

Secularism in the Indian Democratic Curry : a policy analysis

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*"O! Dispenser of India's destiny, thou art the ruler of the minds of all people
Thy name rouses the hearts of Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, the Maratha country, in the Dravida country,
Utkala and Bengal ..."*

- English translation of India's National Anthem (initial part)

The underlined terms refer to some states, regions and communities in India

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyse secularism policy in India, its evolution and related events in Indian history. Why did India choose to be a secular state at the time of independence ? What is the meaning of secularism in India, as compared to rest of the world ? Is India really secular ? To what extent ? How has secularism concretely manifested itself in terms of documented laws and policies ? How have these laws and policies been translated and implemented at local levels in the federal system ? How can seemingly contradictory events be explained ? The analysis reveals that answers to these questions and contradictions lie in the intricacies of the 'grand Indian democratic curry' as developed in this paper. No single policy framework can give all answers. Each individual event, change or phenomenon needs to be analysed within its specific space time context, positioned in the overall democratic process. In particular, the level of focus - National or local - needs to be clear. India has its own brand of secularism which is slightly different from the western brand of secularism. India was born secular and remains secular as a nation. However, the implementation of secularism is not perfect and uniform, and there are variations and contradictions at local levels in the federal system. This gives rise to minority appeasement and positive discrimination on one hand, and instances of state abetted ethnic violence on the other.

The paper is divided in three main parts. The first part sets up the background and framework in which secularism plays itself in India, including definitions and concepts required for policy analysis. The second part looks at some specific *event slices* from India's history since its independence in 1947 and analyses them from the point of view of policy change. Finally, the paper concludes by taking a holistic look and making some comments on the overall pattern. The paper also points out limitations of this analysis and recommends future directions.

I. Background, Framework

In this section, we will try to understand what people mean by *secularism*, and how it manifests itself in terms of *policy* in an entity like India. We find that both the concept and its manifestations are multi-dimensional. We identify and define key elements (actors, institutions, coalitions) in India which influence secularism related policies in India.

A. What are Secularisms ?

The use of plural 'Secularisms' in the title of this subsection is deliberate; to stress the fact that

secularism is a multi-dimensional concept and it is important to understand which dimension one is referring to when analysing it in a particular context.

Secularism invokes multiple meanings, interpretations and sentiments. Perhaps what is common in all is clear *opposition to religious fundamentalism*, including its influence on policies and governance. One way of defining secularism is to say that it is the *separation of religion from state* or governance/public life. It considers religion as an individual's private affair. This is a technical definition, and has its genesis in the western history, dealing with power struggles and power distribution between the church and modern nation states. In terms of implementation, it means that the institutions of religion (eg Church) do not have any direct default role in governance, and policy formation within a secular nation state. It does not say anything per say about the attitude of the nation state and its policies towards religion; whether they pro actively promote and support religion and religious sentiments or whether they remain indifferent to it or are something in between.

Ask an average educated Indian "what is secularism ?", and more often than not you will hear back "*freedom to practice any religion*" or "*giving equal respect to all religions*" or something similar. These meanings do not say anything per say about the role of religious institutions in governance. However, in a multi religious polity like India, to ensure equality for all religions, one obviously cannot allow institutions representing a particular religion to draft and implement 'national' policies. So in this sense, it implies separation of state from religion as well.

Secularism plays out in India in the way of 'celebrating religions', their various festivals, colours, cultural values and rituals. It is common for the President and Prime Minister to issue greetings to people of the country, on various religious festivals through state owned television and media. Or for schools to include religious prayers in everyday assembly. The concept of *unity in diversity* and celebrating the cultural differences as different coloured flowers in a garden now has deep roots in many sections of Indian population. The Indian nation state emerged by promoting and celebrating an identity of multiculturalism and pluralism.

So, we see that there are different definitions of secularism even among academics. And even these definitions are pretty broad and leave a lot of room when implementing or drafting policies. When we move forward from definitions, and from academic world to the real world, things become even more complex and confusing. This is because, people - politicians, public servants, citizens - choose to use interpretations and meanings which suit them at a particular point in time, and sometimes it is in their interest to keep the issue confused. Further, secularism is deeply intertwined with concepts like religion, culture, castes, classes etc which are inherently complex and difficult to define and understand, and exist with very wide variety of variances and varying degree of importance among people. And in a democracy like India, public opinion and common people - often not sophisticated enough to comprehend the fine differences of these definitions - are important; very important when drafting, implementing and interpreting policies.

