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Remarx

Hegemonic Secularism, Dominant Communalism: Imagining Social Transformation in India

Saroj Giri

Most antimodern and subaltern critiques of “secularism” in India work by exposing a hidden, particularist majoritarianism (communalism) underneath abstract secularist universalism; this, however, externalizes communalism to the effects of “Western modernity” or secularization. On the other hand, the secularist left also externalizes communalism to feudal, premodern power relations or right-wing forces, or to the lack of left nationalist hegemony, or “an ethically neutral state.”

What if, however, “abstract” secularism is only the form of appearance of an actually existing communal social order? The categorization of (Nehruvian) secularism as “abstract” and “imposed” glosses over the continuity it provides to this structurally embedded communalism. Dominant communalism’s coexistence with hegemonic secularism, otherwise presumed to be anti-communal and already fighting communalism, precludes anti-communalism as part of a larger (‘old-fashioned’) revolutionary transformation of society.

We have something to learn from Fanon: “one cannot divorce the combat for culture from the peoples struggle for liberation”. This raises the question of the political subject, revealing serious limitations of the biopolitical model of state power invoked by some Subalterns.

Key Words: Secularism, Communalism, Subaltern, Modernity, India

Communalism has often been understood in India as either an aberration from our secular principles or a construct of “colonial modernity,” thereby positing the secular state and “our composite culture” or the so-called nonmodern, faith-based, particularistic communities as domains outside and counter to the communal.¹ In thus isolating and externalizing communalism, particularly its sources, to specific sector(s) of state and society (say, the modern state order or premodern power relations), the struggle against communalism finds a ready, “given” basis in some other sector(s), precluding therefore

1. Communalism in South Asia derives its meaning not from “community” but from “tension between religious communities,” often leading to “communal violence” with a tacit role of the state. In India, it is mostly between majority Hindu communalism and minority Muslim communalism (Pandey 2006, 9).

the rationale for a wider, deeper revolutionary transformation of the whole, and the logic which binds the different sectors—including, for example, the modern and the nonmodern, the progressive secular state and the particularist, heterogeneous communities, capital and community, and so on.

On the one hand, the Subaltern Studies school externalizes communalism to the effects of the homogenizing, enumerative regimes and constructs of colonial state power carried over into the postcolonial period.² So for Pandey, “communalism is a form of colonialist knowledge” (2006, 6). In this approach, the nonmodern community- and faith-based ways of life supposedly escaping this power are counterposed to communalism. Thus, communalism (religion-as-ideology) gets counterposed to religion-as-faith.³

On the other hand, left-secular scholars define “our” culture as composite, secular, and democratic, and view communalism as a force external to the nation, self-referentially taken to be identical to constitutional secularism.⁴ Communalism cannot then be traced to the very basis of this nation as part of what positively determines it. It must be externalized, understood as a deviation, a threat to the “unity and integrity” of the nation.⁵ Thus, for Aijaz Ahmad, communalism “is against the most cherished aspects of our national compact” (1996, 220).

For both viewpoints, communalism does not pervade all levels of society and state and is definitely not a phenomenon in itself: it is always epiphenomenal.⁶ This paper claims that communalism is the very form of the social order in India, including both the modern and the nonmodern, the “constructed community” and the heterogeneous community, capital and community, abstract secularism and particular faith-based “ways of life.” Communalism is the very structural logic that holds all these elements together, so it cannot be externalized.

Far from imposing itself on this communalism, secularism actually provides continuity to it; it is precisely in being abstract, universalist, and imposed (hence “struggling” against communalism) that it ideologically obscures this continuity it represents. However, communalism is not a (by)product of secular ideology, as antisecularists would have it: this would lead us back to externalizing communalism to secular ideology.⁷ The critique of “secular ideology” as abstract, Western, universalist, and imposed, forgets that all these categories in fact feed into secularism’s own self-portrayal as the radical other, struggling against communalism, thereby obscuring how it is merely the form of appearance of an actually existing communal

2. See, for example, Pandey (2006), Chatterjee (1994), Guha (1989), and Kaviraj (1990).

3. Though not a part of the Subaltern Studies group, Ashis Nandy (1997) most famously makes this argument.

4. For a liberal version, see Rajeev Bhargava (1994) and Akeel Bilgrami (1994). For a more left (Marxist) version, which will be discussed below, see Aijaz Ahmad (1996) and Sumit Sarkar (1996).

5. For a social democratic viewpoint, treating communalism as the main threat to the nation and its secular democracy, see Sitaram Yechury (1993).

6. Interestingly, the dominant communalism in India, which is Hindu communalism’s own self-understanding (of communalism), too, is as a byproduct, as the consequence of “pseudosecularism.” Along with pseudosecularism, another term used by the Hindu right is Vote Secularism. See Christophe Jaffrelot (2007).

7. Apart from Nandy (1997), outside the Subaltern school fold, T. N Madan (1987) famously makes this antisecularist argument.

social order. Abstract, imposed secularism does not lead to communalism; instead, it is the inscription of communalism's liberal-constitutional moment after India's political independence in 1947.

