

Sound the secular bugle

As the new government takes its oath of office, it is necessary to restore to public discourse the passionate advocacy and practice of secularism



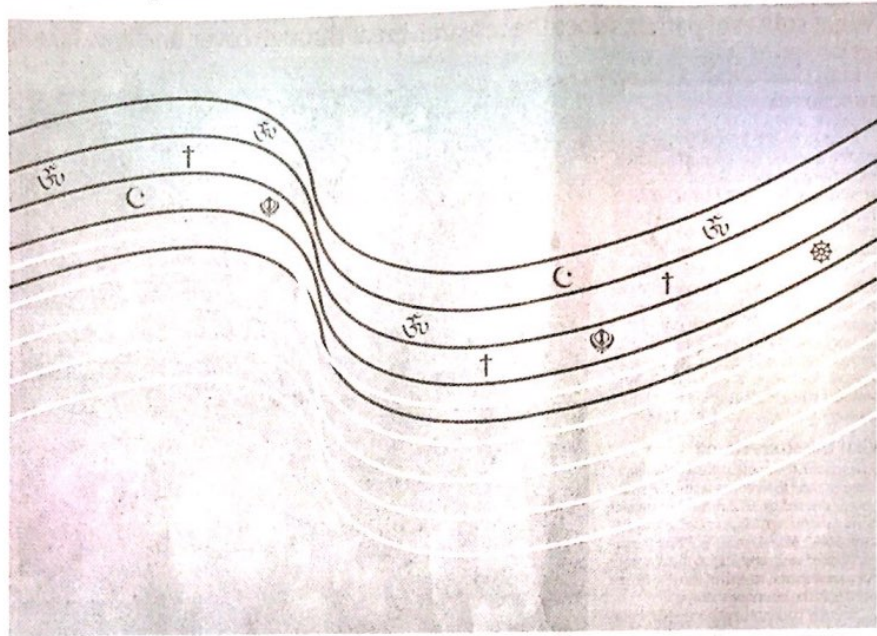
MANI SHANKAR AIYAR

WHILE FOR TACTICAL electoral reasons, the Congress and other Opposition parties chose to eschew the word "secularism" in the election campaign, M K Stalin in Tamil Nadu boldly altered the name of the alliance he was leading in his state from "United Progressive Alliance" (UPA) to "Secular Progressive Alliance". SPA won. UPA lost.

This certainly throws up the challenge as to whether the century-old rift between the forces of Hindutva and the forces that reject Hindutva continues to require the bold and uninhibited advocacy and practice of "secularism", as hitherto understood, or whether the time has come for old-style secularists to throw in the towel and seek political accommodation with the Hindutvawadis. Additionally, but most germane, do Prime Minister Narendra Modi's soothing references to the minorities in his post-election remarks amount to his abandoning the ideological space in order to bridge the divide between him and his opponents? In other words, has Hindutva, as hitherto understood, now embraced the "secularism" of its traditional ideological foes?

Task: Has the blot of the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 been wiped out? Are we resigned to the destruction of the Babri Masjid? Have Modi and his cohort given up their "infinite appetite to quarrel with the past" as journalist-historian Ashutosh put it in his recently published treatise, *Hindu Rashtra*? Has Modi caught in his throat the poison of V D Savarkar's assertion that only those who regard Bharat as their "pitrubhū" (fatherland) and their "punyabhū" (holy land) are true Bharatis? Has Modi repudiated M S Golwalkar who "in the major compilation of what he has said and written about Hindu nationalism, has chapters identifying Muslims and Christians as internal threats to national unity" (Andersen and Damle: *The RSS: A View to the Inside*, p.250)? Is Modi 2.0 going to stamp out "love jihad", "ghar wapsi", the lynching of Muslims by "gau rakshaks"? Is hate speech, not just by kar sevaks, and assorted sadhus and sadhvis, but also by senior BJP office-bearers, central and state ministers and members of legislatures, even governors, going to be reined in through condign punishment of the perpetrators, however high they might rank in the party or the sangh parivar or government? Are quasi militias like Yogi Adityanath's Hindu Yuva Vahini going to be dismantled? Will the saponification of education and encroachment on the autonomy of the independent institutions that keep our democracy vibrant be ended? Are charges of sedition going to be pressed on those regarded by the establishment as "anti-national" because these dissidents recommend policies that are at cross-purposes with the convictions of the ruling dispensation? Is the vicious equating of Muslims with Pakistanis, especially by prominent spokespersons of Hindutva, going to get terminated? If no, what is the meaning of the prime minister's pledge to secure "sabka vishwas"?