Secularism in the western sense has never really been in question in India. Everyone accepts, understands and supports that state has to be run and governed by democratically elected representatives of the citizens; religious leaders and representatives do not have any direct legal authority on state governance and issues. There is no dispute in this matter. However, if many people in a democracy are deeply religious, and consider religion while make their decisions and choices, it is natural for religious institutions and leaders to exercise substantial influence on public life, state and

governance - through the democratic process ! In such a situation, whether all religions, and people practising these religions really enjoy equal rights and freedom in India ? To what extent is India secular in this respect ? This is precisely what this paper tries to analyse.

B. What is Secularism 'policy' ? Its tangible manifestations in India

There is nothing like a unified 'secularism policy' in India. However, the concept of secularism is extremely important and influential, and manifests itself into various policies and events, and in day to day conduct of the state. The term finds itself references in the constitution of India which acts as a directive for policy makers. It has been popular in political and public debates ever since India's independence in 1947. In this subsection, we try to look at concrete forms in which 'secularism policy' manifests itself in India. We begin with a brief review of demographics and governance structures in India.

India : Unity in Diversity, Governance

India's population today is about 1.12 billion, with estimated ~ 80.5% Hindus, 13.4% Muslims, 2.3% Christian, 1.9% Sikhs, 1.5% Buddhists, 0.4% Jains, others (Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahais) etc. It may be mentioned however that Hinduism itself is extremely diverse, and is composed of people speaking different languages, following different kinds of worships etc. It is without a single central hierarchy of institutions. India is the most ethnically diverse country in the world. It is also the largest democracy. In terms of governance, India is perhaps closer to entities like EU than typical 'nation states'. It was born heterogeneous and the process of homogenisation (in the ethnic sense) witnessed in many other nation states was skipped ! The most homogeneous thing about India is its heterogeneity. The constitution of India recognises 22 languages in its *eighth schedule*, and Government of India is under obligation to take measures for the development of these languages. India is a federal republic, with 28 states and seven union territories. Constitution clearly separates legislative powers between state and centre through subjects listed in *union, state and concurrent lists*. Residuary powers are with the centre and the balance of power has shifted gradually towards the centre since independence. Marriage and Divorce, Education are in the concurrent list which means both centre and state can enact laws in that regard; in case of dispute, centre is supreme. Other subjects like 'Land rights', police are exclusive state subjects.

Domains, Documented Policies, Implementations and Interpretations, Manifestations

In India, secularism has manifested itself in various domains like Education, Minority Rights, Marriage and Property Laws, Conversion Laws etc. In fact, in all issues which affect common people, and their religious sentiments and conduct.

The analysis of secularism policy changes depending on whether we are discussing documented laws and policies, or their day to day implementation and interpretation. The way in which the same 'national policy' is translated, implemented and interpreted by the different state governments, and further down in the districts and villages can vary widely. Different elements and frameworks will be applicable for policy analysis depending on the *level* of focus : the geographic resolution, and time stage in the policy cycle. When trying to analyse implementation of policies, we have to focus on individuals (politicians, bureaucrats, policemen, judges) and institutions, and the extent to which they have the capacity to tweak policy implementations and colour them motivated by their own ideologies and vested interests; in other words the amount of 'play' they have within the grooves. We also need to

understand how these different elements are interconnected and interdependent. For instance, relationships between politicians in power and bureaucrats, between politicians in opposition and bureaucrats, between public activists, civil society, business community, interest groups and elements in government, interacting with each other in the democratic process, and how this affects secularism and related policies and domains. Most interesting are implicit or explicit *coalitions of people* cutting across these various diverse elements, working in tandem towards common goals.

C. Elements influencing policy change : Actors, Institutions and their coalitions in various policy subsystems in the Indian democratic process

This subsection introduces the key elements - actors, institutions, coalitions, subsystems - which influence secularism related policy changes in India. These have been referred to in the next section while analysing specific policy changes and events.