In the postcolonial period, secularism was adopted as a constitutional principle without transforming the dominant communal social order.⁸ This inaugurated communalism's continuation, now in its secular-democratic avatar, as the underside of secularism: secularism as the stand-in for communalism.⁹ Thus the so-called imposition of secularism by Nehru was not really a struggle against communalism but, in its structural logic, merely an attempt to reconcile communalism with secularism, as its underside. It was not the "nonnegotiated" imposition of secularism that produced or further incited communalism. Instead, it was the clear dominance of communalism, and the lack of any major societal struggle against it, which meant the "imposition" of secularism as a way of reconciling underlying communalism with democracy.¹⁰

What we have, therefore, is "hegemonic secularism, dominant communalism." My argument is that the externalization of the phenomenon of communalism and the tendency to, as it were, banish its basis to some Western modernity or to the effects of the elite nationalist project or to something outside the given secular nation ensures that the fight against it will not include, and in fact will actively displace, any attempt at a larger revolutionary transformation.¹¹

In narrowly focusing only on how this secularism is "soft" and not "hard" secularism or how its abstract universalism frequently elides into majority Hindu communalism,¹² left-wing scholarship often overlooks its foundational ideological character. Marxism cannot just call for combining "hard" secularism with progressive social reforms, but must pose the question of a revolutionary sociopolitical transformation and a political subject equal to the task. Bhagat Singh's call for a social and economic revolution to address the communal question becomes pertinent here.¹³ We will also recall Franz

8. The word "secular" was deployed only in 1976 when it was inserted into the preamble of the Constitution through an amendment.

9. Rochana Bajpai (2000) and Shabnum Tejani (2007) show that "secularism" stifled the development of minority communities as a political community. The line of connection they draw is, however, again from abstract secular universalism to Hindu communalism, forgetting how the universal derives from the so-called particular. Without a notion of a communal social order, they overlook how this universalism does not exist on its own and is actually the ideological moment of this order. This order itself is left unproblematised.

10. In an interview, Tanika Sarkar (2005) refers to Hindu communalism trying to adapt to democracy. After Independence, "if they want(ed) to get anywhere in a situation of full franchise," they had to adapt. So "somewhere between the 1950s and 1960s, Deendayal Upadhyay made that kind of rhetorical shift . . . and a more democracy-friendly rhetoric was developed."

11. Maybe this displacement of radical transformation can remind us of what D. D. Kosambi (1999, 9, 22–3) referred to as the "continuity of Indian culture," how "the older gods were not smashed, but adopted or adjusted," "how the older cults were not demolished by force but assimilated," so that "a great deal of the superstructure survived, along with the productive and formal mechanism of previous stages."

12. For Aditya Nigam, this elision happens "by default" as secularism "in its effort to erase markers of difference, privileges the dominant/majority culture as the norm" (2006, 73).

13. See, in particular, Bhagat Singh's "Letter to Young Political Workers" of 2 February 1931, posted at www.shahidbhagatsingh.org; and Bhagat Singh, "Communal Riots and the Remedy," first published in Hindi in the journal *Kirti*, 1927, and excerpted in *Mainstream*, 6 October 2007.

Fanon's (1967, 2004) emphasis on the interrelationship between culture and revolutionary struggle, deploying it against the imminently South Asian tendency to invoke "our" composite, pluralistic traditions and faith-based ways of life (with or without the modern state) as a counter to communalism. It is precisely on this question of political subjectivity that the Subaltern approach and its shadowboxing of the biopolitical model of the state falters in spite of its radical antimodernity and anticolonialism.

Modern and the Nonmodern

Sudipta Kaviraj (1990, 201) emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of communalism when he points out that "communalism is not just a force, or an articulation of interests." He raises an extremely pertinent question: "We have to ask not only who are the communal forces, where do they exist, what are the causes feeding them, but also, have we been mistaken in identifying the sources of communalism, its hiding places, its causes, reason, plausibilities?" (188). However, he treats communalism only as part of cultural reproduction and discursive structures, as part of the "problem of political discourses which fashion people's recognition and residence of their life worlds" (202).

Communalism needs to be understood in terms of the structural logic of immanent power relations, as the inner logic of the particular kind of modernity inaugurated by colonialism in India. Such an understanding of communalism will involve treating the three instances of (a) modern state power, brought about by colonial modernity, (b) the modern constructed community or nation, and (c) the nonmodern, authentic inner spiritual domain, as forming an internally interrelated configuration of power relations constituting Indian society.

The interrelationship and inner dynamic between these three elements produces communalism as the very form of the social order under colonial modernity. This communal social order as the form of modernity in India includes the nonmodern (the supposedly unenumerable, authentic singularity always escaping the modern, biopolitical state) as a constitutive element; more precisely, this modernity structurally generates the nonmodern in a synchronic logic, producing communalism. Communalism cannot therefore be externalized to only modernity (the state, constructed community), nor can it be relegated to premodernity or the nonmodern, but it must be identified in the logic incorporating as well as engendering all these elements. In this sense, far from being a byproduct, or the effects or construct of a given modernity, communalism under colonialism, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, is the very form modernity takes in India.

For the Subalterns, communalism is a construct of colonial modernity, a fallout of the construction of the community in the modern sense: enumerated, demarcated, and ossified by the enumerative, classifying regimes of modernity.¹⁴ Arjun Appadurai writes that "these (colonial) enumerative strategies helped to ignite communitarian and nationalist identities" (1994, 317). Modernity is the phenomenon while

14. On how "fuzzy communities" were ordered into clearly demarcated, demographically enumerated and hence constructed communities, see Kaviraj (1992).

communalism, the community it constructs, are epiphenomena. However, my understanding of communalism—as not as an epiphenomenon but as the dominant form of the social order under colonialism—challenges this Subaltern division between the modern, constructed community, nation, history, and the authentic, nonmodern singularity of the (indigenous) community.

For the Subalterns, modernity (modern state power), constructed community, and communalism form one specific conjugation/configuration in such a way that the nonmodern, authentic community or indigenous “ways of life” then fall outside and stands in opposition to it. However, my argument is that this view of modernity producing the “constructs” of community, nation, and history, so that the undistorted/unconstructed authentic, nonmodern community stands outside and in opposition to it, is true only as a first empirical, sociological instance.¹⁵ It will be seen that it is precisely the nonmodern, authentic community and its claims that make such constructions of modernity possible in the first place.

