

India's Left Liberals Need an Urgent Mid-Stream Correction

Jawhar Sircar

“Little girl, are you lost?” asked a concerned lady who was observing a five-year-old moving around aimlessly at the airport terminal, with a teddy bear tucked under her arm. “No,” said the child rather emphatically, as she looked straight into her eye and added, “it’s my parents who are lost”.

This tiny episode triggers the question as to whether most of India has gone crazy with its support for an intolerant Hindu-Hindutva faith – that ensures that its personification, called Narendra Modi, wins not once but repeatedly – or whether it is we who swear by secularism who are lost.

After all, most of us had smirked at the slogan coined in the late 1980s, “*Garv se kaho hum Hindu hain*” (‘say quite proudly that we are Hindus’), and then witnessed the lengths to which the majority of Indians went to prove this. Nor did we realise that they were not only celebrating Hinduism beyond the stifling straightjacket of secularism but were actually targeting us more than Muslims.

They just cannot understand why the English-educated class, which included many who had studied abroad or are deeply connected with the western academia or media, invariably ape Euro-American liberals and disown religion as positively untouchable. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, those who had fervently prayed to their gods covered up their frustrating rootlessness by making common cause with the offspring of Oxbridge and tenure professors. This amalgam is popularly known as the ‘left liberals’.

In any case, there had always been a lot of overlap between the two conglomerates of ‘thinkers’, in terms of caste, class, education, solvency and their uppity exclusivity. Their world views have moved closer, slowly but surely, and it is to their credit that they have consistently opposed Modi’s systematic dismantling of India’s plural structure.

But left liberals had also ensconced themselves into such a tightly-knit club that someone like Swapan Dasgupta — who did a post-doc stint at Oxford and thus fitted the bill with room to spare — could never find a footing in the world of Indian academia. He had reportedly moved from Trotskyist ideals (which were quite acceptable) to a more disturbing right wing philosophy and, further, refused to swear by the reigning secular religion. That such an intolerance was certainly not ‘liberal’ did not appear to bother anyone and those who bemoan the takeover by the Hindutva brigade at present need to ponder on how many non-secular scholars they had blackballed in their own heyday.

One heartily disagrees with the ideology of a few such people who appear too well-educated to be in the company of those who spread more venom than knowledge, as the latter are educationally handicapped. But if one professes to be truly liberal, one cannot deny opponents the right to have their say, even if one is not favoured with reciprocal graces.

We stand accused of treating dissidents with condescension for several decades and the fact is that we are now getting it back, with added measure.

The more important point is that this class has got its secularism and the Indian context grievously wrong. In very short, at the crossroads of its destiny, modern India had two variants of the secular ethos to choose from. Nehru’s aversion for religion per se and his brand of secularism that ‘insulated against religion’ was preferred over the more Gandhian version that was soaked in religion yet was equidistant from all and truly plural.

In Nehru’s own words, religion was too “narrow and intolerant of other opinions and ideas; it is self-centred and egoistic” (*An Autobiography*; Allied Publishers, page 377). He insisted that religion “does not help, and even hinders, the moral and spiritual progress of a people” (page 378).

To be more explicit, he even said that “The spectacle of what is called religion not only in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror” (page 373).



‘Massacre of the Waldensians of Mérindol in 1545’ by Gustave Dore. The painting depicts how Waldensians of the village of Mérindol were ordered to be punished for ‘dissident religious activities’. Photo: Public Domain

What Nehruvians may not have realised in the late 1940s and 1950s was that their ‘western model’ of secularism that maintains an antiseptic distance from god and faith emerged only after several centuries of conflict between the Church and the State.

Its aversion to matters sacred arose from its bloody wars with a terribly dominating Church that had stifled rationality, science and progress. It had not only caused countless deaths in its wars with other religions but was responsible for killing thousands of Christians on grounds of heresy and other alleged offences.

India’s ground realities are and were different as we had no hegemonic Hindu Church and religious bloodshed on a far lesser scale was occasioned at times by certain Islamic rulers, though certainly not by all.

Hinduism’s own low-key persecution of heretics is yet to be proven conclusively, but it did stifle equality and scientific freedom. But, we do not have a track record of religious wars that were fought to free rationality and science.

