

The use of religion in Indian politics

And the floundering pillars of secularism

RAJKUMAR SINGH

ON the eve of independence, India decided to establish a secular state with its own characteristics of religious tolerance, liberty and equality. Religious tolerance is a key element in the concept of Indian secularism because it has been a significant element of the country's historical tradition.

Secularism in India is a way of life. In a country where there are at least 12 religions, over 300 castes, nearly 4,000 sub-castes, over 100 major languages and more than 300 dialects, the only way to reduce internal tensions is to inculcate tolerance and co-existence. The idea of secularism in a country like India with its pluralist tradition lasting over thousands of years cannot succeed without respecting pluralist ethos.

Dilemmas of a secular state

The use of religion for political purposes was almost nonexistent at the time of independence. It is curious to note that communal politics gained strength after about 40 years of national government. If it was entirely due to the forces of traditionalism, it should have appeared at the time when forces of modernity had gained traction in Indian society and economy. Since the '60s, Indian politics has seen drastic changes in style, language, modes of behaviour, reflecting the actual cultural understanding of rural Indian society rather than the Western ideals of the elite which inherited power in the Nehru years.

There are two consequences of this amalgamation of religion, politics and public administration. First, it has given prominence in public life to religious leaders like "sants" and "mahants", "imams" and "priests". They have started playing an active role in governmental decision-making. The interference of religious leaders in administrative matters can prove dangerous to India's secular democracy.

Second, practices and festivals have started making serious inroads into public



Members of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) march to mark the Hindu New Year in Allahabad on March 30, 2014.

PHOTO: AFP

life. As a result, a sea change has occurred both in Hindu religious community and in its relations with others. In these changed circumstances, the Hindu community was called into action, not as one of the various Indian communities, but as "the Indian community". It was not only the religious revivalist forces but also the modernising reformists who equated the Hindu community with Indianism and patriotism. Steps were taken deliberately to create a Sanskrit-based Hindu language, Hindi, as against the earlier composite language. Further, there are two variants of this expression of Indianness. One is the overt religious concept of Hindutva; and the other is the "secular" expression of Indianness as based on ancient Indian culture. The first is a

religious concept, the second a cultural one; but both together relate Indianness to the tradition of what is now identified as Hindu civilisation. According to the lines drawn above, the political parties of India may be grouped as religion-leaning and secularism-leaning.

Increasing importance of religion

In India despite partition on the basis of religion, the country resolved to be a secular state and promulgated its Constitution in 1950 accepting equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their caste, creed or race. It was undoubtedly a great step forward. But it was not easy to translate the constitutional ideals into practice in a society as complex as that of India. The Indian state was characterised as a "soft state" by Swedish economist

Gunnar Myrdal in his book *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*. The Indian state remained not only soft towards communalism but it also encouraged it, if it paid political dividends. 1970 onwards the central and different state governments started the practice of arranging *iftar* parties for Muslims during Ramadan. Now, political leaders compete with each other when it comes to throwing lavish parties at national and state capitals and the practice has continued even in the regime of the BJP. Wide publicity is given in the media as to who attends these parties and what is being served. It is forgotten that such politicisation of *iftar* is a sacrilege of a religious practice which may not be taken lightly by Muslims.

Louis Dumont, one of the most influential writers on Indian religion and society, viewed *sadhus* as the agent of development in Indian religion and speculation, "the creator of values" responsible for "founding of sects and their maintenance", and for the major ideas and social innovations. Under these changed circumstances, this consensus on the role of religious figures began to transform during the time of Indira Gandhi who relied on populist measures and appeal when it came to specific categories of voters. She drew Hindu religious figures into the limelight through her patronage of religious institutions and played the "Hindu card" against the minorities. The case of Sikh religious leader Bhindranwale is an example of her creation. She was systematically encroaching on the traditional vote bank of Jana Sangh. Indira Gandhi also co-opted Muslim religious figures in her attempt to hold on to the Muslim vote, pursuing her strategy of what was then called "Fatwa politics". Thus, the ideology and practice of secularism in reality were confronted with multifaceted and multi-dimensional challenges.

