



# THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy

Interview

## ‘India’s historically shaped pluralism not easy to dislodge; diversity always part of its landscape’: Rajeev Bhargava



[V. S. SAMBANDAN](#)



A temple, a church, and a mosque on a hill abutting the channel that leads to the inner harbour in Vishakapatnam. File photo: K.R. Deepak / The Hindu

*India's plural tradition, safeguarded by a constitutional commitment to a secular democracy, is going through challenging times. The founding ideals of a multi-religious, inclusive Indian nation are fast being reshaped by a majoritarian formulation of the normative relationship between the state and religion.*

**Rajeev Bhargava, Honorary Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, and Balliol College, Oxford, and Director, Parekh Institute of Indian Thought, CSDS,** analyses what went wrong with India's tryst with a sui generis form of secularism. In conversation with **V.S. Sambandan, Chief Administrative Officer, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy,** he draws out the differences between the European and Indian variants, and the lessons offered by the latter; how 'modernity' resulted in 'religionisation', which, in turn, displaced India's plural, free-flowing pathways; and the points of inflexion in the practice of secularism in India. He also flags an important missing element: the omission of caste from the secularisation process. Equating the Indian caste hierarchy with the "meddlesome" church in western societies, he asserts: "A caste system thwarting individual autonomy and one caste dominating another caste within the Hindu order has to be fought."

*As for the trajectory that lies ahead for India's engagement with secularism, Prof. Bhargava remains optimistic but with a caveat: Although the "downward trajectory will stop", one cannot expect "a dramatic turnaround". This assessment arises from his reading that India's disengagement from the constitutional ideal commenced in the 1980s, and, therefore, "the recovery will also take a longer period. But it will take place."*

*Edited excerpts from an interview held in Chennai on August 18, 2023:*

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***V.S. Sambandan: Prof. Rajeev Bhargava, the Indian state's engagement with secularism ranges from the constitutional idea of, to quote you, "principled distance" to the present one of, to quote you again, "majoritarian secularism". In retrospect, given the complex interaction between religion and politics, do you think Indian secularism reflected in the Constitution was an aberration?***

**Rajeev Bhargava:** Not at all. I'd like to identify India's constitutional secularism by contrasting it with models in other parts of the world.

For example, the American model talks about a strict separation of church and state. I use the term 'model' because I am not talking about actual practices that may or may not follow the model. In the American model, the state cannot interfere in the affairs of religion, namely the church. And the church cannot intervene in the affairs of the state. So, you can call it mutual exclusion of the two. And all this was done to protect, initially, the denominational pluralism only within the Protestant religion. It was only slowly that it accommodated other religions, including Catholicism and Judaism. But the basic idea was the protection of religious freedom.

***From the state?***

From the state.

The French model is very different. In this model, the state can interfere in the affairs of religion, but religion cannot interfere in the affairs of the state.

*So, it is a one-way process.*

I call this one-sided exclusion. But that's also strict separation, except that it is religion which is strictly removed from the affairs of the state. So, the state, if it wishes to undermine religion, can do so freely. If it wishes to help religion, that it could also do. But the basic idea is to control religion. It does that for the sake of what it imagined was equality of citizenship. It is a very strongly Republican idea of what it is to be a citizen and to give equal rights to all citizens. It was felt that religious communities and religious identities must be kept away from the public domain altogether, especially from the affairs of the state.

Now, in India, imagine if we were to have any of these models. If we were to have the American model, we would not be able to ban untouchability, because untouchability is widely seen as part of a certain kind of Hinduism, one that is wholly identified with the caste system. We will not be able to intervene because American secularism doesn't allow that. Likewise, any other reforms based on gender justice, any interference in religiously-grounded personal laws, will not be possible. So, we couldn't adopt the American model.

The French model could not be adopted because Indians always had an ambivalent attitude to religion. They felt that there was something valuable in religion: the

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**The Indian state keeps a principled distance from all religions. There is no anti-religiousness. It intervenes if it helps to foster equality, freedom, or fraternity.**

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many varieties of religious worldviews and values could even indirectly influence, in some way or another, the state, and the state must accord equal respect to all religious communities. Here there's no anti-

religiousness. But it also had to keep a distance from these religions in order to intervene in them. As all religions have seeds of unfreedoms and inequalities within them, the hostility of the French also had to come in. Indian religions had so many pernicious practices, mostly to do with caste and gender issues, but it could also be the Hindu-Muslim issue.

