

#SWARAJYA

Dear Swami, Here Are Some Boxes To Tick If You Think Of Yourself As 'Secular'

R Jagannathan

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I was surprised — or, maybe, not so surprised — to read [your open letter to Chetan Bhagat](#), who postulated in an article in *The Times of India* that Hindus should stop disliking the word “secularism” just because [“they like it”](#) — “they” being “smug liberals”.

I disagree with both you and Chetan Bhagat. The left-liberal group is not “smug” any longer, but not because of the rise of “hate speech and communalism”, as you put it, but because Narendra Modi and his core Hindu voters not only gave him a majority in 2014, but an improved mandate in 2019.

Or, as you pointed out in an [article](#) published by the Cato Institute last year, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) “won only 38 percent of the popular vote in the 2019 national election. It has suffered electoral reverses in 11 recent state elections.” This is a reason to disagree with your own supposition, that it is the “Hindutva crowd” that is smug. Not quite. Potential loss of power makes you less smug, not more.

And if “hate speech” had been a problem, the liberals and the left should have been held to account even more so, for consistently referring to a democratically elected government as “fascist”, “Sanghi”, and led by covert “*chaddiwalas*”, among other things.

The problem is, you have wrongly conflated “dislike” for “secularism” with the word instead of its practice.

You say, for example, secularism is not a bad word, and that the “crowd that sneers at ‘sickularism’ does not control the dictionary. ...It (the BJP, one presumes) has promoted the myth that secularism means being anti-Hindu or anti-religion. Look up any dictionary and you will see that this is false.”

This is a deliberate obfuscation. The antipathy to secularism did not arise from any inherent dislike for the word, but its meaning in the Indian context, and particularly its practice over the last seven decades.

I would like you to consider the possibility that Indian secularism neither meets the dictionary definition(s) of the word, nor converges with any common-sense understanding of what it should mean.

Let's start with dictionaries. I looked up several online dictionaries and here is how they define the word (*the italics below are mine*).

Merriam-Webster: Secularism is an “*indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations*”.

Collins Cobuild: “Secularism is a system of social organisation and education where *religion is not allowed* to play a part in civil affairs.”

Cambridge: Secularism is “the belief that religion *should not be involved* with the ordinary social and political activities of a country”.

The Free Dictionary: Secularism means “(1) Religious *skepticism or indifference*; (2) the view that *religious considerations should be excluded* from civil affairs”.

Oxford Learner's Dictionary: Secularism is “the belief that religion *should not be involved* in the organisation of society, education, etc”.

English Language Learners Definition: Secularism is “the belief that *religion should not play a role in government, education, or other public parts of society*”.

Dictionary.com: Secularism is a “secular spirit or tendency, especially a system of political or social *philosophy that rejects all forms of religious faith and worship*”.

Britannica: Secularism is “any movement in society *directed away from otherworldliness to life on earth*”.

While there are marginal variations in how the word “secularism” is defined, do words like “exclusion”, “rejection”, and phrases like not being “allowed to play a part” in government, education, or public life suggest that secularism is *not* anti-religion?

In fact, the word secularism is always posited against the religious. So, no, you are wrong. *Secularism has a problem with religion per se.*

I also have two other counters to offer to even these dictionary definitions.

One, secularism as so defined is not practised even in the Christian west, where exceptions rule the roost.

In Britain, the Queen is the head of the Church of England; the Vatican is a religious state recognised by the United Nations; and the United States (US) — despite the separation of church and state — uses domestic law to supervise religious freedom everywhere except the US.

Two, when it comes to Islam, the less said, the better. Islam does not recognise any separation of mosque and state, and this means the people dubbed minorities in India probably do not believe in this separation either.

So, if any lectures need to be given on secularism, this is the community you must first address, for secularism is anathema to Koranic theology.

You can, on the other hand, say that these formal dictionary definitions do not matter (though you claimed otherwise) since secularism as it has been practised in India, or the way it is defined in the constitution, is not based on dictionary meaning. It is about the spirit of treating all religions equally, or maintaining equidistance from them all.

This is where we come to the idea of how “secularism” has been practised in India. If you can answer these questions honestly, I will concede that India before the BJP came to power was “secular” in intent and content.

Q1: Does secularism allow for separate personal laws based on religion? If no, why do we still not have a uniform civil code?

Q2: Does secularism allow you to differentiate the poor from the non-poor, and the rights of citizens based on religious classification? Why then do we have minorities commissions or minority affairs ministries that cater only to religious minorities — which itself is a joke, for the biggest minority we are talking about adds up to some 200 million people?

Q3: How do we include only Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jains among minorities, but not Hindus, who are not united by a single founder, a single book, or a single set of fundamentals? Isn't diverse Hinduism really a collection of minorities — especially if you use the western definition of religion? Why are Hindu minorities in seven states not given the same privileges as national minorities?