It is precisely through the nonmodern, authentic community and its claims that the constructed community founds itself, lends itself to the sociological, enumerative packaging of modern state power. There is, for example, no religion-as-ideology without, precisely, religion-as-faith; religion-as-ideology is not a byproduct of modernity, a total construct, as is claimed, but is the result of the specific conjugation of modern state power and nonmodern elements that are faith-based, authentic, and heterogeneous. That is, religion-as-ideology is not a corruption, distortion, or perversion of religion-as-faith by modernity but is part of a definitive, mutually engendering relationship between nonmodern religion-as-faith and modern state power.

The nonmodern, the authentic, is therefore presupposed by modern state power; the nonmodern is a structurally necessary instance in the reproduction of modern state power and the constructed community. Since, however, it is the *non*-modern, it serves as an internal moment in the overall reproduction of modern state power, not in its full integration but, precisely, in its autonomy. The nonmodern, the authentic, therefore forms not the constitutive inside (which is the constructed community) but the *constitutive outside* to the modern state power.¹⁶

Communalism is therefore the specific form of modernity that has the so-called authentic qualities and nonmodern claims of the community as its constitutive outside, as the very “absent” basis of its rule.¹⁷ The inner spiritual, private domain as

15. Hegel, in his *Logic*, shows how such “honest but narrow thinking,” reaching for the purely empirical (the nonidentical), ends up in a kind of stalemate: “thought entangles itself in contradictions, i.e. loses itself in the hard-and-fast nonidentity of its thoughts, and so, instead of reaching itself, is caught and held in its counterpart.” This “mere understanding” is to be overcome by the “perseverance of thought” seeking “in itself the solution of its own contradictions” (1975, 15).

16. The notion of constitutive outside means that a thing is what it is only through what it is not. This “what is” allows the thing to be an identity with itself even as it contradicts it. This follows from the idea of identity in contradiction from Hegel (1975). Thus, we can here say that the modern colonial state was an identity in contradiction: the identity in contradiction of the modern and the nonmodern.

17. Reading Pandey’s (2006, 137) account, against the grain, of “the Subaltern perspective” of Ali Hasan’s history writing of the late nineteenth century, makes it clear that it arises from the

the nonmodern, unenumerable singularity therefore stands in opposition to modern state power only as a first empirical, sociological instance but, ideologically, it forms the absent basis to state power which now rules without being hegemonic. That is, the inner logic of modernity allows autonomy to the nonmodern, inner spiritual domain. It is not “dominance without hegemony,” as claimed by Ranajit Guha (1989), but hegemony without hegemony.

That is, *communalism is then a specific kind of social order bred by colonial modernity, which ruled by the principle of exercising hegemony without hegemony or nonhegemonic hegemony. Mediated by constructed communities, the modern state had the nonmodern as its constitutive outside. Overlooking this, some liberals and left scholars tend to explain communalism by showing its basis in the nonmodern, premodern (feudal), which is then taken to stand opposed to the modern. Akeel Bilgrami therefore tries to critique the Subaltern notion of a modern constructed community by resorting to an argument of “historical periodization,” of chronological order so that for him “the process (of construction) goes back a long way into the recesses of Indian history” (1994, 1752). Thus, “the construction began to take shape much before the onset of modernity” (1752). What Bilgrami does not understand is that modern state power here *constitutively*, and not chronologically, presupposes the nonmodern. Communalism was engendered by the inner dynamic of the colonial state power. And this dynamic meant that the most authentic, the most nonmodern, elements would be continuously generated and mobilized now as the absent but internal basis of state power.*

The “inner spiritual domain,” as argued by Partha Chatterjee (1994), might then be the basis of anticolonial nationalism, but it would itself be the constitutive outside of colonial state power, a moment in the latter’s reproduction. This is what I call the nonhegemonic hegemony of colonial state power. Similarly, while this autonomous, alternative, nonmodern space might have created “new forms of imagined communities,” “an alternative public sphere,” as argued by Sandra Freitag (1996, 214–5), yet it is in and through this latter that state power reproduced itself. Communalism cannot therefore be restricted to just the effects of modernity or the undying remnants of a feudal, premodern past. Communalism is at the heart of the *principle* of the rule of the modern colonial state, and it spans all levels of society.¹⁸ Hence the fight against communalism cannot be separated from the question of a larger radical restructuring of society and state in India; and, if separated, some version of the “imposition” of secularism doubles as a progressive and left-wing “cause.” As we shall see below, the imposition of secularism by Nehru, in its inner logic, derived its true force in

Muslim elite’s “crisis of legitimate hierarchy that came with the political and economic changes brought by colonialism.” The community’s nonmodern claims are generated as a function of the logic of modern state power.

18. From a different standpoint, Jairus Banaji (2002), too, argues for understanding communalism as pervading all levels of society and not just as a sectoral construct. He writes that “in India the growth of fascism has been a gradual, step by step process where the fascist elements penetrate all sectors of society and emerge having built up that groundwork.” In keeping with this, he locates the sources of fascism in wider authoritarian, patriarchal structures and practices in Indian society rather than in just the “right-wing” or “communal forces,” as the left-seculars do.

forestalling social transformation by positing communalism (defined as deviation from secularism) as the main enemy, in effect being, paradoxically, also a recipe for how not to fight communalism as a deeper ordering of social and power relations!