In order to make sure that there is no inter-religious domination (one community dominating another) or no intra-religious domination, (domination by some members of a community over other members of the same community) like women within Hinduism or Islam, the state has to intervene. This is an ambivalent attitude, combining both respect and critique; I call it critical respect. The way it expresses itself in policy is principled distance. The state keeps a distance from all religions. It intervenes in religion if it helps to foster equality, freedom, or fraternity; and it refrains from interference if such non-intervention allows the same values to be protected or advanced.

We can put it slightly differently. If you wish to undermine both forms of religious domination, then you have two options – either to intervene or not to intervene. And the state had a flexible attitude: it could either intervene or not, depending upon which of the two strategies would reduce both forms of institutionalised religious domination. Now, this is unique.

The West has no such idea. It's either one or the other; either hostile or completely friendly. By and large, the American model is very friendly to religion, and all kinds of pernicious things are allowed in the name of religion by the American state. The basic idea is that the predominant thing to do is to protect religious freedom and under the name of religious freedom, all kinds of things can happen.

***So, we have abortion laws [in the U.S.]***

The opposition in the U.S. to abortion laws was based on positions such as: 'You have to protect religious fundamentals. How can you intervene in the affairs of religion? Christianity doesn't allow abortion. The state should keep out of it and disallow any intervention which will allow abortion.' So, that is the American [model].

In France, there would be no such problem: the state would intervene, but then the French intervene in all kinds of other things. They also prevent people from wearing the *hijab*. What is the *hijab*? It does not hide the face; it only covers the head. Wearing it is part of individual freedom, not something that should be disallowed. As long as your face is revealed, there is no reason for you to remove the *hijab*. The French have gone out of their way to rid it from the public domain. That is illegitimate interference.

In India, we will not have either of these two problems, ideally speaking, and that is what is there in the Constitution. In practice, of course, lots of things happen. That is a different matter.

***So, very briefly, why did the Constitutional ideal fall off the perch?***

A very large number of people, both outside the Congress, and at least some within the Congress, did not feel very happy about this kind of secularism. All orthodoxies in every religion did not want any interference.

There was always Hindu nationalism. I mean, that's a very old idea, as old as secular nationalism. Most Hindu nationalists always wanted some kind of preferential treatment for Hindus, and that violated the principles of equality and impartiality. But they didn't mind that; they wanted a Hindu state. So, they were not very happy with secularism. Second, many Indian secularists misunderstood the Indian variant. They went by the textbook definition of secularism, which were all found in the West. There were formulas that were repeated: that religion should be privatised. But how can religion be privatised in India? You have all kinds of public expressions of religion. Will you ban the Muharram festival? Will you ban the Kumbh Mela? You cannot do that unless there is a consensus. In France, this was done after a major battle with the Catholic church. In India, you cannot privatise religion.

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**Secularism has always been undermined. All orthodoxies in every religion did not want any interference.**

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In fact, in the Constitution, we even recognise the presence of religious communities. After all, the Constitution says that religious communities, of course, it also talks about linguistic communities, various communities, can set up their own educational institutions and maintain them. And that is a fundamental right. There is recognition of religious communities in the Constitution, official recognition, and that is something which is inconceivable in France, or in many other Western countries. There are establishments in Europe but there are no minority rights available to minority religious communities in any of the European constitutions. It's not that there are religious communities that are oppressed, but there is no constitutional guarantee, as it is given in India, that you will not be oppressed by others. So, [in India] there's always been a contestation. It

(secularism) has always been undermined. And as Hindu nationalism grew, the idea of secularism declined.

***Or, morphed into something else...***

... Morphed into something else. Nobody would say that they're not secular. Now we are doing lip service. Even the official BJP narrative pays lip service to secularism, implicit in statements like “*sabka saath, sabka vikas*”, (with everyone, for inclusive development), “appeasement of none”. It's like embodying the principle of impartiality, which is at the heart of secularism and justice. But in practice, it has gone completely awry.

***In 2011, you wrote an article in the Seminar titled “Should Europe Learn from Indian Secularism?”<sup>1</sup> Should it? You said that article was not “an apologia” but “a reasonable and sympathetic articulation of a conception that the Indian state frequently fails to realise”. What, according to you, are the points of inflexion in independent India when “the Indian state failed to recognise this conception of principled distance as articulated by the Constitution”?***

Right, so there are two aspects. One is, what is it that Europe can learn from India, and the second concerns the failure of the Indian state.



