

Excerpts from book reviews

The Nation the State & Indian Identity

Eds. Madhusree Dutta, Flavia Agnes, Neera Adarkar

Samya, an imprint of Bhatkal & Sen, 1996

...

It therefore seems that questions regarding our nation, state and identity that seemed to have re-surfaced with a vengeance are somewhat passe; more than the genuine concerns in civil society they only represent the hyped up fears of our intelligentsia. Without holding brief for the outpourings of our intellectual elite (governed more often by shifts in global fashions than concerns from the ground) disregarding these anxieties would be a serious mistake. We may not have turned into a Palestine, a Bangladesh, or even a Sri Lanka. But societal tolerance for minorities, including the secular, has clearly taken a sharp dip and this is changing our world in a manner that can only be described as ugly. The recent fracas over Husain's *Saraswati*, or Gulzar's *Maachis* which led, for the first time to a demand for banning by BJP, Congress and CPI(M) parliamentarians is a pointer to the dark times ahead.

It is thus that this collection of presentations and discussion put together by Majlis, a legal and cultural resource centre in Bombay, merits attention. The attempt by Madhusree Dutta, a filmmaker, Flavia Agnes, a legal rights activist, and Neera Adarkar, a designer and architect, to bring together the views of concerned activist-intellectuals on a range of themes around the grid of secularism / communalism provides glimpses into the thinking of our secular activist community that is not easily available elsewhere.

Harsh Sethi
in Biblio, December 1996

Has nationalism in India been secular? Did communalism really get burnt out in the fires that flowed out of the Partition? Have the progressive movements of this country, the left movement and the new political movements, like the women's movement propagated a secular tradition and helped to develop a non-communal consciousness among its supporters? Were the middle class, who were the bearers and beneficiaries of Nehruvian development, the representatives of secularist ideology and contemporary elites at all non-religious?

And beyond these empirical questions rests a more significant quest:
Is there a secular tradition in India outside the intellectual heritage built through the dialectics of modernism with pre-colonial traditions?
What ideological and philosophical axioms is it embedded in?

How do we reclaim it? These questions have either been answered negatively or we have been left with ambiguous position. The spread and appeal of Hindutva, the support it has received from the populace and the state and the simultaneous realization that today, secularism as a political movement and as an ideology finds itself threatened. This has raised fundamental queries regarding not only the reasons for the popularity of Hindutva, but also its relation with the state as well as the nation and nationalism. We are once again questioning the basics: Who and what constitutes the "Indian Nation" and "Indian Culture"? What nationalist identity entangled with and legitimized through a religious identity? Why is Hindutva so popular among the urban middle class in India today? And how do we retrieve the secular tradition(s) of India?

The book "The Nation, the State, and Indian Identity" brings to us the proceedings of a conference held in Bombay relating some of these issues. The conference participants were activists in NGOs, the left movement including one faction of the Marxist Leninist and some academics. Organised by Majlis, a legal and cultural resource centre, its agenda was to critically reflect on the way communalism and specifically Hindutva was spreading in the country.

Sujata Patel
in The Hindu, October 20, 1996