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Inclusive Imagination: A Comment on Religion and Culture in India

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Abstract
Liberal-secular thought, which relegates religion to the realm of the private, is limited in its ability to create a prejudice-free inter-religious life in India. Therefore, discovering or creating political languages that can appeal to the popular ethical imagination is a moral imperative for our times. Living ethical traditions need to be examined closely for imagining new forms of democratic existence. For instance, cinema, the most powerful source of public narratives in contemporary India, can offer lessons for fashioning a contemporary morality.

Keywords
cinema, communalism, education, ethics, imagination, political languages, religious traditions, social responsibility

The rise of religious intolerance is one of the nightmares of our present. It has narrowed perceptions of inter-religious life and perverted social relations. Norms of political responsibility oblige us to reflect on the dangerous problem of religious fundamentalism or “communalism,” as it is commonly termed in public discourses in India, and imagine ways of overcoming it.

Communalism cannot be checked merely by preventing religious extremists from occupying state power. Even if all the functionaries of the Hindu fundamentalist party and its affiliate cultural associations were to vanish from India, the problem of communalism would still not be solved since inter-religious prejudice is widespread and not directly reducible to political instrumentation. Therefore the electoral success of formally secular political parties, though extremely important, can only go a limited extent in dealing with communalism.
Secularist perspectives on the problem of communalism in India insist, in the manner of liberalism, that religion be confined to the private realm and that the state ensure that all religious communities have the freedom to practice a faith of their choosing. The dominance of secularism over the Indian democratic imagination becomes evident when we recognize that Mahatma Gandhi was the last major political figure in India who spoke about religion and politics in the same breath in the service of creating a non-violent, pluralistic social order. Indeed, the two realms were inseparable for him.¹

How do we address the vast constituency of people who subscribe to religious faith but are not fundamentalist about it? In a multi-religious context, such as India, it is important to create political languages that resonate with the shared moral intuition of different communities. The secularist critique of communalism, which is deeply anchored in concepts of western liberalism, such as individual rights, majority rights, minority rights, to name a few, has limited appeal to the popular ethical imagination in India. To help render illegitimate the fundamentalist desires to defend and protect Hinduism, Indian philosopher Ramachandra Gandhi recalls an episode from the life of Swami Vivekananda, the famous nineteenth-century Hindu religious reformer:

Swami Vivekananda was in Kashmir towards the end of his life but his heart was heavy even in that paradise on earth. Large-hearted though he was, he felt tormented by the fact that successive invaders had desecrated and destroyed countless sacred images of Hinduism’s Gods and Goddesses and pulled down Hindu temples and built mosques over their ruins. Unable to bear the burden of this humiliating testimony of history, Vivekananda poured out his anguish at the feet of the Divine Mother in a Kali temple. “How could you let this happen, Mother, why did you permit this desecration?” he asked despairingly. Swamiji has himself recorded all this, and reports that Kali whispered in his heart the following reply to his question: “What is it to you, Vivekananda, if the invader breaks my images? Do you protect me, or do

¹ The difficulty of defining Hinduism as a “religion” in the Semitic sense of the term has long been noted in scholarly and popular discussions—hence the well-worn cliché: “Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life.” Apart from a formal-legal appreciation of the tenets of secularism, the difficulties of actualizing the separateness of the secular from the religious in the Indian cultural context should become clear.
I protect you?” Only the revelatory authority of that chastisement and consolation can heal the wounds of history from which Hinduism suffers. (10)

This moral tale is likely to strike a chord with the popular political-ethical imagination more effectively than secularist exhortations to keep religion a private issue. As a critique of arrogance and the human temptation to indulge in self-deification, it has an intimate relation with the living moral universes in India.

I do not wish to deny validity to secularism in India. It is indeed important—from the point of administrative even-handedness and equity—that the Indian constitution and the Indian bureaucracy continue to affirm secularism. However, I believe that a secularist imagination should not dominate political sensibilities in the realm of “civil society” institutions in India.