On the first, we must recognise that secularism in Europe arose under conditions of religious homogeneity. All religious diversity was virtually liquidated in the wars of religion that followed the breakdown of Latin Christendom. The principle in question was “one king, one law, one faith”. The king publicly confessed his religion and every member living in the territory conformed or converted to that. Those who did not could leave, or were exterminated. So, you find that all of Northern Europe is



***Rajeev Bhargava***

Protestant, one way or another. All of southern Europe is largely Catholic, and there is a very small, tiny little middle strip in between, which is bi-confessional, (i.e.) Germany has both Catholics and Protestants, and both are supported by the state.

In Europe, Islam had virtually disappeared after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Jews have had a very rough time; they were invisibilised. Most of the Jews have always had a very precarious existence; sometimes they were welcomed and sometimes thrown out. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, most of them were sent to one small region in Poland and in parts of Eastern Europe, bordering Russia. Western Europe had virtually been cleansed of other religions.

Moreover, many of the people who were persecuted from other denominations had to flee to the United States of America. So, these are religiously homogenous societies with confessional states [states that officially practice/encourage a particular religion] and there exists a very strong alliance between the state and the church. It was only after all this happened that the process of secularisation

started, and secularism became a political project, and that was only within the context of one very dominant religion. As the church was becoming politically meddling and socially oppressive, the church of that religion had to be separated from the state. [Western] secularism was just church-state separation within one predominantly single-religion society.

What happened in Europe, after the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that people from former colonies began to immigrate. For the first time, modern Europe saw diversity at an unprecedented scale under modern conditions. Its secularism is not adapted to that diversity.

Europe's secularism was born in response to homogeneity and against diversity, but it now has to face diversity. On the other hand, religious diversity in India is

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India's secularism was born in response to phenomenal religious diversity. Europe's was in response to homogeneity and against diversity. It has to learn from India.

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phenomenal. It's always part of our landscape; it's literally assumed, taken for granted. Indian secularism was born in response to diversity.

This diversity is being challenged in the past two centuries only by a certain kind of ethno-nationalism. Before that, it was never an issue. So, which countries have to learn? Europe has to learn from India. Alas! we ourselves are abandoning something which was so original, something which was so highly...

***Sui generis, you would say?***

It was sui generis. It was not only original but also admirable, something which the world can look up to. We are abandoning it. We are imitating Europe of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. We are trying to ethno-religiously cleanse our own society creating

the monopoly of one religion along the lines of a European model, whereas what should happen is that the traffic should be the other way around. Indians should be exporting their model of secularism to Europe. In fact, wiser people recognise that. That's why they have so much faith in the Indian experiment. They want Indian secularism, but Indians are sometimes failing to implement their own secularism in practice.

***To put this in perspective, in current imagination and discussions, there is this comparison: if England is officially Christian, if Sri Lanka is officially Buddhist, if that country is officially that; why not India be officially Hindu? What is your response?***

Look at the havoc created in Sri Lanka when it became officially Buddhist and Sinhalese. It was wrecked by civil war. How many people were killed? Look at Pakistan, which declared itself to be an Islamic state. It's horrible to its minorities, not only minorities like Hindus and Sikhs, but also its own...

***... its own Muslim minorities...***

Muslim minorities. Look at the Ahmadiyyas, look at the Shias. They are mistreated. Those are one or the other form of Islam. So, the treatment that they mete out to their own internal and 'external' minorities is horrendous. Look at the fragility of the Pakistan state, look at the devastation in Sri Lanka. Why would you want to go that way?

***Why not look at the UK, for instance, with which you are familiar? You've been there, at Balliol College...***

First of all, I have to say that multiculturalism in the UK is one of the more successful cases. I mean, just imagine, even India hasn't been able to do that. Rishi Sunak, Prime Minister, Hindu. The leader of the Scottish Party, a Pakistani Muslim. A Pakistani mayor in London. A whole lot of people in the Parliament who are from everywhere.

I have a feeling that the British informally learnt a lot from the cultures they colonised. They learnt from the late Mughal Empire and from their experience in India. Although they don't acknowledge it, it is reflected in their practice today. The other thing is that religion in the U.K. has become extremely weak. The number of people who go to church is minimal. The faith in Christianity as a belief system is virtually non-existent. It is a secular humanist ethos. In this kind of multicultural, secular humanist country, you have still vestiges of something which was there in the past, and which is something...