Legislature : Constitution, Parliament, State Legislatures

India is a republic and its polity is run on the framework laid down in the Constitution of India, which came into effect on 26th January 1950. The basic structure of the constitution cannot be amended and amending other parts is a difficult affair usually requiring a 2/3rd majority in the Parliament. The Parliament has a bicameral structure and consists of *Lok Sabha* ("House of the people") and *Rajya Sabha* ("Council of the states"). *Lok Sabha* consists of representatives directly elected by citizens of India. Members of *Rajya Sabha* are nominated by legislative bodies of the state. States in turn themselves may have bicameral legislatures.

Executive : Bureaucracy and Police : IAS, IPS

Government policies are made by the cabinet (on expert advice of the bureaucracy). The policies are implemented by the civil servants or bureaucrats, which report to the cabinet ministers through a hierarchy. The Indian civil service has been provided for by the constitution. The key element of the civil service, involved in policy drafting, recommendations and implementation is the IAS (Indian Administrative Service). IPS (Indian Police Service) is responsible for policing and law enforcement. The civil servants enjoy high level immunity and protection, as a constitutional provision (from pre independence era). This is believed to be a reason for general loss of accountability in the service. Politicians have the power to transfer bureaucrats and re-appoint them to a new geography or to completely different roles.

Judiciary : Supreme Court, Lower Courts

India has a three tier judiciary with a Supreme Court, 21 high courts and a large number of trial courts. Supreme court is the ultimate interpreter of the constitution and can even strike down union or state laws which contravene the constitution.

Political Parties : Congress, BJP, Communist Party, Regional Parties

Indian National Congress and BJP (*Bhartiya Janata Party* or Indian People's Party) are the two main National parties. Congress is a 'secular party' and has been part of the central government for the longest period since independence. BJP is usually associated with Hindu nationalist ideologies. It is typical for other parties to call themselves 'secular' and highlight that BJP is not. State politics has been dominated by several other regional parties, including the Communist party of India (CPI).

Religious institutions : RSS, Sangh Parivar, Muslim Personal Law Boards etc

RSS (Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh or National Volunteers Organisation) is a powerful hindu nationalist organisation, with grassroots presence. The BJP, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (World Hindu Council), *Bajrang Dal* (Army of *Hanuman*), *Vidya Bharti* (Educational Institutes) and many other organisations with similar philosophies together call themselves the *Sangh Parivar* (Family of Associations). All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLM) is a body to protect continued applicability of Muslim Personal Law (based on *Islamic Sharia*) in India. It does this by liaising with and influencing the government, and guiding general public about crucial issues. It has suffered defections in the form of separate *Shia* and *Women's* boards.

Media : English, Hindi, Vernacular

India has a relatively free media and it has a powerful influence on public opinion, and hence on the overall democratic process. Depending on the region and category of people, different kinds of media are likely to be more influential. For eg, civil society and urban middle and higher classes are likely to be influenced more by the English language based media, while poor people in villages and smaller towns are more likely to be influenced by regional local language based media.

Industry, Business Community

The industry and business community in India usually likes to stay at a distance from issues related to religion etc. It is in its interest to support governments which follow developmental policies, and refrain from divisive politics.

Citizens and Common People

They are the most important elements of the Indian (and ideally any other) democratic system; and are constantly wooed by politicians and interest groups through various policies, and events. They are together most powerful and also perhaps the most gullible. They often find themselves amidst conflicting information coming from different coalitions and media.

Coalitions and policy subsystems [ACF]

The actors and institutions listed above constantly interact, collaborate and compete with each other in various policy subsystems which ultimately affect decisions, policy formation and changes, and nature of implementations and manifestations of policies at local levels. Depending on the *level* of focus, different actors institutions and coalitions become relevant for policy change analysis. We can talk of coalitions based on religious identities and communal sentiments composed of political parties, religious institutions, individual citizens and individuals and institutions in bureaucracy, police, judiciary and business. Such coalitions may exist explicitly or more often implicitly. Individual actors and institutions align themselves with coalitions with which they identify (on religious lines eg *Hindutva*), or along with coalition with which they see a greater chances of their vested interests succeeding (political, business, career etc). There are coalitions based on ideologies eg coalition including civil society and others defending secularism.

