It needs to be noted that this lamentation regarding the loss of the inherent unity of ‘India’ presented as an organic and natural historic paradigm is founded on flimsy grounds. It was the break-up of the British-Indian Empire that was held together through the use of military force by the colonial Raj and the Congress’s spatial reference to the amputation of India was essentially the break-up of a colonial construct (Krishna, 2002, 196). More than a critique of the Congress, such a narrative is representative of the Stockholm syndrome that afflicted the colonial elite and the deep seated coloniality that rendered them unable to

conceive of realities beyond the boundaries set by the Raj. Moreover, it set the Muslims of India as easy scapegoats who were actively demonized tacitly by the state and actively by reactionary Hindu nationalist elements that were allowed to fester by successive Indian governments to gain political mileage. Partition also had the effect of depleting the Muslim community of a major section of its more prosperous members, leaving it impoverished both socially as well as economically (Ahmad, 2015, 691).

This nation-building “othering” directed by the Indian state is brought forward soon after partition in the interesting case of one Amirunnissa and her husband Bashar Khan, a couple who found themselves caught in the identity crisis that Muslims had to contend with in post-partition India. Their application for the India Pakistan passports in 1955 was denied on account their being considered Pakistani by Indian authorities. Their contention was the fact that Khan was born in Peshawar, a city that became a part of Pakistan. Notwithstanding the fact that he was born over two decades before the partition and that his wife was a Muslim woman from Madras, where they were domiciled. Deemed aliens, they were ordered to relocate even though they indicated no desire to migrate (Roy, 2016, 330). The fact that the state chose to focus on Bashar’s birthplace rather than his domicile in determining his nationality, owing to his religious identity stinks of communal bias. Furthermore, it highlights the de-legitimization of Muslim identity in the post-colonial paradigm of the Indian state that largely assumed its Muslim citizens to be disloyal and in perpetual need to prove it otherwise (Roy, 2016, 332).

### **Indian Muslims today**

That Muslims are regarded as a disease afflicting the social body is evident not just from the widespread support enjoyed by the BJP-RSS nexus and its affiliates (Heath, 2009, 29). It

most elaborately reflected in the Sachar committee report commissioned by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the UPA government in 2005 lists Muslims among the most deprived communities along with Dalits and Tribals (Islam, 2012, 64). Muslim displacement from government jobs and services in the Post-colonial era also attests to this paradigm (Upadhyay & Robinson, 2012, 41). The community has been relegated to unorganized labor in the informal sector, constituting a periphery within a periphery (Islam, 2012, 65). It has been divested of its land owing to abject poverty, holds a negligible stake in the major means of production and its representation in the State is abysmally disproportionate (Islam, 2012, 64).

Moreover, for the advocates of communal as well as secular Nationalism, any expression of Muslim identity is scornfully perceived as a threat and is opposed tooth and nail and is subjected to state scrutiny and repression under the aegis of the 'War on Terrorism'. Conversely, similar expressions of upper caste Hindu identity are actively sponsored and deemed truly 'Indian' (Heath, 2009, 573). An example of that is the fact that the Sachar Committee's recommendation of opening Urdu-medium schools in areas of Muslim majority has fallen on deaf ears. While the language is rightfully associated with Muslim culture in the North and in Deccan, it is also a representative and testimony to the syncretic culture that developed in India before the loo of coloniality swept over the region. Unfortunately, the language continues to be in decline as it is perceived by Hindus as a language of Muslim separatism related to Pakistan (Ahmad, 2015, 682/690).

### **Beyond Muslims**

While this paper seeks to deal primarily with the polarity of communalism and secularism vis-à-vis the majoritarian Hindu and minority Muslims in the Indian context, it must

be noted that confining this paradigm to these two communities does not represent a wholistic picture of the state of affairs.

This is evident from the fact that almost every state outside the Hindi speaking cow belt has and continues to experience centrifugal nativist movements directed against the increased centralization of the state. Moreover, these movements have often taken a militant turn owing to their delegitimization and oppression by the 'Centre' represented by the government in New Delhi (Hardgrave, 1993, 59). India has had to contend with such violent freedom movements in the states of Nagaland and Mizoram since its very inception in 1947! Moreover, the negligence of the Anandpur resolution by the Indian state spawned the violent Khalistani movement demanding an Independent Sikh homeland in the state of Punjab in the 1980s that was put down only through the use of State violence and gross human rights violations that are yet to be resolved (Hardgrave, 1993, 60). The reasoning behind the government's aforementioned negligence of Sikh demands was its supposed secessionist hue. Interestingly, it has been argued that the meteoric rise of the Khalistanis was the direct result of the Indian state's policy, under the leadership of the Congress party, of flirting with Sikh communalism in the hopes of manipulating it in order to secure its own power (Bhambhri, 1990, 26).