***Ceremonial, you would say.***

It is more or less ceremonial. See, even there, the current King. He began very early on to say that he wanted to be a king of all faiths; again, a reflection of something which they may have learnt from the Indian experience, not directly but indirectly. So, I think Britain is a very good example of a country which is trying to learn from its former colony. Most of these European states have a secular humanist ethos. Their

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religion has become so weak that it doesn't matter whether institutionally they're linked to a religion or not.

Having said that, in the last 10 to 20 years or so, there are strong right-wing movements in Europe. There is Islamophobia in Europe, which is, of course, worrying. It is much less in Britain, I have to say. It's good, I mean, thank god! The French are very different. They are so dogmatically secular. Their attitude to all immigrants, formally or informally, is very, very disappointing. And the same is true of many countries. Look at Sweden. It started off very well. It even disestablished its own church group. But it's now going the right-wing way. So, these are all precarious, unstable things. We have to fight for it all the time.

***So, is there a fallacy in the popular imagination about, say, countries like the U.K. being officially Christian?***

Yes, it is true that they're officially Christian but in practice and in a lot of other ways, it means very little. That is not to say that this is irreversible. Imagine, if in 10 years' time there is some right-wing movement, which becomes anti-immigrant and becomes anti-Hindu or anti-Islam, and strongly pro-Christian; then this weak establishment [between the state and religion] might become stronger and start creating problems for Great Britain. That can happen. So, I think the best thing would be for it to remove this establishment altogether, or at least to have something like multiple establishments, which would be something like in India, where we recognise all religions. Let the King be the leader of all religions, just as the President in India has to protect all religious communities; a symbol of not just one religion but of all religions as we have been trying to do.

***Even King Charles' coronation pointed to something in that direction with religious leaders from all faiths participating. That apart, India's ruling party often refers to traditional values. You have such a call quite often in world politics, in many places, "going back to traditional values". How do you define, or redefine, tradition and modernity in the Indian context?***

I'm now increasingly tired of this tradition-modernity framework. This framework itself came into existence in 19<sup>th</sup> century. British colonial authorities, who were in some ways also academic, invented this framework.

Some of them argued that 'we should leave India alone, and let them run by their own practices. They are a traditional people and we cannot do anything about it'. And, there was another wing, the liberals, who thought that Indian tradition has to be reformed...

***...The "White Man's Burden"? ...***

..yeah, "and we have to civilize them". So, the whole distinction between modernity and tradition is something which, in India at least, was invented by British colonial anthropologists and administrators. Now, I'm not very happy with this. I mean, we have to think in the *longue durée* [long term]. I think there are multiple perspectives, multiple worldviews, regardless of when they emerged, and regardless of how continuous they are.

We should have, at any point of time, the critical discernment to go for those things which are being done in the past for a long time in India or break with them in

order to do something which is not part of India at all. But that is a collective choice of the people at any given point of time.

That brings me to the latest book of mine. I believe that India had religio-philosophical practices and experiences. We had multiple pathways,

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India had multiple pathways, multiple margas. Some were dependent on one god, some were dependent on more than one god and goddess, and many were independent of the idea of god.

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multiple *margas*. Some were dependent on one god, some were dependent on more than one god and goddess, and many, many were independent of the idea of god, gods, or goddesses. Even the Mimansa's interpretation of the Vedas has no god in it. Buddhism, Jainism, the Charvaka are god-free. A very large part of religio-philosophical perspectives in India, until the second half of the first millennia of the Common Era, were free of gods, free of ...

### ***Institutionalised religion?***

Religion

### ***Religion itself?***

Yes. Religion itself, because, I mean, what is religion? For a start, religion in Europe by the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century had come to refer to collective entities (institutionalised communities) that were:

- a. mutually exclusive and necessarily conflicting;
- b. comprehensive;
- c. sought exclusive allegiance not only to their version of the truth
- d. but also to the state with which they had a strong alliance.

In this sense, religion did not exist in India even in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century.

Second, religion is a Latin term. Philosophy is a Greek term. Early Indian ways of thinking and acting do not fit into either of the two. Is Buddhism a religion or philosophy? You can't tell...