Use of religion in politics

Secularism in India began to face turbulent weather with the revival and strengthening of religion-leaning political parties in the

country. The pro-Hindu strategies of the ruling Congress reminded the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) of its actual role for which they had been struggling in the previous decades. Earlier in the '70s, several proposals were made for a judicious deradicalisation of the BJP's slogans from groups inside the party itself.

The decade also witnessed communal propaganda bring in a few dividends and the irreversible decline of the Jana Sangh. At this juncture, it was felt inside the party that it should subtly shift its appeal to the middle class. Instead of the traditional appeal to Hindu chauvinism, it should try to project itself as a substitute for the Congress, asking for support not because of its ideological differences with the Congress, but because of its similarities—offering a cleaner, more efficient, less corrupt government. After the dramatic success of the *ratha yatras* (public processions in a chariot), its own agenda was rewritten in a retrograde direction, but it is remarkable how clearly the party has not rejected its other, more secular constituency.

From the early '80s, Hindu communal organisations increased the scale, aggressiveness and violence of their operations under the general direction of the militant Hindu right-wing party RSS and its mass fronts: the VHP, which coordinates religious bodies, and the BJP, its electoral wing. Again in the mid-1980s, elections were held to the Lok Sabha in 1984 after Indira Gandhi's assassination, and the BJP, under the presidency of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, got only two seats. Vajpayee resigned and LK Advani, considered a hawk in the party, took over and gave BJP new hope and a decision was taken by the leadership of BJP to promote Hindu militancy to snatch the Hindu vote bank from the Congress.

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The burden of the 'Eves' of this world



SHAGUFTA HOSSAIN

"EVE-TEASING", the colloquial term for public sexual harassment in use despite directives being issued by the High Court about changing it to a more appropriate term, alludes to the monotheism's (mainly biblical sources) creation story concerning Adam and Eve. In the oft-repeated religious origin story, considering the semantic roots of the term in Indian English, eve-teasing refers to the temptress nature of Eve. Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden apple, leading him to commit the original sin, resulting in both of them being expelled from the Garden of Eden and landing here on earth and the rest is history.

The millennia of stamping the woman as a tease have, historically, almost justified acts of sexual harassment. So, it is no surprise how deeply ingrained into the human psyche it is that women, simply by virtue of their sex, will most naturally be subject to sexual harassment.

I am used to reading statistics deeming Dhaka as the least safe city for women, the least liveable city, etc. But statistics can be taken at face value or not depending on who's publishing them, when and how, and who's reading them. When faced with lived realities, however, brushing off the statistics as mere statistics becomes slightly more challenging.

As part of my work, we recently conducted an anonymous qualitative survey to understand how the female students we work with felt about safety issues, whether or not they felt safe in school or on their way there.

"We need to wait for bus/rickshaw on the streets. Sometimes men on the streets make comments about how we dress or about our body shapes," one student wrote. Another one stated, "When we go to madrasa, on our way, some boys give us looks and stare at

us and make inappropriate comments and gestures."

Considering that Ain O Salish Kendra reported that Bangladesh has had more than 700 cases of rape and sexual assault in 2018, this should come as no surprise.

But, it does.

It does because more often than not religions have played a role in providing value frameworks regarding personal behaviour meant to guide adherents in determining between right and wrong. And by virtue of the religious bearing on the madrasa education, we expect these institutions to adhere to the highest moral grounds. So, there is greater shock value attached to crimes that occur within religious institutions. Whether or not this shock value is misplaced, however, is a separate conversation.

There is a fascinating report titled "Improving the quality of girls' education in madrasas in Bangladesh" by Badrunnessha and Kwauk published by the Brookings Institution which found that observing Islamic religious teachings—for example, about girls and boys occupying separate spaces—make madrasas seem as safe havens for girls. The traditional settings help allay concerns of many parents about protecting the honour of their daughters

The problem isn't a madrasa-centric problem per se. It is the result of a kind of social conditioning that leads to sexual harassment being seen as playful resulting in zero accountability for the perpetrator.



Nusrat will be forgotten like so many are. Or maybe she will remain just a memory; remnants of a story of victimisation by multiple systems that refused to let her exist.

