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INTRODUCTION

Despite the seeming inferiority present in its nomenclature, Indian Political Thought has largely worked itself out in its sociopolitical operation rather than in normative justification and conceptual clarification as found in Western Political Theory. That is why a study of the political in India is always a 'thought' and never the enviable cogent theory of the West. By considering what seems to be a weakness as a strength, in this book, I first take up the task of elaborating upon an Indian intellectual history of a so-called Western conception – secularity. Drawing on recent debates on secularity, I wish to address the problem of understanding histories or narratives of secularity in context. Conceptually, I broadly follow recent studies, which through the framework of 'multiple secularities' challenge the claim of cultural embeddedness and historical specificity of secularity.[1] In this book, I understand secularity to connote a modern epistemological characterisation of the social world wherein religion and secular are distinguished in terms of conceptual distinctions as well as structural or institutional and symbolic forms of differentiation of social spheres.[2] It is also a 'historical category' in so far as such distinctions and differentiations develop as a response to social change brought in by new or unique conditions created by modernity.[3] Second, through the lens of secularity, I also undertake an exercise in an intellectual history of modern India's two leading political leaders – M. K. Gandhi, the leader of India's non-violent nationalism, and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India – whose thought and politics had a defining impact on the 'idea of India' as a multireligious nation-state.[4] This book is thus an intellectual history of both idea(s) and intellectuals, which revisits

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the narrative of secularity in modern India.[5] Lastly, as a self-avowed secular and democratic nation-state,[6] post-colonial India faces challenges of majoritarianism and extremist Hindu nationalism, where we see a simultaneous rejection and appropriation of secularism in the political field.[7] With the popularity and electoral success of right-wing Hindu nationalist groups challenging the 'Gandhi–Nehru tradition'[8] of a nation built on the secular ideal, I revisit dominant narratives of secularity in the twentieth century, as exemplified in *sarva dharma samabhava* (equality of all religions) and unity in diversity, which in Indian politics today have been reduced to empty rhetoric.

This book pursues a question that has confounded explorations in Indian Political Thought which engage with the Gandhi–Nehru tradition of secularity. How can we speak of a unified, single tradition of secularity in modern India, when the leaders who lent their names to this tradition had different, even opposing, ideas of India? In this book, I will argue that two distinctive, indeed contrapuntal, narratives of secularity emerge from the thought and politics of Gandhi and Nehru which influenced post-colonial India's constitutional secularism. While Gandhi's thought and politics elicit, what I call, a counter-narrative of secularity, Nehru's ideas and politics, I maintain, express the ideal of secularity in terms that are simultaneously Indian and modern. Despite this, both Gandhian and Nehruvian narratives nevertheless come together on the question of a secular state in independent India.[9] Both reject the Westphalian model of a confessional state, and this commitment is reflected in rhetorical ideals and nationalist slogans, such as *sarva dharma samabhava* and 'unity in diversity'.[10] In other words, although Gandhian and Nehruvian ideas are grounded in fundamentally different views of the world, it may be argued that on the question of a secular state 'their practical precepts and their historical tendency are miscible'.[11] Thus, the broader aim of the book is to demonstrate that although in modern India influential political ideas have sought both differentiation and integration of social spheres, the Gandhian 'holistic vision' of society does not elicit an adversarial position towards political secularism, and the Nehruvian 'secularist ideal' does not envision the radical secularism of the French *laïcité*, where the secular public sphere is freed from religion.[12] This broader argument needs to be highlighted, given the influence of critical discourses in the study of secularism.[13] Post-colonial studies have rightly shown the inadequacy and normative violence of the language of political modernity of the West in

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non-Western societies.[14] At the same time, arguments about derivativeness of ideas have also sometimes buried the ingenuity that non-Western sociopolitical actors and institutions brought to (seemingly) Western ideas. This problem is acute in studies in secularity because while it is acknowledged that the 'secular age' may be unique to the North Atlantic world,[15] the argument that ideas travel in interconnected histories and lend themselves to new interpretations and challenges gets shrouded by the culturally embedded character of the term 'secular'.[16] As a result, political secularism and secularity in general are denied their socio-historical specificity and therefore their applicability and relevance in non-Western societies.