This specific form of modernity with its absent basis in the nonmodern, I claim, gives rise to communalism as the form of the social order in the colonial period during the second half of the nineteenth century. It is in this period that British policy not to interfere in the “private” matters of religion and faith was adopted.¹⁹ This period witnessed the “refusal on the part of the Indian elites to let the colonial state enter into areas that were regarded as crucial to the identity of the nation” (Chatterjee 1994a, 1769–70). After 1947, however, communalism as the form of the social order under modernity undergoes a shift with the adoption of democracy and secularism as the legitimizing principle of the modern Indian state. The adoption of secularism as the official, constitutional principle of the state, without transforming the social order whose form was communal, meant that now secularism became a stand-in for communalism which is active as the underside of secular democracy. Right since its inception under Nehru, secularism has presupposed and was engendered by an already existing, immanent communalism in society.

Let me simplify. We do away here with the Subaltern dichotomy between the modern and the nonmodern so that the nonmodern, being the absent basis of modernity, cannot be the basis for our fight against modernity and its construct, communalism. As will be seen, we also do away with the left-secular dichotomy between society and state where premodern, feudal relations are considered as somehow not necessarily defining the nature of the “modern” state: the existing constitutional state thus remain the focal point of transforming these premodern relations and of fighting communalism. *In doing away with these dichotomies we then see (again to simplify) that the modern state, constructed communities, and nonmodern (spiritual) domain form one, whole differentiated field. Communalism can be understood not sectorally but in terms of the manner in which this field is constituted, involving all the elements. As we pointed out, the state, modernity reproduces itself through a fusion of the “present” moments of the modern, constructed (including feudal relations) as also the “absent” nonmodern, authentic domains.*

Imposition of Secularism

If, then, communalism, under colonialism, is to be located in modernity’s non-hegemonic basis in the most nonmodern, most “premodern” constellations of community and tradition, then what happens once in the postcolonial period secularism is adopted as a constitutional principle? With communalism as the dominant form of the social order in the colonial period, what does it mean to adopt secularism constitutionally without any transformation of the social order? To

19. As Sandra Freitag points out, “the (colonial) state identified itself as the protector and protagonist for ‘general’ or ‘public’ interests; it then relegated ‘private’ or ‘particular’ interests to the myriad communities that constitute the realm” (1996, 212).

turn the question around we have to ask, what was it that led to the infamous imposition of secularism?

There were two sets of factors. One was that even though communalism was the very form of the social order, any struggle against it involving a larger “social and economic revolution” was to be avoided. Second, given how communalism occupied center stage in politics and society around 1947, particularly with the Partition, the “fight against communalism” itself was unavoidably the dominant template for consolidating power and forging the unity and integrity of the country. That is, *the “fight against communalism” came to be declared or posited in such a way that it did not involve any larger social transformation, so that it could just be the organizing principle and legitimizing basis for state power, provide the basis for the “unity and integrity” of the nation, and so on.* The imposition signified that secularism had to create a need for itself, redefining the terms of political contestation in its favor, so that it then becomes the legitimizing principle, a progressive plank for the new political regime.

It is to answer such a deeply structural need that secularism comes in the self-happy guise of an imposition so that, in placing itself in opposition to communalism, it defines the infamous secularism versus communalism field. This imposition was secularism creating a need for itself by not just structuring the field in terms of secularism versus communalism, with itself as the dominant term of the two, but also by obversely setting up a conception of communalism as a deviation from itself (secularism). Secularism could not but be the only answer to communalism retroactively defined as a deviation from itself. The argument that secularism could have come through negotiation (and not necessarily through imposition) forgets that first the need for secularism itself (whether imposed or negotiated) was not so obvious and was created through this very imposition, also thereby structuring the political field in a way that excluded radical forms of anticomunal struggle. Nor was this imposition an obvious fallout of the “violence of modernity” or the blind rationality of the “Western” process of secularization—beyond such generalities one must examine the inner logic and specificity of Indian modernity.

Thus, secularism could not have come except as imposition, for it had to restructure the political field with itself as the dominant discursive formation. Contrary to the usual meaning of imposition, this imposition marked no break, discontinuity, or rupture in the systemic logic of the state and political power. Instead, at that level, this “imposition” of secularism provided continuity to the state power of the time, something akin to a “legitimizing vocabulary”, as Bajpai puts it (Bajpai, 2000). It was perhaps truly the “call of the hour,” that which, far from being imposed, seems instead engendered by the underlying structure and sociopolitical processes. Given that it merely ensured structural continuity to the system by redrawing the political field, this idea of imposition is therefore invariably ideological.

Perhaps none other than Nehru himself understood that the guise of an abstract imposition of secularism was the best way to posit the “fight against communalism” since the actual fight against it would involve taking into account its dominant nature, how communalism is deeply embedded in social and power relations and so on. Nehru was aware of this embedded and dominant character of communalism in Indian society and how secularism is no match for it. Writing in 1961, he says, “our

constitution lays down that we are a secular state, but it must be admitted that this is not wholly reflected in our mass living and thinking” (2003, 194). He notes that in England, even though “the state is, under the constitution, allied to one particular religion, the Church of England, nevertheless, the state and the people there largely function in a secular way.” At another point, expressing his “total disagreement with this revivalist feeling,” he finds himself and his secularism “a poor representative of many of our people today.” He therefore acknowledges “the unnaturalness and artificiality of the present (secularist) position” for the country (195). The question to be raised here is why was Indian state power so fundamentally attached to this “unnatural and artificial position” even when it knew that this was no way to fight communalism.