Consider the following subsystem as an example. A political party in opposition at the centre aligns implicitly with religious institutions and consistently tries to communalise policy issues. This is with the goal of inciting public opinion against the party in power, and for political gains in upcoming state or central elections. The civil society and advocacy coalitions of liberals, business and other communities opposes this, which is most vehemently reflected and debated in leading English language national media. Local media whose customers are local people, delivers content coloured with slightly

different sentiments and undertones, in the local language. Amidst all this, some decisions are made and policies formed by the party in power. It has to keep in mind its interest in the next state and central elections. Some of these elections would be influenced by liberals and those who uphold and understand secular principles enshrined in the constitution, while others would be influenced more on religious lines. The bureaucrats implementing these policies use their power and jurisdiction to twist, turn, delay, expedite, colour things according to their own implicit/explicit coalitions, based on their vested interests and reporting position at a given point in time. This finally results in delivery of those policies to common people at the local level. They react in a certain manner and the cycle repeats, in the Grand Indian Democratic Process !

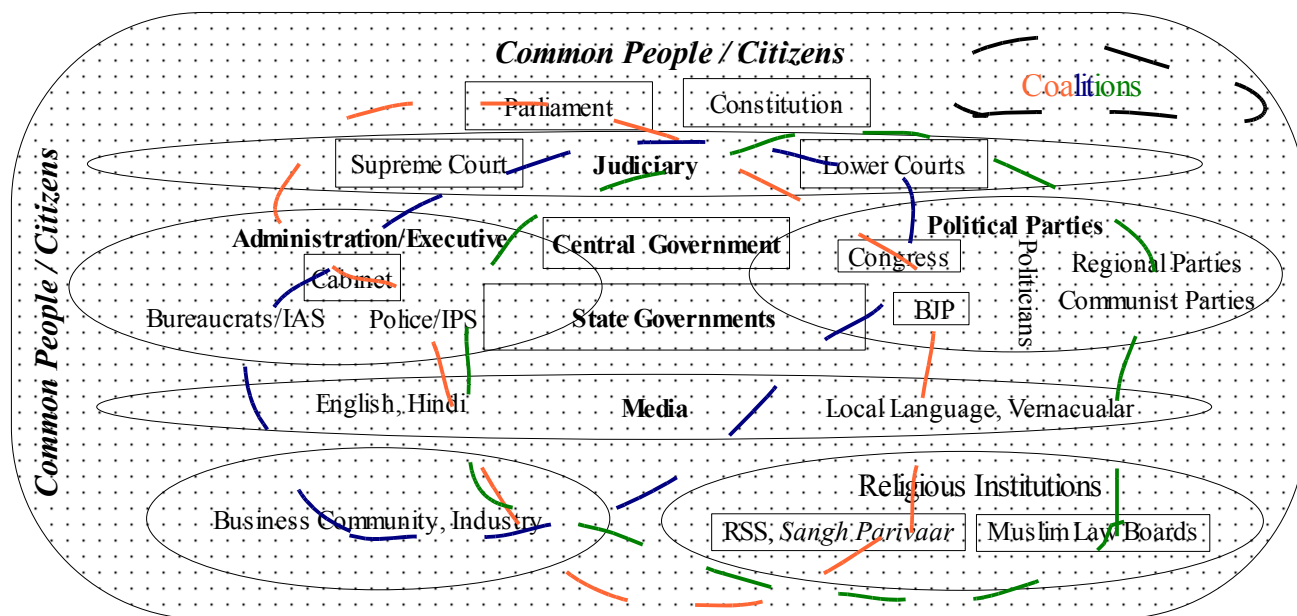


Fig 1 : The Grand Indian Democratic Curry

II. Events, Policy Changes and Analysis

This section looks at specific *event slices* from history since India's independence in 1947 and analyses them from the point of view of policy change. The events have been chosen on the basis of their importance for secularism 'policy' in India. No single policy framework can explain all events, so we invoke different frameworks depending on the *level* of focus and nature of events, and try to develop an evolutionary view [JOHN P]. The overall background and framework is the *grand democratic curry* as developed in the section above.

A. Constitution : Resisting punctuations in the secular equilibrium

Event Slice

The constitution of India, in its preamble today says that "India is a secular, socialist, democratic, republic". The words "secular" and "socialist" were inserted in 1976, during emergency imposed by

Indira Gandhi. Earlier, the ideal of secularism was defended, practised and enforced by Nehru and Congress party which was the ruling party for most of the time since India's independence. At the time of Independence, the issue of secularism was heatedly debated and secular principles were upheld staunchly by Gandhi and Nehru. Gandhi's assassination in 1948 by a Hindu right wing fanatic Nathuram Godse underlines the intensity of the forces involved. The constitution was adopted on January 26 1950, and laid the foundations for building a secular republic. The day is celebrated every year throughout the country as the *Republic Day*, one of the three National days, the other two being the Independence Day and Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary.