Q4: How is state control of religion, and the refusal to give autonomy to Hindu-run institutions, whether educational or cultural, secular? And if this is kosher, how is this secularism “beautiful?” If discrimination on the basis of religion is beautiful, why not call the caste system beautiful too?

Q5: Why is every Hindu *sampradaya*, or denomination if you like, keen to call itself non-Hindu, from the Ramakrishna Mission to the Lingayats?

Q6: Why is it that “liberals” and “secularists” find it easy to condemn any Hindu crime against other humans, but almost never crimes against Hindus, except by creating false equivalence?

I can cite an example from your own writing, where you wrote about two ethnic cleansings in Jammu and Kashmir.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ethnic cleansing of Hindus from Kashmir, your article in *The Times of India* (20 January 2015) talked of an earlier ethnic cleansing (of Muslims) in

Dogra-ruled Jammu around the time of independence. Is this not false equivalence, where the only way you can talk about the ethnic cleansing of Pandits in post-independence India, which is ruled by a written constitution, is by mentioning another one at the time of partition, when ethnic cleansings were the norm in Punjab, Bengal, and some other parts of India?

Why did you lack the courage to talk about the 1990 Pandit exodus without diluting it with references to what happened under a Dogra ruler? Or are you afraid of losing your life membership of the “secular” club if you talked about one and not the other?

I can go on, but if you reflect on these questions, will you not agree that our practised “secularism” is indirectly anti-Hindu, even though the constitution mandates equality before the law and non-discrimination?

If you do not agree, can you at least aggressively canvas for amending Articles 25-30 to specifically state that nothing in these laws should mean that these rights can be denied to any group that is presumed to be part of a majority (example, Hindus).

You accused Chetan Bhagat of being “defensive” on the question of secularism and noted that you cannot buy off “communalists” by replacing the word “secular” with “United India”.

You wrote: “You cannot so easily buy off a group that demands statues to glorify Nathuram Godse, who murdered Mahatma Gandhi for being too secular. Godse hated the notion of secularism and would never have swallowed a verbal shift to United India. Nor will his ideological heirs.”

There are several questionable points here, though one can agree that Godse probably wanted a Hindu *Rashtra* and would not have been happy with the word secular, although Judge G D Khosla, who rejected Godse’s appeal against his guilty verdict, said Godse may have repented his act.

But here are some posers:

Why should a “liberal” like you object to Godse’s statue being erected by some of his fans, especially if this is done without state support? When mass murderers like Lenin, Stalin, and Mao are being celebrated by mainstream leftists in India, why does the mere intent to erect a Godse statue bother you so much? Did you support the attempted demolition of the Lenin statue in Tripura some years ago after the BJP came to power?

Second, you can completely condemn Godse for his murder of the Mahatma, but his main disagreement with Gandhi was his “appeasement politics” — which is what you categorise as “too secular.”

From backing a completely illegitimate enterprise called the Khilafat movement to refusal to condemn the murder of Swami Shradhananda by a Muslim and ignoring the Moplah genocide and forced conversion of Hindus in Kerala in the 1920s, Gandhi was not “secular” enough to condemn violence against Hindus.

So, while Gandhi certainly was a pacifist Hindu, he was by no stretch of the imagination “too secular” where he could be even-handed and fair to all sides.

And, by the way, you are partly wrong to suggest that Godse would have opposed United India. He was for “*Akhand Bharat*”, an India that was not partitioned in 1947, and his animus for Gandhi stemmed partly from this rejection of territorial vivisection.

I will concede that he would have liked a United India to pay heed to Hindu concerns, but he probably would not have supported a theocratic Hindu state like Pakistan (nor would Savarkar or even today’s Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS]).

You also refer to Hindu “trolls”, but my view is that you can be a hateful person even in mainstream media or in the highest courts of the land if you want to be.

Thus, you can blithely and repeatedly refer to Narendra Modi as “fascist”, label the RSS as the equivalent of the Islamic State or Boko Haram, defame the Indian Army’s actions in Kashmir as equivalent to General Reginald Dyer’s actions in Jallianwala Bagh, call for street riots to oust the BJP, blatantly lie in court about what lay beneath the Babri structure, and accuse the BJP of enforcing Jim Crow-like laws in India.

But, hey, these are intellectuals, not trolls.

Do you consider all these views, by your own fellow-liberals, democratic and any less of hate speech? Or is hate speech only what you want it to mean, just like what Humpty Dumpty said in *Through The Looking Glass*.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’”

I have no quarrel with the word “secular”, but can it be made to mean something that only you will define, Mr Aiyar, or should it mean what it seems to mean in practice?

The problem isn’t the word, it’s in the meaning it has acquired in India. It’s in the labelling rights that it seems to give liberals to dub all those who they disagree with as “communal trolls”.

That does not sound too liberal or secular to me. Just as handsome is as handsome does, liberalism and secularism have to be defined by the actions of those who covet these labels, and not merely serve as removable post-it pads on their foreheads.