

Notes from the field: Exploring the secular in West Bengal

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LSE's **Fernande Pool** explores alternate understandings of secularism by exploring how the Muslim minority in West Bengal defines and experiences the secular.

November 2012, West Bengal: Faizul, a local Trinamul Congress (TMC) leader, lashes out at the local Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) leader, talking to me in a conspiratorial whisper. "He is a very bad man. He is a communist, right, so he doesn't have a god, he is an atheist. If you don't have a god, you don't have any values either, so how can you do good politics?" "But is there not some separation between politics and religion?" I ask. "Yes, we have that separation as well ... it has become like that," he says, a little flustered. "Yet, doing politics is automatically doing religion [*dharma*]. Politics is taking care of people, isn't it? And that is *dharma*. And everything comes from god above [*uparwallah*], so it wouldn't be right to do politics without a god."



Someone familiar with the political climate in West Bengal may think Faizul's comments simply illustrate the animosity between party leaders that mark Bengal's deeply politicised society. Others more concerned with the relation between religion, politics and society may believe it demonstrates the incompatibility of Islam and secularism, or the [crisis of secularism in India](#). Whereas in the West religion is assumed to be successfully ousted from the public sphere so that states and populations can achieve a consensus concerning core principles that stand apart from any particular faith, the idea persists that for Muslims such a separation between religion and political ideals, and thus the acceptance of universal rights and values, is inconceivable. This would be a prime cause for ideological clashes (think of the latest outrage around the anti-Islam film "The Innocence of Muslims" and the [controversial Newsweek cover](#)).

A similar line of reasoning is discernible in the [debate](#) on the 'crisis of secularism' in India, which was particularly

vital in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots in 2002. The crisis allegedly lies in an irreconcilable discrepancy between the Indian polity, crafted after the image of the western state, and its deeply religious citizenry. The adaptation of a colonial, 'culturally intransferable' ideology with inherent fallacies, inconsistencies in the execution and implementation of the policy, and a traditional population that fails to be rationalised by the modern nation-state, have alternately been blamed for a variety of problems, ranging from unequal treatment and representation of religious groups to ongoing communal violence.

The problem of both debates is that secularism is related to a series of binary oppositions: modernity/tradition, public/private, rationality/affectivity, the West/the Rest. The legacy of the secularisation thesis, part of the modernisation theory, which predicts a marginalisation of religion into the private sphere and a consequential decline of the significance of religion in any modern nation-state, is kept alive in ambiguous folk as well as academic conceptualisations of secularism. As such, the arguments demonstrate a confusion of historical observations with normative positions, and presumed universal values with actual national policies and desired individual dispositions.

My research is an attempt to give an alternate understanding of secularism, by exploring how a religious minority in a secular state defines and experiences the secular. The study is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork amongst Muslims in West Bengal's rural hinterland (commenced in October 2011). India, with its religious plurality and adapted version of secularism, is a productive site to start rethinking the problematic western conceptualisations. To illustrate: how can Faizul's statement help us forge new directions in thinking about secularism and its discontents?

Faizul defies all binary oppositions and sits uneasily on the track from a religious being to a rational, 'disenchanted' citizen. He is a modern subject in many aspects, with a doctor's certificate in his pocket, a fervent belief in the power of education, information technology and democracy, and wishes to marry only when his (political) career is comfortably settled. Although he may say that all values reside in religion, I know from our close interaction over the last year that he is very much concerned with ideals that are not clearly articulated in the ethics of Islam, and his aspirations go way beyond his hope for a peaceful afterlife. He has friends and enemies amongst Hindus, Adivasis and Muslims alike; it depends on party rather than communal affiliation (in fact the concerned CPM leader is a distant relative). Faizul only ritually practices Islam during Ramadan and occasionally attends the Friday prayers, but his belief in Allah is unquestionable. Clearly, our conceptualisations of secularism and the secular need to be formulated differently if we want to understand how Faizul, and the Indian Muslim citizenry at large, position themselves within a contested ethical space.

For the purposes of my research I define secularism as the name of a polity. It is a normative position in that the political ideals (usually enshrined in fundamental rights and constitutional commitments) are placed above religious ideals and practices when they are inconsistent with the former. The relevant substantive values to which a secular polity is committed are the equality of free citizenship, religious liberty and peace through fraternal deliberation between faiths. In a religiously plural society, it follows that a state cannot be entirely neutral towards faiths as practices in one religion may be more inconsistent with the polity's principles than those of another. In the Indian case, the state therefore keeps a 'principled distance' from all religions. This entails that the emphasis is not on a rigorous separation of church and state, such as in the United States or France, but rather on the protection of equal representation and rights of adherents to all religious groups.

The secular, or secularity, refers to the resonance of the abovementioned normative position in citizens, institutions and societies. More than 'anything wordly' and less than an ontology, I think it is most productive to see the secular as a conscious subjectivity in a particular time and space; an ethical disposition suggesting a commitment to certain substantive values—equality, liberty and fraternity between faiths.

But before exploring the values and normativities of my informants in detail, the encounters in my fieldsite lead me to question the presumably related oppositions between the public/private and secularity/religiosity. Taken that Indian secularism is particular in that does not primarily intent to oust religion from the public sphere, it is not surprising that Faizul's quote demonstrates that an absence of religious influence in political work cannot be assumed. Rather the

opposite seems to be true: the secular, as an ethical disposition, is necessarily experienced as intrinsically related to religion, for the space outside religion is considered an ethical void, and an atheist an unethical person by definition. Religion is thus the axiom of the secular, since it offers the origin of all ethics for many of my informants. So it is not at all contradictory for Faizul to act according to religious principles in his political work; it is only logical, or at the very least, he would experience and articulate it as such.

This is of course not the end of the story, merely the beginning of an attempt to understand the complex and ambiguous relations between discourse, practice and dispositions concerning the secular. In the months to come, I will follow up on this post with more ethnographic observations and tentative analyses of the secular in India.

About the Author

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