**It was a protest against what was happening at that time.**

No, I wouldn't say [that]. I mean, it was a protest against Brahminical Vedic ritualism. But I wouldn't say it was a general protest or a movement as such. I mean, early Buddhism was pretty asocial. It was certainly against Brahminical Vedic rituals. But I don't know if it was a social protest movement. Asoka always used one term, a hyphenated *brahmans-shamanas*. The *shamanas*, who turned away from their world, were wanderers. This included some Brahmins who were disillusioned with the spectacle of rituals but largely Buddhists, Jains, Ajivikas. The Brahmins were followers of Vedic rituals, and so on. And Asoka said: "I am going to equally honour both." He went one step forward as well. I am very fascinated by Asoka; I have written many pieces on his political thought.

***So, he could be considered 'modern' by any standards.***

Yes. Here it is. Asoka is the very embodiment of the idea of what we consider modern, although he lived several centuries ago. So, what do you do with modernity? I've written a paper which is already published in a volume<sup>2</sup> *An Ancient Indian Secular Age?*, where I argue that secularity and modernity should be delinked from each other. Why should you always think that modernisation and secularisation are linked to each other. (i.e.) 'the moment you bring in modernity, you bring in secularity'.



Why can't you think of secularity in the past, where there was no 'modernity' but it was still 'secular'? I would say that "there was", and this is something which needs to be investigated; it is more of a hypothesis. That is the challenging question that I pose in *An Ancient Indian Secular Age*? It is a response to Charles Taylor who in 2007 wrote a book called *A Secular Age*<sup>3</sup>, where the idea of modernity and secularity are very closely intertwined. I was challenging that. I said that we could still think of an Indian secular age, which is not modern. Alternatively, we should reconceive the idea of the modern.

***Prof. Bhargava, what you have said is an eloquent exposition of 'everything that is modern need not be good and everything that is traditional need not be bad'...***

What is traditional and what is modern itself is open to question.

***... but what about claims that traditional [ancient] India had perfected surgery for instance..***

What can one say about these kinds of philistine statements? There is freedom of expression, right? People can say what they want, and they have a right to say it. But look, there are many things in India that Indians have to be proud of, and the world has to be proud of, right? But plastic surgery is not one of them.. Consider some of the strong non-theistic tradition in India; or the mathematical, the astronomical, the literary traditions; the epics; and later, the poetry of Kabir and Ravidas. Even in the Early Vedic Period, I'm not saying this is good or bad, but there certainly was the idea that there is one life, one birth, one death.

## ***There was no afterlife***

There was no afterlife, no karma theory, which was a Buddhist, a kind of a greater Magadha idea, which was born around the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century before the Common Era. There are a huge number of things in the past which resemble the modern, some of them are praiseworthy. We don't have to invent things that could not have happened earlier, and which are conceivable only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What kind of an inferiority complex is this? Why should you have to own up to things that are not yours and make them your own? Why should we do that? Let me also tell you one thing: there is no idea which anybody, any culture, can claim entirely as its own. There's a lot of cross fertilisation, the circulation of ideas, there's movement across regions. Always! Don't underestimate the global history of the early period.

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There are a number of praiseworthy things in the past which resemble the modern. We don't have to invent things that could not have happened earlier:

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***In contemporary India, everything comes down, in a democracy, to the numbers game. Politically speaking, Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) and its hinterland hold parliamentary numbers and, therefore, the route to power. Has this region also shaped the narrative of secularism in a diverse country like India, ranging from the north-eastern hills to the southern tip and everywhere, thereby impacting the national narrative and its collective response?***

That is a hard question. All that I can say is one thing: Brahminical orthodoxy in U.P. and its hinterland is very strong.

### ***Even now?***

Even now. We know that the rigidity of the caste system in U.P. and in other northern Indian States is very strong. The kind of movement that began in the south very early on in the 20th century, that is happening in northern India almost a century later. And even that is not successful. Brahminical orthodoxy has more-or-less co-opted 'lower' castes as reflected in

- a)** the BJP's numbers,
- b)** what is happening with the OBCs and Dalits,
- c)** the fragmentation within the Dalits and OBCs, and
- d)** how upper-caste political configurations are able to prop these divisions. That's why it's not very successful. So, I would say that, yes, U.P. is a big, big problem.

Having said that, I wouldn't say that it's only a U.P.-plus issue.

