

# WHAT WE OWE TO THE MAHATMA

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Where does multiple, forceful Hindu assertions of the past few years leave Indian secularism? Some say that secularism lies in tatters. But can it also be claimed that it is needed more than ever before?

Two related but equally distinctive conceptions of secularism developed in India: one constitutional, the principled distance model; the other, the communal harmony model, attributed to the Mahatma. I believe this second Gandhian conception, equally distinctive, is in need of desperate revival. What makes it distinctive and why is it needed? To answer this, a comparison with European conceptions of secularism would help.

The background of the emergence of political secularism in Europe is profound religious homogenisation — dissenters, and adherents of non-dominant religions, were expelled or exterminated during and after the wars of religion. Rulers publicly confessed allegiance to one of the many churches in these predominantly single-religion societies, thereby consolidating a strong alliance between state and the dominant church. Trouble began, however, when this church became increasingly politically meddlesome and socially oppressive. The key issue then was how to tame the power of this church. The state's disentanglement from the dominant church (church-state separation) was necessary to realise a number of goals, including the enhancement of individual liberty and equality. But for this secularism, tackling religious diversity was simply not an issue, because it had already been liquidated in all kinds of ethically undesirable ways.

By contrast, in India, deep religious diversity was not an optional extra but part of its social, cultural and historical landscape. Gandhi understood this and never tired of stating it: India is “perhaps one nation in the ancient world which had recognised cultural democracy, whereby it is held that the roads to one and the same God are many, but the goal was one, because God was one and the same. In fact, the roads are as many as there are individuals in the world... The various religions were as so many leaves of a tree; they might seem different but at the trunk they are one”. Gandhi dismissed the idea that there could ever be one religion in the world, a uniform religious code, as it were, for all human kind.

What is needed then is due recognition of different religious communities and to ensure comfort and trust among their members. This was viable because for Gandhi, all humans had a fundamental desire for what might be called deep sociability. They value human relations as an end in itself. They desire a constructive relationship with others. Why else would they be motivated to seek agreement, even when it was not really necessary? Why, upon realising that they can't resolve disagreement on one issue, would they seek agreement on something else? Why are they motivated to renew conversation after it has been violently disrupted? Why, after a period of mutual recrimination, breakdown and silence, do people still begin talking to one another? Humans simply can't do without one another, and no matter how much they like to be with people of their own ilk, they invariably also need to live with those with whom they differ, to reach out to people with whom they disagree.

The world's religious diversity, the impossibility of there ever being one religion for humankind, makes mutual respect, equal regard and communal harmony a necessity. Gandhi believed that this can become a reality by virtue of the human quality of deep sociability.

Humans occasionally wish to live independently of their communities, but as participants of

historically embedded cultural and religious traditions, they also meet each other as members of religio-cultural communities. They must actively shape these encounters, ensure that they do not become bitter or turn sour but be good, decent, friendly and respectful. Humans can't really be good to each other unless they are respectful to each other's religious and philosophical traditions.

Gandhi felt that a large part of the responsibility for maintaining communal harmony lies with communities themselves. But there are times when this communally sustained harmony is disturbed, even breaks down. When this happens, the state has to step in. And for this to be possible, it cannot already be aligned to any one religion but must be distant from all. Secularism then marks a certain comportment of the state whereby it distances itself from all religio-philosophical perspectives in order to promote a certain quality of sociability and fraternity between communities. This makes Gandhian secularism distinctive. Unlike modern Western secularisms that separate church and state for the sake of individual freedom and equality and have place for neither community nor fraternity, the Gandhian conception demands that the state be secular for the sake of better relations between members of all religious communities, especially if they are mutually estranged. The Gandhian conception is indispensable in times of religious disharmony.

This Gandhian view did not stem from strategic considerations, but was grounded in deep conviction. It is sometimes said that Gandhi's views were influenced by Jaina teachings. "All religions are true and all have error," he said, implying that all religions are inevitably partial, incomplete, fragmentary, so that different traditions need to complement and enrich one another rather than behave as mutually exclusive rivals. Without denying this philosophical lineage, I would claim that Gandhi's views were shaped even more by the wisdom-traditions of the ancient world, in which gods and goddesses of each cultural region are different, yet part of the same semantic universe and therefore mutually related and translatable. As a result, no culture denied the reality of the gods of another culture but always found ways to accommodate them. For instance, the god of another culture could become a member of the family, say, some other god's son (Ganesh, the son of Shiva and Parvati). A new god could be created by merging half of one god and half of another (Hari-Hara). Most of all, a relation of equivalence or identity could be established between them (Rudra is Shiva), making it possible to claim that the gods of different cultures were the same, only called by different names. Gandhi was inspired by these traditions, particularly by the habit of establishing equivalence, and extended this insight to the new world religions. Thus he claimed that Ram, Allah, 'Satya' (Truth) refer to the same entity. If this is so, every attack on someone else's god was a denial of one's own god; every claim that one's own god is better than the other's was tantamount to the humiliation of one's own god.

Yet, the realisability of Gandhian secularism depends on faith in popular wisdom traditions which in turn is sustained by a certain idea of popular moral agency. When good, god-loving, ordinary men and women free from the trappings of power, wealth and fame — precisely what makes them ordinary and good — get together, they release non-violent creative energies that morally sustain and improve our world. Alas, it seems that such men and women have gone missing in our times. Gandhian secularism is badly needed, but who will ride it out?

*Rajeev Bhargava is Professor, CSDS, Delhi*

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