The answer we are seeking to provide is that such an artificial, unnatural, and abstract secularism was adopted precisely as an imposition because it provided the ideological legitimacy for structural continuity of the Indian nation-state and its power. In monopolizing for itself the fight against communalism, the imposition of secularism inscribed the power of the Indian state and nation with a moral, ideological legitimacy. As we will see below, Sumit Sarkar for one tells us how secularism provided the ideological basis for the territorial “unity and integrity” of the nation.²⁰

Thus, far from fighting communalism, secularism, through the instrument of its imposition, enframes and redefines communalism in a way that maintains the instance of “the need to fight communalism” as a defining one, even as communalism in the deeper sense goes unchallenged. The deep nature of communalism, however, demands a wider struggle for a radical transformation of state and society. It is precisely such a wider transformation that is precluded by secularism and, in this sense, it acts as a stand-in for communalism’s continued and long career in the subcontinent. Secularism comes to be the organizing principle, the basis of legitimacy for the Indian state and dominant social order.

Now it looks like by ushering in communalism to the democratic phase in a way that defined the fight against it as the principal task of all progressive politics, secularism answered a wider need for the structural continuity of the Indian state. There are strong parallels here with the relationship between democracy and racism, pointed out by Frantz Fanon in the European context. He points out that it is not democracy but racism that provides logical consistency to the dominant systems in England, Belgium, and France. That is, “despite the democratic principles affirmed by these respective nations, it is these racists who, in their opposition to the country as a whole, are logically consistent” (Fanon 1967, 49–50). He therefore sees through the “spectacular and futile condemnations of race prejudice,” which of course reminds us of the spectacularity, if not futility, of Nehru’s imposition of secularism and condemnation of communalism (Fanon 1967, 49). Just as democracy ideologically

20. The secularist defense of the “idea of India” and of its “unity and integrity” was most recently played out in denying the right to self-determination to Kashmir. Writing in a popular mainstream daily, one of the top hawks in the Indian strategic affairs establishment, K. Subrahmanyam (2008), for example, argued that “allowing secessionism will be a defeat for secularism ... the end of the concept of India.” “What Kashmir needs is good and firm governance ... crowd control, respect for the law.”

ensured the structural continuity of an essentially racist sociopolitical system, secularism ideologically ensured the continuity of a communal social order, in such a way that secularism itself becomes a mere stand-in for communalism.

Sumit Sarkar (1996) alludes to this systemic function of secularism. However in pointing out how the very ideological needs of the Indian state anticipated secularism, he surprisingly does not find the nature of the discourse of the imposition of secularism to be ideological. He overlooks the fact that the imposition of secularism so defined the parameters of the “fight against communalism” that any left-wing position of radical social transformation was precluded. Sarkar indeed points out both the elision of secularism to communalism and the systemic need of secularism for Indian nationalism. He shows how even the most secular emphasis on “unity in diversity” could not avoid assuming “a glorious past.” Given that “the tendency has remained strong to assume some kind of cultural or civilisational integration as the ultimate foundation of nationalism,” it took little “to resist the further slide toward assuming that that unity, after all, has been primarily Hindu” (Sarkar 1996, 275).

A more interesting argument here, which Sarkar makes, is how the adoption of secularism fitted into a larger structural logic of Indian nationalism. Far from an imposition, secularism harmoniously provided the ideological basis for “national unity.” Communalism came to be a divisive force, unlike secularism, which could be the basis for national integration. “Indian nationalism had to seek a fundamentally territorial focus, attempting to unite everyone living in the territory of British-dominated India, irrespective of religious or other differences” (Sarkar 1996, 273). Communalism, more specifically *Hindutva* (Hindu-ness), had to be opposed since “given the specific conditions of subcontinental religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity, Indian nationalism did have to develop thrusts or tendencies (not more than that, and often reversed) that can be seen to be contradicted by the ideology and practice of *Hindutva*” (273). To keep the nation comprising people from different religions together, the state had to oppose Hindu communalism, or *Hindutva*, and propound secularism.

Given his earlier point about secularism’s all-too-frequent elision to Hindu communalism, Sarkar here seems to be arguing that, even when Indian nationalism was actually secular, that was incidental upon elements and factors that made secularism efficacious or expedient to adopt. What Sarkar does not recognize, however, is that *even though this secularism was born out of a larger systemic logic, it still had to be ostentatiously imposed to define the political field in terms of secularism versus communalism, which would preclude other forms of struggle against communalism that would have involved societal transformation.* That is, in binding the polity to this secularism versus communalism struggle where secularism does not mean more than “anticommunal,” the continuity of the system, the state, and dominant forces is ensured precisely through the “progressive” “fight against communalism,” and this latter “fight” comes to displace the question of societal transformation. Sarkar rightly points to the frequent elision of Indian secularism into communalism, but fails to understand the constitutive role of the “imposition of secularism” in laying out an ideological field precluding any real struggle against communalism or of revolutionary transformation. Communalism is far from an

aberration; nor, however, is it an elision from “bad” or “soft” secularism. *It is instead, particularly in its low-intensity, right-wing fascist guise with bouts of communal violence, what sustains secularism in its place.*

Inability to view the structural logic of secularism, and how its ideological imposition derived its charge in displacing the “fight against communalism” to its own narrow confines (secularism as anticommunal), has meant that secularists occupy themselves with endless debates about how secularism should or could have come in a more negotiated manner. In countering the antiseccularist association of this imposed secularism with the supposedly inherent violence of the modern state and modernity, the secularists therefore try to respond by conveniently dissociating secularism itself from this actual imposition. Akeel Bilgrami, for example, agrees that imposition did take place, but disagrees with the antimodernist view on it. For him, the imposition of secularism was not really an imposition of the kind Nandy has in mind, in the sense of “a modern intrusion into an essentially traditionalist population,” but was “an imposition rather in the sense that it assumed that *secularism stood outside the substantive arena of political commitments*” (Bilgrami 1994, 1753). Thus while Bilgrami tells us how secularism ought to have come, how it “never got the chance to emerge out of a creative dialogue between these different communities” (1754), he never symptomatically reads much into how it did in fact come.