Sarkar argues that there is a deeper logic at work regarding the continued use of communalism as means of securing political power by even the most secular forces in the Indian political spectrum (Giri, 2010, 142). The unfortunate reality is that politics in the post-colonial Indian state is reflective of the politics of coloniality vis-à-vis elites vying for power, the only difference being that the old hereditary aristocratic elite have been replaced by homegrown capitalists. Seen in this light, the meteoric proliferation of communalism,

represented by the rise of the Hindu right represented by the BJP-RSS nexus is not surprising considering the capital laid at its disposal by business interests. What is also not surprising is the irony with which the Hindu right conducts itself, with its various organizations such as the Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal staging protests against globalization and westernization while its proponents have been the chief architects of economic liberalization that has paved the road to the Indian market for foreign investors. Therefore, such symbolic protests are merely representative of the politics of distraction employed in order to befool the population of its real enemies, the WTO and the government (Heath, 2009, 581).

Arguing in similar vein Sankaran Krishna writes, “By classifying economy, religion, race, gender, class, and various other aspects that determine life opportunities under the rubric of civil society and relentlessly hammering on the theme of the abstract equality of all in political society, the bourgeois state is able to sustain the extraordinary inequality, egoistic individualism, and predatory nature of existence under capitalism” (2002, 199).

While scholars such as Hardgrave argue that “India’s democracy is challenged by communalism, excessive caste consciousness, and separatism” (1993, 68), one wonders whether majoritarianism really constitutes democracy? Moreover his suggestion that, “balance must be restored through a devolution of power to the states, indeed, perhaps to an increased number of states and possibly ‘autonomous regions’ within states”, fails to recognize the logic and depth of communalism and although applaudable, is an erroneous attempt at dealing with mere symptoms (1993, 62).

The duality of communal vs secular has been perpetrated by the Indian state since its inception, through its adoption of essentially majoritarian agenda garbed under the aegis of

secularism under the Nehruvian project. That secularism in India defines itself as nothing more than anti-communal ensures the continuity of the state as it exists and the status quo it represents because the everlasting fight against communalism supersedes the real fight for societal transformation (Giri, 2010, 139). Moreover, it is clear that the post-colonial states of the 'third world' have failed to curb communal tendencies in whatever form or shape they manifest in their respective contexts but have rather contributed to a reinforcing of such identities (Krishna, 2002, 203). Writing in 1961 Nehru himself admitted that, "our constitution lays down that we are a secular state, but it must be admitted that this is not wholly reflected in our mass living and thinking" (Krishna, 2002, 203). This superficial fight against communalism does not concern itself with social transformation and is merely a basis for legitimizing state power (137).

It is Fanon's contention that, "the liberation struggle does not restore to national culture its former values and configurations. This struggle which aims at a fundamental redistribution of relations between men, cannot leave intact either the form or substance of the people's culture" (Krishna, 2002, 144-145). It is clear for the aforementioned discussion that while the various national cultures constituting South Asia have undergone significant transformations in both form and substance. Unfortunately, India as well as other post-colonial South Asian states such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan have, by wholeheartedly adopting the homogenizing model of the centralized hegemonic nation state have aided coloniality.

It is clear that the fight against communalism cannot be separated from the question of a larger radical restructuring of society and state in India (Krishna, 2002, 135). The deep nature of communalism demands a wider struggle for a radical transformation of state and society

(138). Bhagat Singh's call for a social and economic revolution to address the communal question becomes pertinent here (132). The young revolutionary stated in 1927 that "in order to stop the people from mutual (communal) fighting, class consciousness is needed. The toiling poor, working classes and the peasantry should be made fully aware of the fact that their real enemies are capitalists". He reiterates that, "the cry of the day is absolute transformation and those who realize it bear the responsibility to reorganize society on the basis of socialism" (Cited in Krishna, 2002, 143).

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