

THE RETURN OF THE SECULAR

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A protest in New Delhi against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act earlier this week. | Photo Credit: [SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR](#)

It was both touching and comforting to hear the reply of Nikhil, a young student from Jamia Millia Islamia, to an unexpected question put to him last week by a TV anchor — “What does Jamia mean to you?” After a long pause, he said, “It has given me *tehzeeb* (refined civility), an understanding of the *samvidhaan* (Constitution) and taught me to read, write and think. When I joined Jamia, I had no understanding of India. This university has made me understand my country. I will work to the end of my life to realise Gandhi’s vision. I want my secular India back,” he affirmed.

Mentioning Mahatma Gandhi was entirely appropriate. For, Gandhi’s contribution to an everyday understanding of secularism is massive, one different from at least three other understandings. First, the political secularism of Western Europe and North America in which some form of separation between church and state is required to defend equality and individual liberty but has no room for the idea of fraternity or community, crucial in deeply diverse societies. Second, the more legal and philosophical, constitutional secularism of India, one that is immensely complex, nuanced and comprehensive, cognisant of deep diversity as well as oppression within communities. Here, the state is required to maintain a principled distance from all religious communities. This is concerned with preventing inter-religious domination as much as fighting religiously grounded hierarchies and fanaticism within religions.

Finally, the secularism practised in recent times by most political parties in India, what I have called ‘party-political secularism’. This secularism does not really deserve to be called so because it is unprincipled and opportunistic, plays footsie with the most orthodox, bigoted and regressive elements of all religions, is concerned solely with seeking and maintaining power, and is willing to engineer riots or capitalise on inter-communal estrangement.

In contrast, Gandhi made secularism simple. All religious communities inhabiting a particular territory must live with continuing ease and comfort with one another. This is a people-dependent notion, one that Gandhi believed was already part of popular Indian consciousness but jeopardised in modern times by communal politics. To counter it, he felt, support was needed from the state that is not partial to any one particular religion. Moreover, whenever any estrangement or hostility ensued, then the state must help restore communal harmony. To perform its primary duty of maintaining fraternity, to prevent political alienation, the state must distance itself equally from all religions.

It was heartening to find so many young women and men all fired up about this Gandhian vision of secular India, and be out on the streets to defend their idea of constitutional secularism. Four things about what they conveyed are noteworthy. First, the fundamental injustice of policies with unambiguous discriminatory intent. This is unconstitutional. And offends the dignity not only of those discriminated against but also of every citizen in the polity. In major nationwide protests in which countless people participated, it was made clear that any law or policy that discriminates on the basis of religion is not acceptable. Besides, the whole idea of proving one’s citizenship by producing documents before government officials is abhorrent — anyone born in India must be presumed to be an Indian citizen and should not be compelled to demonstrate this. Many protesting students are convinced that the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) is discriminatory. Article 14 provides for equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Suppose that a

foreign national from Europe commits a grave crime in India. Should he be treated differently from other Indians? Would the law be differentially applied simply because he is, say, a European Christian? No. Analogously, suppose that illegal immigrants fleeing persecution in their own country enter Indian territory, need to be identified and investigated for possible deportation. A uniform criminal law should apply here too. Either all should be given refuge or all deported by due process of law. No one within the territory of India, Indian citizen or foreign national, must be treated differently. The students appeared to have imbibed this logic.

Second, a rejection of the politics of hate and revenge. Such policies, the peaceful protesters seemed to suggest, disrupt peace and stability by generating a vicious cycle of resentment and mutual hostility. To be sure, conflicts and skirmishes have not been uncommon between communities in the past, but a deep division between them occurred only when a pernicious ethno-nationalist ideology was imported into India in the 19th century, with tragic results in 1947. Young people appeared to have realised that leaders of the current government have not learned any lessons from those dark events and continue with policies aimed at consolidating a pan-Hindu identity defined by hostility to the 'other'.

Third, the public acknowledgement by young Hindus of the contribution of Muslims to Indian culture and civilisation, to constructions of Indian notions of civility. Young women and men asserted that their religious identity is not defined against other religions. One can be Hindu without being anti-Muslim and vice versa. Indian citizens cohabit a shared social and public space not through mutual toleration but by actively accepting one another, and are committed to participating in each other's suffering and destiny. They conveyed that they shall not tolerate attempts to breach civic friendship.

Likewise, norms of public etiquette, civility and refinements in culture have been shaped in India by multiple religious traditions in which Muslims have played a prominent role. For example, the *qawwali* and the *ghazal* are as much a part of our culture as the *bhajan*. Are not some of the greatest *bhajans* in Hindi films written by Sahir Ludhianvi and Javed Akhtar, sung by Mohammad Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar and others to compositions by Naushad and A.R. Rehman? It is not for nothing that even a known Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sympathiser, the actor Paresh Rawal, was compelled to remark that he was stunned by the 'idiocy' of the demand that Firoz Khan not be allowed to teach Sanskrit at the Banaras Hindu University (BHU). There is a whole tradition of such scholarship alive today that harks back to Dara Shikoh and Amir Khusro, and continues in Modern India with renowned Sanskrit scholars such as Mohammed Hanif Khan Shastri and Pandit Ghulam Dastagir. Finally, the protesters made it clear that an obsession with religious identity takes focus away from pressing issues of everyday life. No more divide and rule, as one of the posters averred; the business of government is to facilitate a better everyday life for all ordinary citizens, including Hindus and Muslims, not to destroy it.

The reappearance of secularism in Indian public discourse, initiated by young Indian students, is surely a matter of relief and joy to those who aspire to protect India's diverse cultural heritage, defend India's Constitution and wish every Indian to have a better standard of living.

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