

“If Muslims insist on speaking exclusively for Muslims and do not recognize Bodo suffering then theirs is an ethnic of narcissism”

This is an essay on secularism and the Indian Muslim. And I must admit the recent events have made this a difficult piece to write. Let me begin at the beginning.

I was born in Jamshedpur where I saw riot after riot triggered in urban areas. I still remember the day in school when my classmate Obidul Islam came to say goodbye. He told me sadly that his family was going back to Pakistan. Obidul was a brilliant 100-metre runner and I am still unsuccessfully racing against him.

As I grew older and watched the Mumbai 1992 riots and the Gujarat carnage of 2002, I saw with sadness how for the majority community, democracy tasted like castor oil, good for health but difficult to consume. While studying the Gujarat violence I saw how the community of Muslim survivors built a new citizenship around a community of law. I heard Mr Bandukwala, once professor of physics at Baroda University, tell the Hindus that even if you do not apologise I forgive you. Listening to all this I wondered what secularism meant.

My secular friends practised a strange kind of casteism. In the aftermath of the riots they would talk to Muslims but stay away from Hindus who had also suffered. I found secularism becoming a form of ghettoisation where one community's suffering was privileged over others. Worse, I

found secularism empty and non-dialogic. It was catechism without a theology, a form of political correctness, where the Hosannas were the sons to the minority community and truth flew out of the window.

Secularism, at least in terms of the relation of science to religion, is based on a false history. The battle between science and religion is a falsely constructed one. Tracts about the conflict between religion and science were published as a result of a struggle for power between scientists and theologians battling to control the modern university. They both wrote history backward, destroying the fact that religion and science have been reciprocally creative.

I think Indian secularism cannot not engage with religion but must create a communicative relationship with it. I am reminded of the ending of an old movie, *Inherit the Wind*, where the hero, Clarence Darrow, picks up Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and the Bible and holds them up as great books, each inspired by a different kind of truth. Secularism as dialogue insists on critique and this is what I am going to engage in.

What happened in Mumbai, and is still happening, is atrocious. If Muslims are as rabid as Bal Thackeray, or Raj Thackeray, then one must say so. If Muslims insist on speaking exclusively for Muslims and do not recognise Bodo suffering then theirs is an ethnic of narcissism, and not a secular value. Unless Muslims realise that over a million Bodos have been displaced, the displacement of three million Muslims will make little sense. One man's suffering cannot be the cause of another man's celebration. This cannot be the secular way or the secular ethic.

In our society, secularism has to be defined differently. It cannot be a battle between religion and science or separation between state and religion. Secularism is the way we respond to strangers. The stranger is the other who defines us. The first law of secularism should be hospitality. We welcome the other because he is not us. The other is the reminder that we are not complete as truths, that as fragments we need each other. The second law of secularism can be formulated after the Dalai Lama's comment that George Bush's behaviour "brings out the Muslim in him". Similarly, after the Gujarat carnage I can say that Narendra Modi brings out the Muslim in me. It is a way of giving secular space a meaning where we become the other in their moment of suffering. Yet, our secularism allows for boundary walls. It realises that violence might come when identities are too close and separations are not maintained. Our secularism understands difference and distance creatively because our secularism is a theory of diversity

not homogeneity.

As a human rights activist I have to be secular by definition. I cannot fight only for Hindus because I am a Hindu. But I fight for Muslims because I am a Hindu. My duty extends beyond my community because my rights also extend beyond it.

The very dialogicity of this secularism demands that I challenge both Muslim fundamentalism and Hindu fanaticism. Our society has become fragile today because Muslim violence and exclusivity has become a problem. To criticise the Muslim is not to demonise them. It is to use the reciprocity of citizenship to mirror each other. We have to realise that a few more riots can change the very nature of politics.

I am writing this because I am concerned about the fate of democracy. The situation is tense and let's not forget that Assam is the state with the second largest Muslim population in India. We need to understand that a coercive minoritarianism is as putrid as bully boy majoritarianism. The Muslim fanatic and the Hindu fundamentalist both threaten democracy and we need open ended democracy that challenges both. A Mulana Abdul Qadir Alvi is not an alternative to Raj Thackeray.

He is merely a Muslim Modi with a skull cap. The danger is that a few riots can create an insecurity, a climate of hate that could bring a politician like Modi to power. This is a history that a secularist must seek to avoid. The current meaning of secularism is too narrow and impoverished. We have to reinvent words so that we understand the worlds we wish to live in. The pomposity of a narrow state-sponsored Western secularism is utterly useless in this new democratic battle.

The writer is a social science nomad.