Analysis

Reading the constitution and its amendments, things appear simple and linear. India was born secular. This was explicitly enshrined in the preamble of the constitution in 1976 and has been so ever since. So the secularism 'policy' at this level has changed incrementally without any reversals ! The perplexity - immediately evident when one peeps outside the constitution at the real world events - is not so much the incremental nature of policy direction, but the absence of any punctuations. [PUNCTUATED]

To understand this, we need to focus on the institution which can amend the constitution of India; which is the parliament of India. It requires 2/3rd majority to amend the constitution. India has been repeatedly seeing coalition governments for many years now, and no single party commands a large majority. Power share has gradually moved from the Congress party to BJP, Communists and regional parties. While the power of the hindu right might be rising, it is far from gaining majority at the national level. Note, that even the BJP has liberal leftist elements within it. Thus the continuance of secularism policy at National level - in particular in the constitution - is no surprise.

Why did India choose to be secular at the time of Independence ? Why did the constitution uphold secular principles from the beginning ? Simply because it could not have been anything else, if it had to integrate and unify the diversity of people who had together dreamed of a unified independent Nation in the subcontinent. While most fundamentalist Muslim elements did succeed in partitioning India and moved into Pakistan, the relatively liberal muslims along with all hindus and people from other religions formed India. The fundamentalist hindu elements could not succeed (they were never powerful enough in terms of representation) to form a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation). The congress party led by India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi understood the importance, indispensability and the beauty of creating a nation where different faiths could co-exist, flourish, mix and evolve without fear. This led to the birth of a secular constitution and a secular India.

B. Attempts for bringing about a *Uniform Civil Code*

Event Slice

India does not have a uniform civil code (UCC) ie personal laws vary depending on religion. For eg. separate marriage laws apply to Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Parsis; a Muslim man in India can marry four women by law, while a Hindu cannot. There have several high profile cases and controversies in the judiciary, typically dealing with reforms related to women's rights etc which have brought this issue to the fore. Perhaps the most notable among these is the *Shah Bano* case, which led the Supreme Court to direct the Parliament to frame the UCC. This is on the basis of Article 44 of constitution which says that the state shall 'endeavour' to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code.

However, the parliament has never managed to bring about a uniform civil code; there is no political unity on the issue. BJP supports the issue. Congress and most other parties oppose it. Civil society considers both pros and cons, and usually supports implementation of the UCC.

Analysis

Why couldn't the founding fathers of the nation agree on a common uniform personal law for the nation ? Because there were diverse groups, and a uniform code could not have been adopted without seriously hurting sensitivities of the other. Given the background of partition and formation of Pakistan, it was important to give Muslims in India the confidence that their interests will be protected, and their sensitivities respected. This was necessary for keeping the Nation together at that time !

Thereafter, until today, different coalitions have been advocating and opposing uniform civil code. Women's rights coalitions advocate change and reform in the current system of laws, and therefore support moves to bring about a uniform civil code. These voices typically gain momentum with some case like the *Shah Bano* in the judiciary, which suddenly gains lot of media attention, and then even issues not directly related to the case get involved. Muslim fundamentalist coalitions may try to gain mileage in the controversy by accusing those who are trying to bring about reform to be anti-Islam ! Amidst all these pulls and pressures, status quo has won and there has been no uniform civil code till now. Conscious of the directives in the constitution, Supreme court regularly takes the view that the government ought to make more efforts to bring about the uniform civil code. But the government, often finds it too difficult or politically costly.

C. Minority Appeasement : Presidents of India

Event Slice

The last three Presidents of India have been from minority or 'oppressed' communities - Shri K R Narayanan (1997-2002; *dalit* or lower caste), Dr A P J Abdul Kalam (2002 to 2007; Muslim), Smt. Pratibha Patil (2007 - ; Woman). Is it a mere coincidence that so many Presidents of India are from minority or *oppressed* communities. Difficult to believe, specially because there have been on most occasions contenders with equally if not more impressive *credentials*.