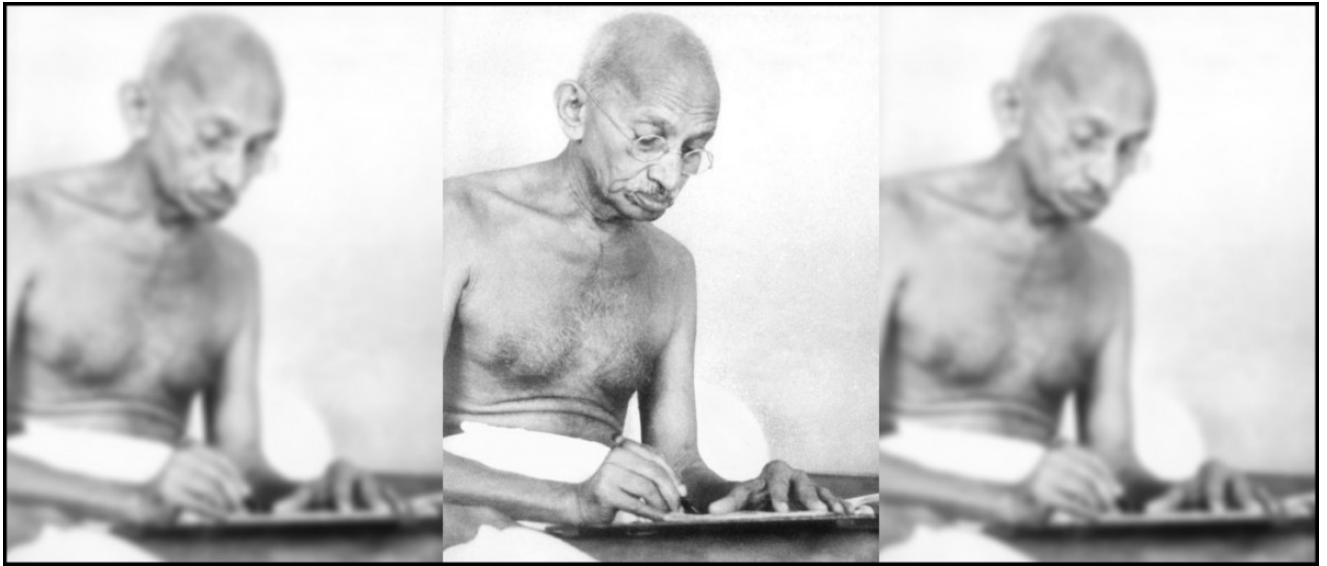
Though Nehruvian secular and scientific ideas were, indeed, very progressive, the policy of ‘insulating against religion’ runs against the very grain of the Indian psyche that is immersed in religion.

The Indian experience – that is still evolving – is considerably different and is, in fact, quite unique. It was religion (Hinduism) that crafted, through trial and error, the ‘great treaty’ that binds the majority of Indians right across the subcontinent. This consists of an accepted commonality of values, thoughts, rituals, deities, festivals, pilgrimages, and beliefs without which this impossibly-diverse country could never have come together.

The Indian experience also differed considerably from the Islamic model of ‘secularism’ that existed in the Levant and in some Muslim countries bordering the Mediterranean, as caste and rigid ideas of what was pure and what was polluted were the final arbiters here. For instance, the obsession with the ‘impure’ did not permit surgery or chemistry or even the leather industry to flourish, beyond a point. Marxist atheism also had a profound impact on those who worshipped rationality and science and its stream often ran parallel to the Western liberal school, actually merging for some stretches.

Gandhi, on the other hand, managed to reconcile his unshakable belief in the peaceful coexistence of India’s two major religious communities. His politics did not shy away from making adroit use of the Hindu idiom and yet he could never be accused of communalism.

Rajmohan Gandhi in *Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi* (2000) discusses several of the charges made by his critics like Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Ainslee Embree and William Shirer. They pointed to Gandhi’s overtly ‘Hinduism-based’ appeal to the Indian masses, through his dress, Vaishnava prayers, songs and bhajans, the use of the *Gita* and the *Ramayana* – his Hindu idiom.



Mahatma Gandhi. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

His fakir-like demeanour and his frequent use of terms like “*Ram rajya*” are known to all, but he was never playing ‘Hindutva’ politics. Soviet scholar, Olga Mezentseva stated in her *Ideological Struggle in Modern India: Implications on Hinduism* (1988) that as a “very religious man”, “religion was an inherent element of Gandhi’s teaching”.

She observed how he “proceeded from the tasks of the anti-colonial movement by enlarging the system of traditional Hindu maxims by adding such norms which had actually never been within religion” (page 25). Thus, Gandhi connected more easily and comfortably with the masses because he empathised with them and accepted wholeheartedly that they lived and breathed in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, or in Muslim or Christian lore.

In practice, however, India after Independence maintained an equidistance from all religions and officially celebrated the major festivals of all, with public holidays that were welcomed by others but quite meaningless to them. This was because the communities continued to live in their silos without either understanding each other’s religion or empathising with beliefs and rituals.