***Let us take two particular points of inflexion. One, which you also mention in your writings, and please correct me if I'm wrong, was Mrs. Gandhi playing the Hindu card in the 1980s. Then, there were – Shah Bano [Madhya Pradesh] and Babri Masjid [Uttar Pradesh] – and they became national narratives.***

You're right about that. I should have remembered that. These are U.P.-plus-specific. But the Hindu card was played [by Mrs. Gandhi in the 1980s], don't forget, in Punjab and Jammu as well. Operation Bluestar was implicitly supported, if I remember correctly, by sections of the Sangh Parivar. There was a lot of Hindu support.

It (Operation Bluestar) was a very mixed act. It was a good secular act as well. After all, the Khalistanis had turned the Golden Temple into a fortress. It was a storage

[vault for arms] and ammunition. Once you turn a temple into a fortress, you cannot say the state should just be indifferent. Now, whether it was intended or not, it did result in the destruction of the temple itself. That was extremely humiliating. That's what really hurt the Sikhs. Many of the Sikhs would have supported freeing the Golden Temple from the militants. But what happened was something much more than that. Who was responsible? I have no idea. But the Hindu card was played. And it continued to be played. It was followed up in the U.P. and its hinterland. That's not where it started. It started elsewhere.

The reversing of the Shah Bano judgment, the unlocking of the Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi, the ban on *The Satanic Verses*. India was among the first countries to ban it, much before Iran did. All of these very foolish, indeed, politically demonic acts; this is where the demise of the Congress started.

Let's not forget that from the late 1970s to the early 80s, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (precursor to the Bharatiya Janata Party) was changing. It had become part of the Janata Party. It had softened its Hindutva line. Even people like [the late Prime Minister] Vajpayee and [former Union Home Minister] Advani had changed colours and were part of the Janata Government. There was an intermingling even between the socialists and communists. There was a possibility of change. And that change was prevented by Mrs. Gandhi playing this Hindu card. When you played that card, then your traditional players, the ones who have always played with it, they just felt that they should go back to it. If she is going to do it, they'll do it even better. That whole decade of 80's has to be studied more deeply. That is what is really ...

***... the first point of inflexion?***

... again, something that I mentioned yesterday [at a public discussion in Chennai on August 17, 2023,] as well, let's not forget what happened in 1979. It was a period when political Islam was born.

***The Ayatollah [Khomeini] moment?***

Ayatollah and the open Sunni-Shia split, following changes in Saudi Arabia. Who was going to be the dominant voice of political Islam? That whole thing started. This kind of resurgence – which is in fact relocation – of religion in the rest of South Asia took a much more nationalistic form. This impetus, global and national, both coming together, I don't think it was inevitable. But retrospectively you could say that what started then has moved with great steam ahead and taken us in the direction to where we are now.

***If I were to borrow from the title of your most recent book <sup>4</sup>, released last month, how would you reimagine Indian secularism?***

This reimagination started earlier when I talked about how important it is for us to not disconnect the inter-religious from the intra-religious. I think that this exclusive focus on inter-religious has been unfortunate because it is as if the burden of defending secularism is on pro-Muslim secularists and the Muslims themselves. If you make inter-religious as the main issue, fighting Hindu domination of Muslims, defending minority rights, then it seems as if secularism is not a project for the Hindus. It's a project only for the Muslims.

Go back to Western Europe. Secularism invariably fought against the church. What is the equivalent of the church in India? Caste. Intra-religious domination is as

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By identifying secularism solely for the defence of Muslims, Hindus can begin to feel, not rightly, that “this is not for us”. And this is what a lot of Hindus feel.

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important. What was secularism in Europe for? Defence of individuals against oppressive social communities, defence of the state against a meddling church.

A caste system thwarting individual autonomy and one caste dominating another caste within the Hindu order has to be fought. So, the anti-caste movement has to join with the anti-majoritarian movement. The anti-majoritarian movement should not distance itself and disconnect itself from the anti-caste movement. But in fact, they're frequently fighting against each other. I have often seen Dalits voicing their opposition to Muslims.

In addition, how can the movement for women's emancipation be separated from intra-religious domination and from inter-religious domination? They should all come together under one wing, I don't mean that their specificities should be forgotten or elided, but they have to come together. However, by identifying secularism solely with the defence of minority rights, specifically of Muslims, by reducing to that, we've put too much burden of secularism on them. And Hindus can begin to feel, not rightly, that “this is not for us”, and then twist this idea into “this is against us”. And this is what a whole lot of Hindus feel: “secularism has worked against us”.