Analysis

The appointment is a complex political exercise in the grand democratic curry of India, and the end results depend on which coalitions nominate and suggest what kind of names and the running political *wave* at the time favours which 'kind' of person. The person itself and his/her credentials seem to be only secondary ! Dr Kalam's name was suggested for Presidentship by the BJP led coalition government in 2002. Earlier, Gyani Zail Singh (a Sikh) became the president in 1982, with support from Congress (Ref : Ethnic Violence against Sikhs, below). BJP - believed popularly to be anti Muslim, and congress facing the Sikh secessionist movement in early 1980s may have scored some points to change their popular image in these respects through the appointment of the Presidents. This *inverse effect* is interesting ! There are several other instances, where the government has been seen to be going 'over-secular' in the sense of appeasement of minorities. Historically, it was considered necessary to appease Muslims who decided to stay back in India against moving to Pakistan to assure them that their rights and sensitivities will be protected. Such appeasement (positive discrimination) policies are practised not just on religious lines, but also on the basis of castes (eg. Caste based reservations in higher education / *Mandal Commission*).

D. Education

Event Slice

Mr Murli Manihar Joshi, human resource and development minister in the last BJP led central government, tried to make several changes in the school curriculum and textbooks (2002). The most discussed among the changes was perhaps the *rewriting or 'saffronisation' of* history books. Many historians criticised the changes and saw them as deliberate hindu nationalisation of the Indian history. BJP allegedly also used the changes and the new history for its political advantage. Most of these changes were later *corrected/restored/'de-saffronised'* once the Congress led government came to power. There were cross allegations.

Analysis

The above events are almost self explanatory. The BJP led government brought about the changes to score a point with their hindu nationalist voters and related coalition, as well as to strengthen the coalition in future by tweaking the education system. This was opposed by the liberals, civil society and the 'secular' coalition of the country. With the change of government to a congress led 'secular' government, the changes were reversed.

E. Ethnic Violence and Role of the State

Event Slices

Indira Gandhi led congress government confronted and suppressed Sikh secessionist movement in the rich state of Punjab (1980s). This included operation blue star in June 1984, which involved army entering the holy Sikh shrine of the *Golden Temple*. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. This led to breakout of anti-Sikh violence and riots in many parts of the country, including in the capital New Delhi. Many Sikhs were killed and it is believed that the state apparatus (Government, IPS officers) supported the rioting mobs, by deliberating delaying use of control forces and not doing enough to prevent massacres. Some political leaders in the Congress are also supposed to have been directly involved in mobilising and inciting the rioting mobs.

2002 was perhaps the most shameful year for secular India. The hindu right - led and represented by the *Sangh Parivaar* - had been rising after 1980s. *Babri* mosque was demolished in Ayodhya (December 1992) and a BJP led government came to power at the center in 1998. A train carrying many hindu pilgrims caught fire in a town called Godhara in the western Indian state of Gujarat, in which several of the them were killed. The place where it caught fire was habitated mainly by Muslims. The news spread quickly, blaming the Muslims. As a backlash, around 2000 Muslims - including women and children - were killed throughout the state of Gujarat, over the course of next several weeks. There is widespread belief that BJP government in the State, led by Chief Minister Mr Narendra Modi, deliberately delayed action, and thus supported attacks against Muslims in the state. [NUSSBAUM]. The state politics is vitiated with religious hatred till today, and the hindu right wing forces have strong support in the state. The state has however done relatively very well in terms of development, and the voter is often presented a choice between development and secularism.

Analysis

In terms of role of the state in the violence, one has to understand the coalitions between politicians and IPS officers, and policemen they are leading who are finally responsible for delivering law and order ie the 'bureaucrats of the street'. And also the social fabric in which these coalitions exist and thrive. The

anti-Sikh riots took place because for some reason the social fabric supported an anti-Sikh sentiment at that time. This gave an opportunity for the coalition composed of anti-Sikh elements in police forces, the executive, the government (at various levels) and in the ruling congress party to become strong; stronger than the corresponding liberal 'secular' coalition. Vested interests - as always - change sides and join the stronger group, making it even more stronger. This eventually led to the violence. The Gujarat riots can also be explained in the same manner, except that the core coalition this time was made up of anti-muslim elements and was geographically concentrated more in the state of Gujarat, rather than at the central level. The fact that BJP continues to win in the state, and that no party is coming out explicitly on a secular agenda (Congress's *hindi/gujrati*/vernacular election manifestos, differed substantially from the English manifestoes ! [NEEDHAM]), explains that the social fabric in the state is indeed leaned towards non-secular sentiments at the moment. This cannot be said to be true at National level though.