PHOTO: STAR

while in school. Another study titled "What Determines Religious School Choice? Theory and Evidence from Rural Bangladesh," conducted by Asadullah, Chakrabarti, and Chaudhury, found that while poverty and religiosity are factors taken into consideration when deciding whether to send girls to madrasas or to state-run secular schools, the motivations for choosing madrasas are marriage-related. It is perceived that madrasa education instills traditional values that increase their daughters' marriage prospects by making them more "honourable". And sadly, perhaps of all the things that are worth protecting, a woman's honour is the most valuable.

The above quoted statements from our surveys with the girls show that these beliefs of madrasas being safe havens for young

women are, at the very least, questionable. And even if these statements were seen as a biased NGO-type organisation's attempts to justify its foreign-driven interventions and garner funding, too much has happened to treat the issue lightly including the much-talked-about murder of Feni madrasa student Nusrat Jahan Rafi.

Despite all that has been said and done, is this to say that all madrasas are hubs of sexual harassment? That they are, contrary to popular belief, not holy places but rather spaces where the roots of all evil, and not honour and virtue, spread? And that increased monitoring, or better a complete removal of the system, would rid the world of the plague of sexual harassment and assault? That would be too easy of a conclusion to reach and a titillating one given the shock

value that comes with atrocities committed in so-called holy spaces.

But the reality remains that while schools and religions form an integral part of the socio-cultural norms, the problem is wider and much more complex than that. "Eve-teasing" is a result of socio-cultural norms relating to sexuality and one outlet for boys' sexual feelings who gain pleasure from it and assert their masculinity at the expense of girls' discomfort. It is true that Nusrat had faced harassment and assault at the hands of the principal of the school she was studying in. But it is also true that the girls we spoke to referred to incidents that happened to them outside of the madrasas. And sexual harassment isn't unique to madrasa students. So the problem isn't a madrasa-centric problem per se. It is the result of a kind of social conditioning that leads to sexual harassment being seen as playful resulting in zero accountability for the perpetrator.

Regardless, the institutions that these girls are a part of, and that form such an integral part of who they are, have an obligation to protect them, especially given that upholding their honour is oftentimes a significant factor in influencing their enrolments in these institutions.

In time, Nusrat will be forgotten like so many are. Or maybe she will remain just a memory; remnants of a story of victimisation by multiple systems that refused to let her exist. My girls will grow up to normalise sexual harassment too, like I did, as something that just happens, as a part of life. Eve's penance for being the temptress.

But if we had created institutions, religious ones that don't vilify women as objects of temptation asking to be teased, educational ones that are indeed safe spaces, I wonder if maybe Nusrat would be more than a memory or a case study, and my girls would maybe know what it is to grow up without having to bear the unfair burden that society places on them for being who they are.

Shagufta Hossain is the Founder and Executive Director of Leaping Boundaries. Leaping Boundaries aims to empower female madrasa students by increasing their visibility and access to platforms where they are traditionally underrepresented.

QUOTABLE
Quote

MALCOLM X
(1925-1965)

American Muslim minister and human rights activist

A man who believes in freedom will do anything under the sun to acquire, or preserve his freedom.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Feeds the furnace	9 Diamond corners
1 Years gone by	34 Sad sack	11 Downhill glider
5 Field yield	37 Tolerate	15 Cox-swain's count
9 Wee	38 "I agree!"	19 Black
10 Buenos —	39 Hunger signals	20 Sock part
12 Jordan's capital	40 Finished	22 Singer Tori
13 Locker room need	41 Border	23 Soak up
14 Bike wheel parts	DOWN	24 Went it alone
16 Cain's mother	1 Zit	25 Magic word
17 Different	2 Maximally	26 Wise-cracking
18 Like nobles	3 Tent anchor	27 Anxious
21 Ready to go	4 Daly of "Cagney & Lacey"	28 Agreeable answers
22 Traitor Benedict	5 Purr producer	29 Peaceful
23 Chimney output	6 2016 Olympics host	30 Spoil
24 Eerie	7 "1984" author	33 Gift-wrapping need
26 Delight	8 Irritated	35 Long, long time
29 Whodunit find		36 Fish eggs
30 Departed		
31 Pub drink		

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TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

B	A	L	I	F	R	E	T	S
A	W	A	R	D	L	I	M	I
L	A	P	S	E	A	M	I	N
L	I	T	F	O	X	N	O	R
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott