



Call for the secularisation of Indian civil society

Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities

By Achin Vanaik

Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2017, 468 pp., Rs 1200 (HB)

ISBN 978-93-82381-99-0

SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

Achin Vanaik's latest book, *Hindutva Rising*, resumes an examination of themes he initially addressed in a volume published two decades back. The reverberations from an act of vandalism at Ayodhya in 1992 had not yet died, and even if the violence that accompanied the event had abated, its ramifications were still working their way through the political system.

Political competition had altered in character. The comforts of a single-party democracy that India had in its first two decades of independence were a fading memory and the relative certitudes of a democracy where a single party was dominant, also seemed irretrievably lost. A consolidation of forces was underway on one side, under the self-conscious label of "secular politics". On the other was a political formation that claimed to represent the original Indian nationalist spirit that ostensibly had been sullied by a misplaced emphasis on secularism and tolerance of the culturally intolerant.

The underlying social reality was of growing polarisation around multiple axes, of a proliferation of identity claims creating uncontrollable dissonances in the distributive bargains that politics runs on. The circumstances generated a particular dynamic of consolidation and fragmentation, pushing the political centre of gravity to the Right. Every seeming success in halting the onward march of the new strain of extreme nationalism proved a temporary holding operation. Changes in the political realm since then provide the context in which *Communalism Contested* – the title of the precursor volume – was transformed into *Hindutva Rising*.

Vanaik deals extensively with the source of this dynamic of Indian politics, in which "a non-denominational state with substantially secularised laws", though resting on an "insufficiently secular Constitution", "coexists with a civil society in which religious influence is pervasive". In the circumstances, it is an indispensable activity to strengthen the secularity of the state, but the "crucial challenge lies elsewhere, in civil society itself".

This is a call to action that Vanaik addresses at both the theoretical and strategic levels. Recalling his earlier volume, he argues that with scholarly focus being on "the character, practice and ideal of the secular state", due attention was not given to the "secularisation of Indian civil society — its advances and retreats, its possibilities and obstacles, its desirability or undesirability". These threads emerge in the current volume as an urgent call to shift the terrain

of "the longer-term battle to defeat communalisms and fundamentalisms", to the "terrain of civil society, where the democratic process must be stabilised and secularisation deepened".

This is the first of the challenges that Vanaik's book poses the reader: to clear up the thicket of conceptual confusion that surrounds the term 'civil society'. In the volume *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) jointly edited with Sunil Khilnani, Sudipta Kaviraj spoke in an introductory essay of how 'civil society' is a term that somehow seems incapable of surviving without the support of another prop. Civil society as a concept in modern western political theory, Kaviraj remarked, has at least three different senses, all "based on dichotomies or contrasts", variously expressed. In an early version of the term, the opposite number was the 'state of nature'. In a later understanding, it was about 'political society' or more specifically the 'state'. Overlapping with these was the notion of the 'community' against 'society'.

In that spirit of mild scepticism, it could be asked if the secularisation of civil society can be distinguished quite so clearly from the politics of the state. 'Secularisation' as a process has a long genealogy even if the term may have dropped out of common use. It goes back, as Vanaik observes, to the Westphalian Treaty of 1648, when the appropriation of church land by the 'state' began. Monarchies across a patchwork of European territories were consolidating their power within defined boundaries, drawing lines in the map that the Catholic Church disdained in its claim to universal authority. In being a struggle between two specific institutions – the monarchy and the church – secularisation in this phase was not a process that involved 'civil society' in any defined sense.

As a force of historical change, secularisation is better understood when viewed in the context of the French Revolution. In 1795, riding on a rising tide of social radicalism and anticlerical sentiment, the revolutionary regime in France introduced a law which disestablished the Catholic Church and turned over all its properties to the state. This was partially reversed through Napoleon's Concordat of 1801, which restored some of the privileges of the Church. As revolutionary radicalism yielded to the imperative of stability,

Napoleon sought political dividends from a pragmatic policy of accommodation with the Church. It was an attitude that he carried into his mission of conquest in Egypt, often making a public show of deference to the Islamic clergy there.