A host of knowledgeable commentators have, on the eve of the counting of votes and in its immediate aftermath, expressed their apprehension of India "walking towards electoral authoritarianism" or, to vary the metaphor, as "sliding towards non-theocratic majoritarianism" (Yogendra Yadav, IE May 22). Was or was not the electoral outcome "a



CR Sasikumar

victory for electoral Caesarism... a victory for majoritarianism... a desire to openly marginalise minorities and assert the cultural hegemony of Hindutva... a victory for the politics of fear and hate" (Pratap Bhanu Mehta, IE, May 24)? Did not the verdict amount to India taking "another step towards re-inventing itself as a de facto "ethnic democracy" (where) India continues to be a secular state on paper but, in practice, the minorities are becoming second-class citizens" (Christophe Jaffrelot, IE, May 24)? Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (IE, May 29) has drawn pointed attention to "the ways and means of securing BJP's victory, including instigation of hatred and intolerance of groups of Indian citizens, particularly Muslims"? And, finally, most tellingly, does the assessment of academic Vinay Sitapati of Ashoka University — "there is no Hindu Rashtra down the road from here. It has already arrived" — hold?

Consider the contrasting views of two renowned Indian Muslim intellectuals, Zoya Hasan and Faizan Mustafa, on the one hand, and Ram Madhav, leading RSS intellectual and general secretary of the BJP, on the other. Hasan, professor emerita, JNU, attributes the "Modi landslide" to "Hindutva consolidation and majoritarian triumphalism, powered by a hyper-nationalist agenda" while Mustafa, an eminent jurist serving as the vice-chancellor of the NALSAR University of Law at Hyderabad, drawing attention to the numerous communal crises that nationalist Indian Muslims have survived over the last century and a half, argues that "if a government shows authoritarian tendencies, suppresses dissent and keeps mum on the violations of fundamental freedoms of its citizens" (IE, May 28) that is not an issue for the minorities alone but "should worry the whole country as it will equally affect all citizens not just its minorities". That is true. It underlines the threat that "Hindutva, which is a political ideology and a political project" (Hasan) presents to the Idea of India as manifested in our Constitutional order.

BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav, at this juncture of heady electoral triumph, perhaps unwittingly, reveals the ugly reality of Modi's "ideology in action" which he portrays as an admixture of Bonapartism, citing Napoleon, "What counts is what the people think is true"

This is not the time for pious hopes. It is time to sound again the bugle of secular fundamentalism. We need to revert to the language of Rajiv Gandhi when in the Lok Sabha on May 3, 1989, he began his speech in a debate on communalism with the ringing proclamation, 'A secular India alone is an India that can survive. Perhaps an India that is not secular does not deserve to survive'. That is the ideological idiom and unambiguous language of the secularism espoused by Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, and all their successors till Modi, including Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Each in his or her own way 'discovered' that India was fundamentally a secular nation and reflected in their 'Idea of India'.

and, curiously, considering the sangh parivar's dread of the Red, a Marxist scholar, William Davies, as pronouncing "the leader becomes the truth". Gandhiji, of course, held that "God is Truth and Truth is God".

This is not the time for pious hopes. It is time to sound again the bugle of secular fundamentalism. We need to revert to the language of Rajiv Gandhi when in the Lok Sabha on May 3, 1989, he began his speech in a debate on communalism with the ringing proclamation, "A secular India alone is an India that can survive. Perhaps an India that is not secular does not deserve to survive".

That is the ideological idiom and unambiguous language of the secularism espoused by Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, and all their successors till Modi, including Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Each in his or her own way "discovered" that India was fundamentally a secular nation and reflected in their "Idea of India" the aspiration of Indians through the "trackless centuries" to live in a secular country. Hindutvists have tried to posit an "Idea of Bharat" as against the "Khan Market" gang's "Idea of India". There is only one "Idea of India, that is Bharat" and it is written into the letter and spirit of our Constitution. It constituted the national consensus, especially in the wake of the horrors of Partition and lasted till the rise of Modi. Do these elections signal, in the words of a secular, liberal Pakistani Muslim intellectual, F S Aijazuddin, writing in the *Dawn*, "the fading away of the hieroglyphics of Nehruvian 'secularism'"?

In the final decade of his life, M A Jinnah propagated the utterly un-Indian theory of "two nations". For seven decades, independent India proudly refuted that proposition by remaining a secular nation despite break-away Pakistan becoming a Muslim nation. Under Modi, we are being taken towards the fulfillment of Jinnah's dream. Now, more than ever, as the new government takes its second oath of office, it is necessary to restore to the public discourse the passionate advocacy and practice of "secularism", as understood hitherto. We have lost the secular battle. We must win the secular war.

The writer is a former Union minister

For skillful India