In countering the antiseccularist argument that the imposition was part of the intrinsic logic of violence of the modern secular state, he does not give his own explanation of how and why the imposition took place. While for him “there is nothing inherent in the state which makes it logically impossible that it should adopt such a substantive, negotiated policy outcome,” he does not tell us what was *in* the state which made it historically possible for precisely a nonnegotiated, imposed secularism to come about (1754). Completely oblivious to how his own proposition of a more negotiated, emergent secularism is merely the oppositional ally to, and was born out of, the imposition, Bilgrami in a logically tautological fashion seeks to explain the imposition by referring to Nehru’s “failure to provide for a creative dialogue between communities” (1755). Negotiations between different communities for secularism is premised on the necessity for it, on the fact that these community leaders realize its importance and are willing to work toward it, and this was not already so evident, as the Constituent Assembly debates show. For example, quite a few of such “minority” leaders, including B. R. Ambedkar and Hukam Singh, were for separate political electorates and not exactly secularism.²¹ *It is here that the imposition establishes the “need” for secularism.* Bilgrami forgets that since his framework of imposed versus negotiated secularism is itself one inaugurated by the imposition, his explanation of imposition in terms of the failed opportunities of negotiations is no more than an arbitrary transposition of these two positions in the abstract. He thus has no idea of how secularism in its imposition actually comes as a necessary structural element and is not therefore subject to the deliberation and negotiation that he wishes should have taken place.

21. See Shabnum Tejani (2007) on this major tussle, during the making of the Constitution, between separate minority electorates and the Congress insistence on secularism as the panacea.

In ignoring the structural basis of secularism, and the ideological character of this imposition, secularists end up unaware of the conditions of their own discourse. By working on and developing the negotiated position on secularism which is, however, nothing more than the oppositional and derivative ally of the imposed secularism, it reinforces the secularism versus communalism framework, which in turn expunges any project of social transformation from the field of politics. The *formal* imposition of secularism therefore was of effective *substantive* importance in inaugurating a status quo political field so that Bilgrami could write, “this Archimedean existence gave secularism procedural priority but in doing so it gave it no abiding substantive authority” (1754). The fact of the matter is just the opposite. It is not the Archimedean, nonnegotiated existence of secularism that took away its substantive content; it was substantive precisely in its Archimedean existence. Imposed secularism was substantive precisely in being formal and imposed. Thus, the continuity of Indian state power, including the integrity of the nation based on unity-in-diversity, was ensured precisely by the Archimedean nature of secularism, which precluded any transformative agenda in the fight against communalism—no mean substantive task!

Beyond Secularism/Communalism: Locating the Political Subject

If the idea of imposition of secularism is important to preserve, for the left seculars, with all their passion and seriousness displayed for secularism, this imposition and hence the “fight against communalism” is the substitute for any real social transformation and justifies their attachment to the present state order. For the antisecularists, this imposition can prove how “secular modernity” is an outside to local, authentic communities, so that again no overall social transformation involving a political subject is needed since local communities and faith-based ways of life are taken to provide the basis for the fight against modernity. Here we come face to face with a fundamental deadlock: either take the state and its modern discourse of rights as the basis of social transformation, or take the heterogeneous community and its plurality and authenticity as the basis for opposing modernity and the modern secular state. Most critiques of the secularism/communalism binary end up in this deadlock.

As we noted at the beginning, an externalized understanding of communalism, confining its “causes” or sources to one or the other sector of the sociopolitical whole, has meant that the other untouched, “pure” sector then becomes the basis of the fight against communalism. Left-seculars one way or the other consider the state, or the “struggle for hegemony” around it, as the basis of this fight; and antisecularists consider the local cultures and faith-based ways of life as this basis. In both instances, the agency, the subject, of this struggle against communalism is then already (“objectively”) given and is definitely not a political subject that would emerge in the course of this struggle. Such a struggle against communalism through either the state (be it left hegemonic or negotiated “political secularism”) or nonmodern communities amounts to no more than a rearrangement of what is already given. Thus Bilgrami’s negotiated emergent secularism does not do away with communal elites but presupposes them: he wants “a secular policy to emerge

through negotiation between different communal interests” (1994, 1754). Even though proposals like that of Nandy are far more radical than a mere rearrangement of what is given, the subjectivity granted nonmodern traditions and ways of life is oblivious to how it forms the absent basis of modern state power. In suggesting an impossible withdrawal from modernity, its implication in modernity is overlooked.

In taking one or the other sector of the sociopolitical whole as the basis for the fight against communalism, what these proposals lack is any idea of political subjectivity. A political subject in the fight against communalism would emerge if we, to start with, do not externalize communalism to only the “violence of modernity,” or premodern feudal relations, or communal forces, or the imposed nature of secularism, but are willing to see that these largely empirically given factors (which are all true, as a first instance) actually are subject to an abstract logic of modern state power.

A political subject would not pick on and valorize the “empirically true” divisions and overlook the abstract unity (the concretely true in Hegelese) that holds them together. It will know that the modern and the nonmodern form an abstract unity and communalism cannot be attributed solely to either (in which case, of course, the other term is easily taken to be the basis for anticomunalism). Since communalism neither in its sources nor, of course, in its effects can be isolated to this or that sector, but involves the immanent relations that constitute the sociopolitical whole into an abstract unity, any political subject therefore cannot base itself on some sector of Indian society taken as religion-as-faith, or secular, syncretic traditions, and so forth. It has to base itself on a revolutionary transformation of society and state involving a dissolution of the present and the given.