***Which is not the case...***

Which is not the case. Secularism exists as much to protect Hindus from their own fanatics, from their own extremists, from their own caste groups, domination of

castes, orthodoxies, that was the original appeal of secularism in Europe. India has added something else to it, which is what happens when you have a diverse country, there is a prospect of inter-religious domination. That's not there much in Europe. So, we brought that but we can't forget the original appeal, which is fighting internal hierarchies. So, why have we disconnected the two? And why has it become solely something which is there for the Muslims, and for the Christians? It has to be reimagined.

***It would involve a redefinition in the popular mind.***

Yes! But there's another thing, which is there in the new book: that modern religion itself is an alien category to us. It is only after we turned our own religio-philosophical experiences and practices and began to look at them through the interpretative grid of religion, after a process of religionisation had started, that religion came into existence in India. Recall what I said earlier about religion being invented in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century and before that, present as a 'resource' in the Abrahamic traditions. Now when the category of 'religion' travelled to India and people began to see their religio-philosophical practices through the modern European category of religion, then a process of religionisation began. This process upset the cultural equilibrium in the sub-continent. It has caused havoc in our socio-cultural imaginary. It has created exclusivism, bolstered the idea that the religious 'other' is an enemy, introduced new forms of violence. But fortunately, this process is not complete. It is still partial. But we should stem the rot, we should not go through this process of religionisation. We should try and reverse it.

And so, part of the secular project will be to fight religionisation. It is only when things are religionised that you can talk about inter- and intra-religious

domination. But before doing that, we should go to the past. When I say the past, I don't mean a little way back to the past. There is an older surmise: people in India had multiple religions. There was no exclusivist religion, there's no need for conversion from one to another, because you can embrace both.

***One did not entail the exclusion of others***

Correct. You have such instances. Can you imagine the Nizari Ishmailist, the Aga Khans believed that Ali [the fourth Caliph] was the 10<sup>th</sup> incarnation of Vishnu.

**Or Emperor Akbar, for instance.**

Akbar, of course, but we have examples even now. Look at what is happening in Mewat. Mewati Muslims are so different from the stereotypical Muslims that a lot of Indians and a lot of people in the West

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**Multiplicity in allegiances is not possible under conditions of modern religion; you cannot belong to both. But we have this tradition of multiple attachments.**

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imagined them to be. Fifty years ago, as my colleague Shail Mayaram has pointed out in a study, there have been people who were

called Ram Mohammed, they were readers and followers of the *Ramayan* as well as the Quran. So, this kind of multiplicity in allegiances is something which is not possible under conditions of modern religion. In religion, there is strict demarcation; one religion is demarcated from the other; you belong either to this or to that, you cannot belong to both. But we have this tradition of multiple attachments.

Look at our shrines. Even today, the Hindus and Muslims go there. Look at *Shirdi ka Sai Baba*. Everybody is a follower. Hindus and Muslims are followers. All kinds



of castes are present in such sects. They don't discriminate on caste, and they don't discriminate on the basis of religion. And we have to protect these things, not allow this modern religion to take over this inherent, continuing religiosity or these philosophical leanings of what has been there for a long time, which I wouldn't want to call tradition, but which exists in the *longue durée*, and which survives for very long. We should have them as much a part of our modern contemporary world as a whole lot of new things that have come in.

***We've talked about how Indian secularism moved away from its constitutional idea of principled distance; we've talked about points of inflexion. Going forward, do you see further points of inflexion around the corner, either taking India on the upward trajectory or further down?***

I think the downward trajectory will stop. I am hopeful. I think the broader, historical pluralism will not be easy to dislodge. But it's going through a very bad time. Well, but how long it will continue, I can't say. Whether the next elections will make any difference, even if the INDIA coalition wins and the present government loses, I don't think we can expect a dramatic turnaround. This has been happening for some time, and the recovery will also take a longer period. But it will take place, say, 30 years or 40 years, because I believe the crisis of the pluralist imaginary is, in the long run, a blip.

***Hasn't India lost a lot in the process?***

It has lost a lot. But that India has not vanished, and it's not going to vanish anytime soon. And as long as that India survives, I think we have hope. I won't say anything about the next elections. I don't think we can expect no matter what happens, a

certain turnaround, not in our lifetime. I'm talking about the fundamental change to recovery, the retrieval, the reimagined secularism. I don't think that will happen [in our lifetime], but it will happen. Unless the world itself is destroyed, because there are all sorts of forces globally, which are hell-bent upon destroying our planet. Besides, a lot of things that are now happening in India are global, and a lot of the things that constitute a right-wing movement are present not only in India but also in America or in Italy, in Hungary, in Poland, or in other parts of Europe.