Another formal separation of the state and church occurred a century later, with the Left in power in France. Under the 1905 Concordat, the concessions to ecclesiastical authority that Napoleon had granted were revoked and most church properties were taken over by the state. The pragmatic spirit though, survived. The 1905 law was in its implementation, always negotiated with the Vatican. Over time, its rigidities considerably abated.

When these complexities of the actual historical record are reckoned with, it would seem a little difficult to identify a clear case of 'religion' in its many doctrinal and practical aspects, being sundered from politics. This is not a case for the immortalisation of religion: a tendency that Vanaik criticises with great coherence and logic. Religion, he argues, does not have any kind of an immutable or irreplaceable role and can be studied as the Marxist tradition has shown, within the broader analytical category of political ideology.

Paradoxically, this may be the precise reason why secularisation is a great deal more complex as a social and political process than Vanaik seems to concede. Consider modern nationalism as an object of study and the reasons why one of its foremost theorists, Anthony D. Smith, believes it is an ideology unlikely to be superseded in the near future. In Smith's arresting description, the 'nation' is the focus of collective loyalty because of its unique property of permitting finite human beings to reconcile their brief presence on the planet with the immortality – by no means assured, but probable – of a wider network of human relationships. It creates a sense of finite human endeavours sustaining a territorial entity with an assured after-life.

Vanaik recognises nationalism as "perhaps the most powerful example of an ideological community, the inheritor of the mantle of kinship loyalty and the religious community of the past". But then, as Edward Shils and others have pointed out, the nation-state is what makes civil society possible. So how far can the secularisation of civil society proceed, when the enveloping ideology is the quasi-religious one of nationalism?

Late modernising societies such as India did not create their nationalist idioms in an ideological contestation with ecclesiastical authority. Religious traditions such as Hinduism were indeed reimagined and reinvented in the creation of elite solidarities under a colonial regime.

Ernest Gellner has identified nationalism as the political ideology and organisational form specific to capitalist industrialisation. Within the Marxist tradition again, there have been influential studies of the impact that capitalist industrialisation has on social ideologies. Vanaik draws attention to these, in his identification of capitalism as "both desacralising and dehumanising". If the former contributed in "significant degree" to secularisation, the latter "meant that capitalism would also create the conditions conducive to newer forms of religiosity".

This raises questions about how far secularisation as a process could run a successful course on capitalist foundations. Vanaik's scepticism, indeed firm rejection of such a possibility, are vividly expressed in the latter chapters of the book, where he argues for a politics of transformation based on radical equality, an exhortation towards re-imagining and renewing struggle towards a socialist future.

Vanaik's strategy centres around building institutions within civil society to resist the onward march of extreme nationalism and communalism. This is strongly reminiscent of the popular theses that capitalism in itself, working through the logic of the market, has no inherent tendency towards creating fair or just outcomes. Fairness and justice rather would be the outcome of the institutions of "countervailing power", that resist the relentless logic of the market, such as unions, consumer organisations and platforms of collective community mobilisation such as, ironically enough, local churches.

Could an analogous strategy be conceived in a situation where institutions of local collective organisation have been severely debilitated by the relentless march of corporate globalisation? Is there any redemption visible from a plunge into the abyss of fascism? Vanaik deals at substantial length and subtlety with this question, though ultimately without any resolution.

Accurate characterisation is necessary for developing a sound strategic response. How applicable is an understanding of fascism drawn from its actual arrival on the world stage in full-blown form in the 1920s and 1930s, to the current and evolving conjuncture? Time's arrow moves in only one direction and the closing of the territorial frontiers for the expansion of capitalism in the early years of the last century led to years of global conflict and the rise of fascism. That effort to establish a new global hegemony failed and led to still more conflict and a reconstitution of capitalism on foundations that are recognisable to this day, though decreasingly, as liberal and democratic.

Is a reconstitution on similar foundations of liberalism likely or even possible, when the technological frontiers of capitalist expansion seem reached? Will that reconstitution happen painlessly without the deeply traumatic and wrenching moment of fascism intervening in a quite distinct fashion, for a distinct conjuncture? The answers, of course, transcend theory and can be forged only in the crucible of political action. ■