If, as Sarkar argued, even the Nehru of *Discovery of India* elides into a Hindu essentialist view, if the most secular parties have compulsively given in to communalism, there is a deeper logic at work here. Often it is said that the Bharatiya Janata party, or BJP (Hindu right-wing political party), does by day what the Congress (centrist party) does by night. The political subject must take it as a comment not just on the Congress but a comment on the logic at work here, a logic which extends across the political spectrum, pervading Indian society and state at all levels. It is the failure to understand this logic at work and instead resorting to piecemeal responses to the “communal offensive” that is partly responsible for the sterile debates on the mainstream left today.

Thus, this debate in India today seems confined to modernists à la social democrats versus antisecularists à la postmodernist, antistatist left, where the social democrats are assumed to carry the burden of an Enlightenment idea of Progress (including sometimes the Stalinist belief in History) while postmodernists are supposed to carry the charge of regressing into indigeneity and romantic particularisms (including sometimes right-wing positions close to Hindu communalism).²² The secularism versus communalism debate seems to correspond to a left political field structured between social democracy/traditional left versus postmodernist/subaltern/identitarian left, excluding any third revolutionary position from the field of vision. In particular, the

22. See, for example, Nigam (2006) and Nanda (2004), who locate their discussion in terms of such broad theoretical positions.

negative, reactive agenda of anticommunalism has been the preferred refuge of social democracy for a long time. Indeed, one can write volumes on the unholy nexus between secularism and social democracy.²³

Our formulation here of “hegemonic secularism, dominant communalism” therefore tries to grasp *this logic where communalism reproduces itself through secularism*.²⁴ Secularism is, however, not an abstract universalism but an *embedded* universalism emanating from the dominant communal social order’s entry into the democratic-constitutional framework. The embedded nature of this universalism means that the nonmodern, particularist or heterogeneous singularity is, as we pointed out, complicit in it and hence cannot be the political subject; for example, community is a moment in the reproduction of capital. Nor can this subject be the modern state or its secularism which poses itself as an imposed, abstract secularism, a stand-in for communalism. The political subject then must arise in and through the very struggle for the transformation of this order in which the modern and the universal exist in and through the nonmodern and the particular.²⁵

This is where we need to revisit, if not return to, the good old-fashioned Marxist formulation once expressed by Bhagat Singh and his comrades. Singh and his Republican Socialist party had this formulation in the late 1920s that, in order to solve the communal problem, India needed a social and economic revolution first.²⁶ He stated in 1927 that “in order to stop the people from mutual (communal) fighting, class consciousness is needed. The toiling poor, working classes and the peasantry should be made fully aware of the fact that their real enemies are capitalists” (Singh 1927). Further, “the cry of the day is absolute transformation and those who realize it bear the responsibility to reorganize society on the basis of socialism” (quoted in Sehanavis 2007).

One of the reasons this idea is not taken seriously in academic and postcolonial circles is that Singh seems to be repeating the “Enlightenment metanarrative” and “imperialist tropes” about how once society progresses through science and industry, problems of religion and ascriptive identity will slowly disappear with the dissemination of the “scientific temper.” So here Nehru and Singh are bundled together much like the collapsing of the Enlightenment and the October Revolution!

What if, however, Bhagat Singh had a much deeper insight than this formulation suggests? He was proposing not just progress and development of society through the use of science and technology, but a social and economic transformation necessarily

23. For social democracy, being secularist helps, and dangling it as the distinguishing mark of being on the left is even better as this means that one can be in the forefront of spearheading neoliberal economic policies, building Special Economic Zones and so on, as the biggest parliamentary Communist party is doing today, and yet be progressive! To draw parallels, it is as atrocious as the combination of New Labor and liberal multiculturalism.

24. Following B. R. Ambedkar we can ask: wasn’t secularism more about promoting the Hindu communal majority into a political and hence legitimate majority, through the invocation of equal rights for all citizens, rather than about protecting minority rights? (in Tejani 2007, 260).

25. Referring to Fanon’s views, Arif Dirlik also seems to be searching for the political subject based in the present. He writes of Fanon’s “insistence on the present” in searching for a new, transformative political subject (1997, 43).

26. See, for example, Bhagat Singh’s (1931) “Letter to Young Political Workers.”

involving a revolution. It is therefore not a question of “combining” the antifascist struggle with progressive economic reforms and redistributive justice, as suggested by Ahmad.²⁷ It is not a question of “solving” or “addressing” the “real” problems of the masses through progressive social and economic reforms so that the Right cannot then acquire mass support. Such an argument is no more than demanding social democratic capitalism. Instead, what is central to the idea of a social and economic revolution is a revolutionary political subjectivity, which we are proposing here.²⁸

This political subjectivity is not given by the split or contingency of the social that poststructuralist thought or post-Marxism refers to, but is the surplus that opens the realm of politics proper. Going beyond policies of redistribution and social justice, this politics stipulates a realm where each and everyone would be qualified to participate, necessarily involving the suspension of society comprising individuals with specific social roles, trades, hierarchies, and, of course, religious affiliations. It fundamentally involves ending the autonomy of the given (the reified social, cultural, or economic), rendering it completely malleable in the hands of the *demos*. Not therefore an anticommunal politics involving the revival and defense of so-called secular traditions and composite culture or nonmodern notions of the self and subaltern agency, but the fashioning of a new society and culture born of the liberation struggle, as argued by Fanon.²⁹ Mao’s “politics in command” anticipates this: a politics unencumbered by the exigencies of “reality.” What we have here is, as Badiou (1999) points out, a “politics which is in need of nothing except itself” leading us, as he writes, to the pronouncement on Lavoisier the scientist, “the Republic needs no scientists.” We can say, the republic needs no communal harmony, it needs no secularism!