The think-tanks of the world, particularly pro-capital, hate-inducing, or reinforcing, are communicating with each other all the time. They're influencing each other, they're giving each other blueprints, they're doing a lot of things. I used to think of the Zeitgeist as a non-empirical, purely-in-the-air phenomenon. But no. It emerges because of a lot of global interconnectedness. The ideas that crop up in one place also crop up in another place because of networks of inter-communication. And today, communication being so swift, you find something that is happening in, say, America, immediately happening here.

***I would suspect that the political pendulum started its swing towards where we are now in the Thatcher-Reagan period.***

Yes.

***This pendulum has to swing back. Do you see that really happening?***

It will happen. Hegel called it the cunning of reason. There are all kinds of ways in which we think we're doing one thing, but in fact, we're doing something else. Sometimes when we appear to be acting irrationally or non-rationally, we're working for another, better reason. And when we're working rationally, we may be from a larger perspective doing something extremely erratic.

There are also unintended consequences of our actions. We can never anticipate them. What we do today may have a consequence which we never anticipated. It may be terrible, but it may be fantastic. Who knows? We live in a world of uncertainty. We have to take decisions in these uncertain conditions. We are never fully in control of things. That idea, that super-humanist idea, that we plan something to execute it to the tee, that's not only over-optimistic, it's simply false. We cannot fully anticipate the direction the world will take.

***But you are optimistic about secularism?***

I am optimistic... you see, it's a dialectic between good and evil in both ways. It's much more complicated than any kind of simple thinking would reveal. So, it's hard for me to project, but my heart says that, my gut says that ...

***And your theory says?***

My theory too. With all these other things that I mentioned, the other side, those who differ deeply from people like us, they are also planning something. But what will happen? Even they don't know. They might actually be producing a backlash, which will politically wipe them out 20 years from now, who knows? They may be thinking that they're sowing the seeds of something which is going to last a thousand years, but they may be actually digging their own [ideological] grave by the same kind of thing that they're doing. You can't tell. And this is true of the right or the left. Could anybody predict what happened in 1989 or 1991, when the Soviet Union fell? Nobody could predict that. But it happened suddenly; everybody was taken by surprise. And the world order changed.

Closer to the present, who could have told that before September 11, 2001 [9/11], that we would be heading in this direction? Nobody could predict that the world would go in this direction, the way it has gone now. But people made certain choices and the entire world is paying for it. The first great fake news was the claim about the existence of weapons of mass destruction. Everybody fell for it. [former British Prime Minister] Mr. Blair and [former U.S. President] Mr. Bush were the ones who perpetuated this whole [fake news] thing. [But now] people are [realising]. The more they read, the more they see with open eyes; the more they can tell. But it's still limited. People cannot be omniscient; cannot be omnipresent. They don't know. Nobody knows what's going to happen.

*\*This article was last updated on September 22, 2023. In Prof. Bhargava's response containing the reference to the Aga Khan, "Muhammed" was corrected to "Ali [the fourth Caliph].*

### **About Rajeev Bhargava**

Rajeev Bhargava is honorary fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, and Balliol College, Oxford, and Director, Parekh Institute of Indian Thought, CSDS. His list of published books include *The Promise of India's Secular Democracy* (2010), *What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It* (2010); *Individualism in Social Science* (1992); *Between Hope and Despair* (2023); and most recently, *Reimagining Indian Secularism* (2023). His edited books include *Secularism and its Critics* (1998); *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution* (2008); and *Politics, Ethics and the Self: Rereading Hind Swaraj* (2022). His list of articles include *Hegel, Taylor and the Phenomenology of Broken Spirits* (2010); *The Crisis of Indian Secularism* (2012); *Hinduism and Social Democratization: A Preliminary Sketch* (2012); *Should Europe Learn from Indian Secularism?* (2014); *Beyond Toleration: Civility and principled coexistence in Asokan Edicts* (2014); *Reimagining Secularism: Respect, Domination and Principled Distance* (2015); and *The different Futures of Secularisms* (2017). In addition, he is a longtime contributor to *The Hindu Group of publications*.

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