What qualifies as injustice and domination? What constitutes the violation of dignity? Communities grapple with these questions in their everyday social transactions. Indian cinema as a source of rich public narratives, for example, provides rich testimony to the humanistic traditions prevalent in India. The cinematic medium, which comes alive through a wide array of genres like mythologies, historical dramas, family sagas, romance, and modern-day action, has enabled powerful attempts at imagining community life in contemporary India. The language and music in Indian cinema form a popular imaginary that subverts the official rhetoric of community identities and goes beyond denominational religious divides. Suffering, self-sacrifice, self-less action, and other virtues central to the centuries-old devotional (bhakthi) literature in India continue to provide the parameters of ethical conduct in many of the commercially successful films in recent times.

For instance, 

_Mungaru Male_ (literally, “Pre-Monsoon Rains”)—released in 2006, and now the biggest commercial blockbuster in the eighty-year history of Kannada cinema—is ongoing testimony to the cultural value placed on the subordination of individual desires for the sake of the community’s well-being. The film’s narrative, in broad strokes, goes like this: Preetham, a young man, falls in love with Nandini at first sight but remains unaware of her whereabouts. His mother takes him along to visit a friend in another town, whose daughter is about to be married. The daughter is none other than Nandini! Preetham woos her nevertheless. Nandini returns his love following his sincere efforts at winning her heart, and agrees to...
elope with him. Her mother, who learns of these plans, but not the identity of the person who has brought them about, turns to Preetham for help in saving her daughter’s marriage. Her husband also beseeches him to ensure the success of his daughter’s wedding, as his future son-in-law had saved his life during military combat. On learning of her son’s love for Nandini, Preetham’s mother asks him to give it up and not ruin the happiness of her friends’ family. Preetham gives in to the wishes of the elders and takes the only way out: he lies to Nandini that he was never serious about his love and was merely playing all along. A shocked Nandini now decides to marry her fiancé. And Preetham is left alone, with only his rightful conduct to speak for him. Although tacky in its conception, manipulative towards the audience’s emotions, and indifferent to any serious social issue, Mungaru Male nevertheless is a clear endorsement of the long-standing value—common to many religious communities in India—of showing deference to familial authority and, by extension, to the wishes of the larger community.

Yajamana (Master), another hugely popular Kannada film from 2000, upholds the virtues of a joint family authority structure, where each member exercises restraint and responsibility in the interests of the larger family. In Sivaji—The BOSS, the most successful Tamil film of 2007, the hero single-handedly takes on the task of cleaning up the enormous mess created by a corrupt state and a greedy market. The allegory of justice found in this tale of overweening individual heroism is analogous to that found in Indian mythological episodes where God Vishnu reincarnates himself on earth to annul the evil forces on the verge of total triumph. Examples of films like these, which proffer clear moral resolutions, are legion.

In the context of a modern education system that has deracinated large numbers of Indians, “fieldwork” in familiar places becomes essential for creating an inclusive imagination sensitive to both the immediate and the enduring elements of cultural worlds in India. One of the biggest political challenges, I believe, is to discover, and perhaps even create, a language to

2) In the Rig Veda, Yajamana refers to a person who conducts a sacrificial rite (yagna). The film’s title is drawing on both the philosophical and the colloquial senses of the term.
3) The BOSS, we are told in the film, stands for Bachelor of Social Service! Sivaji—The BOSS, the title of the hundredth film of Rajnikanth, the superstar of South Indian cinema, alludes to the actor’s real name: Sivaji Rao Gaekwad. Sivaji (1627–1680) is also the legendary ruler from Maharashtra known for his heroic encounter with Aurangzeb, the powerful Mughal Emperor.
address issues of fundamental ethical importance like non-violence, charitableness, friendship, and generosity whose idiom resonates with the shared moral intuition of different religious communities in India. An integral part of this politics will also be to discredit the nineteenth-century European idea of a nation that presumes a “natural” link between a culture, a people, and a territory. The logical extension of this mode of thinking is a genocidal situation where people seen as “others” have no place in that nation, and eliminating them in one form or another appears the only available option. Imagining forms of dwelling that depart from the genocidal idea of the nation state is a moral imperative for our times.

Work Cited