Our issue is not so much with state policy but with the left liberal class that dominated Indian thought and policies for the first five decades and then managed to cling on through the turmoil of the next two. It was dethroned quite decisively in 2014 and Narendra Modi’s irresistible appeal played upon the ‘hurt’ of Hindus at being ignored by the English-speaking elite. He does not disguise his disgust as he labels them as the ‘Lutyens Delhi class’ or the ‘Khan Market gang’ and goes about smashing their much cherished Central Vista for no pressing reason other than the sheer pleasure it gives him to inflict pain of those he hates.

We may as well admit that the last seven years have revealed that left liberals who had protested so vociferously and self-righteously, but so terribly ineffectively, against the Ram Janmabhoomi project were tossed by the horns of the raging bull of Hindu pride, high into the air like helpless and pitiable matadors. Their dogged opposition to the metaphor that the temple stood for actually benefitted Narendra Modi and helped sustain his politics as it was the much-required ‘enemy’ without who his repeated victories were hardly possible.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with UP governor Anandiben Patel, chief minister Yogi Adityanath, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat and others perform Bhoomi Pujan rituals for the construction of the Ram Mandir, at Ayodhya on August 5. Photo: PTI

The isolation of this class becomes more pathetic when one compares its gross inadequacy in launching any mass movement with the tremendous energy displayed by their more belligerent counterparts in neighbouring Bangladesh.

For more than two decades, millions (yes, millions) of common citizens, mainly Muslims, come out on to the streets in colourful processions in all major cities on occasion of the Bengali New Year’s day. These oceans of humanity and their massive *Mangal Shobha Jatras* have boldly defied several bans and threats by pro-Islamic military regimes from 1998 onward. They love to cock a snook at the die-hard Muslim fundamentalists who swear to finish them off with bombs and violence.

The main outer walls of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Dhaka University along one the busiest thoroughfares of the metropolis taunt Islamic extremists with Bengali folk paintings that flaunt human figures. A few even portray Ram’s marriage with Sita. It would take kilograms of guts and years of struggle for the pro-plurality warriors of (say) Delhi University or JNU to display similar large frescoes of themes that are obviously Islamic on any of the prime roads of Delhi.

In 2013, during Dhaka's Shahbagh movement, civil society activists could motivate millions of people (again, mostly Muslims) to protest against any leniency towards Islamic killers. They succeeded in ensuring that the ring-leaders of the 1971 genocide were executed. Our Shaheen Bagh movement, on the other hand, was allowed to be largely confined to one community and what our civil society provided was a distant 'moral support'. Therein lies a world of difference.

Left liberals like us applaud the farmers who are carrying out a historic agitation at the borders of Delhi, but we have not been able to muster millions to protest along with them at or near their sites or within the city as a mark of solidarity and a show of strength.

We must realise that there are several audiences that Modi is playing to and a large one consists of those who equate him with all that India has to be proud of. The manner in which he appropriated all credit for our millennia old yoga, just short of taking credit for its invention or evolution, is a pointer to how he operates. By deriding every 'credit' that India may claim without coolly examining its merits first smacks of a hangover from the colonial past. Modi's constituency is thus furious at the English-educated class for running down *Bharatiya sabhyata* ('Indian civilisation') on most occasions as the prattling of the Modi-mesmerised Hindi-Hindu masses.

The game is thus a walkover gifted to Modi.



A man in a Modi mask among BJP supporters, in 2012. Photo: Reuters/Amit Dave/File

It is also completely erroneous for a large section of left liberals to equate faith in one's religion with communalism.

The vast majority of Indians are steeped in religion and we need to allay their strong suspicion that left liberals are intrinsically against Hinduism or other religions. It is also time to give up our instantaneous branding of all overtures towards Hinduism as 'soft Hindutva', while considering (say) participation in *iftar* meals as secular.

If we are serious in standing by our beleaguered Muslims, it is also time to condemn, in no uncertain terms, expressions of 'vote bank politics' that give ammunition to claims of 'minority appeasement'.

But the most important step we really need to undertake is to move away from the inheritance of antiseptic 'no-religion' Western secularism and gravitate towards a more inclusive secular idiom that appreciates that religiosity is not synonymous with communalism. West Bengal could defeat the ruthless power of money and muscle that Modi unleashed with his *Wehrmacht* and teach a lesson to Shah for carpet-bombing with his *Luftwaffe* of misinformation mainly because the ruling party and the people strongly believed in and publicly displayed their inclusive secularism, that embraces all religions.

In fact, only time will tell whether our fond notion of Hinduism as an intrinsically tolerant and accommodative religion will survive the strains of the present. It is submitted that if we undertake an immediate mid-course correction and move closer to the Gandhian model of secularism, we have to learn to live with those who sincerely believe in miracles, because that may then stop pushing them more into the outstretched arms of those who seek to use them, to alter the basic structure of our plural polity.

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