III. Conclusion

We find that secularism policy in India plays out in a variety of forms ranging from positive discrimination or minority appeasement on one hand to state abetted ethnic violence on the other. The specific events and policy changes beg different explanations, within the grand democratic process of India composed of various actors, institutions, ideas, coalitions and policy subsystems. To understand what is written in the Constitution, one needs to focus on the institution of Parliament and the National Government, and to understand ethnic violence in a particular scenario eg the state of Gujarat, one needs to focus on localised coalitions in the given space-time context; remaining conscious of the overall democratic framework at all points in time. If we take this approach, and understand the meaning of secularism more in the Indian sense of "equal respect/freedom of all religions" rather than the western sense of "separation of state and religion", we begin to comprehend the seeming contradictions between various events, implementations and manifestations of secularism policy in India. We also learn that *framing the debate* in the political democratic scenario becomes extremely important - whether to approach an issue from 'over secular' minority appeasement ie positive discrimination side, or whether to present it in a 'right wing majority fundamentalism' flavour. Or maybe wrap everything in something completely different pivoted for eg on women's rights and reforms, and debated in the courts of law in the light of the constitution !

After a *slice-by-slice* analysis, lets take a holistic look at the key events related to secularism in India :

1947	India and Pakistan become Independent. End of British colonial rule. Partition and communal riots.
1948	Mahatma Gandhi assassinated by a Hindu right wing fanatic
1946-1950	Constituent assembly debates
1955	Hindu Code Bill
1976	The forty second amendment to the constitution includes "secularism" in its preamble for the first time
1984	Sikh secessionist movement climax. Indira Gandhi assassinated; anti-Sikh riots.
1985	<i>Shah Bano</i> judgement. Government passes Muslim Women's act.
1990	Implementation of Mandal Commission Report (quotas/reservations for lower castes).

	Wide spread protests by students and upper castes.
1992	Babri Masjid demolished in Ayodhya. Communal riots. <i>RSS, VHP</i> banned.
1998	BJP election manifesto supporting building of temple at Ayodhya; forms coalition government at center with secular allies.
2002	Godhra train incident followed by widespread "Hindu retaliation" Supreme Court upholds 1994 decision to maintain status quo at Ayodhya
2004	General elections. BJP out of power. Congress led coalition government at the center.
2007	Gujarat state elections. Narendra Modi (BJP) retains power with landslide election victory.

These events, and the future events in this series can be understood and predicted only on the basis of the the grand Indian democratic process. Ultimately, it is the Indian social fabric, and concentration of different hues and flavours at different points within this multicoloured social fabric, which will determine whether India manages to protect and strengthen its cherished brand of secularism and "unity in diversity". Common people in India are the ultimate masters and kings in the democratic process. They can exercise better choices if they understand clearly the difference between reformist and fundamentalist elements in religion, and between vested interests and those genuinely aligned to their ideologies; and if they avoid generalisations based on identities and learn to discern individuals and specifics. As the democratic polity of India evolves and educates itself, we will continue to see contradictory manifestations of secularism policy in India. The National conscience remains secular, though it continuously keeps questioning and so far reinforcing itself.

Critical self analysis, Limitations, future directions

There is a scope of including wider literature survey to understand individual events in greater detail and for comparisons with other countries and regions [JACOBSOHN]. Further, key events from South India and north-east India could be included to present a geographically more complete picture; though the events chosen in this paper expose a large variety of issues ranging from governance at National and local levels, from minority appeasement to ethnic violence, and from specific public events to documented laws and policies. The philosophical aspects of 'secularism' vs 'minority freedom' - "Can there be a perfect meeting ground ?" - is an interesting direction which can be explored further. Perhaps the language of the paper can be made more literary and academic, and synchronised against available public policy literature and terminology and models, to make it more widely accessible.

Key References, Further Reading

Most events, facts and dates in this paper can be traced to related essays and papers in [NEEDHAM].

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