Anticolonialism and the Political Subject

In order, then, to fight communalism, the Indian republic would not need the hegemonic secularism, neutrality, or political secularism of the modern state nor the particularistic inner spiritual domain, syncretic practices or multiple selves of communities and so on, as the struggle for revolutionary transformation would undermine communalism in its very social basis. But this struggle would also transform what we know to be our culture, tradition, and customs. Writes Fanon, “the liberation struggle does not restore to national culture its former values and

27. Aijaz Ahmad’s evocation of Gramsci does not keep him off his essentially social democratic enthusiasm about progressive reforms. He writes that “if the rest of the country could speedily implement a land reform even as moderate as the one in West Bengal, ‘Ram and his rabble’ would have to run for cover” (1996, 264). The same regime with its reforms in West Bengal today.

28. No wonder that Bhagat Singh has escaped appropriation by postcolonial studies. And the seductive Fanon is a hit and miss: “witness the uneasiness of ‘radical’ postcolonialist Afro-American studies apropos of Fanon’s fundamental insight into the unavoidability of violence in the process of effective decolonization” (Žižek 2005).

29. As Fanon puts it in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “one cannot divorce the combat for culture from the people’s struggle for liberation” (2004, 168).

configurations. This struggle which aims at a fundamental redistribution of relations between men, cannot leave intact either the form or substance of the people's culture" (2004, 178).

This revolutionary political subjectivity, the surplus escaping all codification and enumeration, is, however, not one that would arise from a particularistic singularity or heterogeneity. This is not the authentic community, inner spiritual domain of the Subalterns or the singularity expressed in Nandy's religion-as-faith. I pointed out above how this singular, heterogeneous, nonmodern community provided the "absent" basis to colonial modernity in India, and this is what led to communalism as the form of the social order.

However, the Subalterns seek to portray this particularistic community as the basis for anticolonial, antimodern subjectivity. Taking the modern state to be part of the trajectory of History, with Europe as its center, the Subaltern and antiseccularist critique of an imposed secularism and top-down modernity often gets formulated in radical, anticolonial terms precisely on the basis of the nonmodern community or the inner spiritual domain. Thus the nonmodern community, the inner spiritual domain in its heterogeneity, escaping the enumerating effects of the modern state, is supposed to provide the ultimate resistance to the colonial project and, in fact, to the universalist march of capital.³⁰

Our proposal of a political subject, however, does away with such a notion of nonmodern community or the inner private domain. Does that imply relinquishing an anticolonial position and instead being a victim of Universal History? That is, does radical anticolonialism presuppose some domain in the colonized which apparently retains its autonomy, escaping the hegemony of the modern state and capital? My answer here is clear: radical anticolonialism does not presuppose such a domain since the autonomy of such a domain was precisely the absent basis of colonial and modern state rule. We thus proposed hegemony without hegemony as this basis. In failing to grasp the internal, abstract logic of modern state power and treat it as merely a sociological, enumerative power, the Subalterns and antimodernists tend to locate subjectivity in the heterogeneity and singularity that escapes this sociological enumeration, completely overlooking how this singularity and heterogeneity form the constitutive outside to the not so self-same, not so self-contained modern state power that always contains a pie of the nonmodern!

Since this abstract principle of rule incorporates the modern state, the constructed community, and the nonmodern inner private domain into an internal abstract relation, it is at this level that the political subject must be defined. Chatterjee (1994) seeks to formulate his attachment to the apparent autonomy of the inner private domain as the basis of anticolonialism in terms of a critique of the modern state form as such (not just in its colonial mission).³¹ In arguing that the "subterranean, potentially subversive... community marks a limit to the realm of disciplinary power" and that "our inquiry into colonial and postcolonial histories"

30. The classic Subaltern statement of resistance to History and the march of Capital emanating from its "failed hegemony" is, of course, by Ranajit Guha (1989).

31. Thus, Chatterjee writes that "the history of the colonial state, far from being incidental, is of crucial interest to the study of the past, present, and future of the modern state" (1994a, 18).

can “lead us to a fundamental critique of modernity from within itself,” Chatterjee (1994, 236–7) clearly invokes the biopolitical notion of modern state power.³²

However, as Jacques Rancière (2004) points out, the biopolitical model of power in effect has no notion of the subject or, rather, of the “process of political subjectivation.”³³ Thus, in positing singularity, heterogeneity as what negates the state power, the biopolitical notion overlooks the fact that this singularity, this heterogeneity might itself be a moment in the reproduction of (state) power. The political subject fighting communalism therefore cannot have recourse to any pregiven particularism, supposedly outside the enumerating, codifying mechanisms and processes of modern state power. Indeed, for Fanon, taking recourse to particularisms is characteristic of the “colonized intellectual” for whom “culture” “is very often nothing but an inventory of particularisms” (2004, 160).

Since the particular (anticolonial, antimodern) singularities that thus appear to be autonomously outside are actually the constitutive outside of the modern state, the political subject must locate itself in a critique of the whole as produced by an abstract logic in which the modern reproduces itself through the apparently autonomous nonmodern domain, where communalism dominates through the hegemony of secularism even as secularism poses itself as turned against communalism. There is nothing to choose between the modern and the nonmodern or between secularism and communalism.

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32. The reference to the biopolitical model is much clearer in Chatterjee (1994b), where he brings in Foucault and his notion of governmentality.

33. Jacques Rancière critiques the biopolitical model of power by pointing out that it “misses the logic of political subjectivisation.” It overlooks the fact that “political subjects are surplus subject” (2004, 305). This critique applies to the Subaltern and antimodernist critique of the modern state.

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