Today, a historically contextualised study in secularity in India is necessitated by the challenge of religious majoritarianism on a multireligious nation-state and the consistent inability of this state to sustain and safeguard its secular principles in the face of this majoritarian challenge. In securing massive mandates in two successive general elections (2014 and 2019), the right-wing national party, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), has successfully demonstrated its ability to garner votes based on exclusionary politics of Hindutva,[17] that is, on an anti-secular agenda. By locating the 'enemy' within the nation-state, most evidently the minority Muslim population, and by altering the secular character of Indian nationhood,[18] the BJP-led government has disseminated a new idea of India based on majoritarian nationalism. This idea of a 'new India', it must be noted, does not seek to remove but *alter* the meaning of secularism in India. In the current popularity of right-wing politics, in mainstream politics, there is no demand to remove the 'word' secular from the preamble of the Indian constitution. Instead, in a perverse Orwellian doublespeak, the Hindu right's claim is that it is they who are truly secular, such that those who defend minority rights are 'pseudo-secular' because they are supposedly motivated by the politics of minority appeasement and vote-bank politics. To put it differently, it has been argued that a certain 'dominance of nationalist habits of thinking' influenced Indian social science discussions in the twentieth century.[19] This nationalist influence was reflected in the sociopolitical field in the dominance of the Gandhi–Nehru tradition, which asserted the normative and ethical value of equal respect for all religions, and historically justified in the traditional 'tolerant,' 'secular' and 'plural' culture that was claimed to have existed in the pre-colonial past.[20] Given today's political climate, it may be argued

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that this Gandhi–Nehru ideal of secularity based on a multireligious nation stands marginalised, its relevance reduced to a symbolic value.

This study also emerges in the context of a renewed interest in religion (at least since the late 1980s and especially in the West), with its assumption of public-political roles and its new visibility in the public domain, including its discursive and political presence, as well as its visual and media manifestations. In the domain of academia, this has reopened debates about religion's engagement with society and politics found in influential ideas such as Jürgen Habermas's 'post-secular society', Charles Taylor's 'secular age' and José Casanova's 'public religions'.[21] The 'resurgence of religion'[22] in the public domain has prompted debates in the Western world about the viability of secularism as a philosophical ideal and as a set of political prescriptions.[23] This renewed debate on religion's role and relation to modern state and society has also called into question the theory of secularisation as a world-historical and social process of modernisation, which purported a decline of religion and its retreat from the public sphere.[24]

In the Indian context, these renewed academic debates on secularity seem belated for at least two reasons. First, in its transition from a modernising colonial to a post-colonial state, Indian political leaders and thinkers had to perforce engage with questions of religion's relationship to state and society philosophically, discursively and politically. The clearest example of these engagements, contestations and debates can be found in the Constituent Assembly debates (1946–1949), wherein independent India's constitution took shape. In rejecting the Westphalian model of a confessional state, the Indian national movement challenged the claim of the colonisers that India could never be a nation because of its bewildering diversity. In the Constituent Assembly, the members went on to ensure that the British Raj would not be replaced by a 'Hindu Raj'. Second, as opposed to the Western experience, a socio-historical examination of the religion–state–society relationship in modern India demonstrates a longer engagement with inter- and intra-religious diversity, domination and conflict.[25] Although religious diversity became philosophically and politically a central concern in Europe after the Reformation in the eighteenth century, this issue was internal to Christianity, in the sense that it was a concern within the ambit of diversity found within Judeo-Christian traditions.[26] The nature of conflict that arose from such diversity was thus intra-religious or internal to the religious field. It was only in the

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late twentieth century when Islam entered the European subcontinent in a major way, as a stable demographic and political entity, that the nature of religious diversity and conflict took the shape of inter-religious strife.[27] By contrast, in the Indian subcontinent, both inter- and intra-religious diversity was a social and political issue for a much longer period of time. In ancient India, internal religious diversity arose from a schism between Vedic religions and heterodox traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. Inter-religious diversity emerged with the arrival and entrenchment of Islam on the Indian subcontinent during the medieval period. The major presence of Islam as a religion from outside, from the thirteenth century onwards, brought social and political issues of accommodating inter-religious difference.[28] Evidently, in the debates on secularity in India, this history of inter- and intra-religious diversity and conflict has played an influential role in conceiving the relationship between religion, state and society in the modern period. In engaging with the works of Gandhi and Nehru, the assumption in this book is that such influences shaped their narratives of secularity as well. Indeed, Gandhi and Nehru's ideas are often invoked to defend or decry the value of secularism in contemporary India.[29] Furthermore, the influence of both these political figures on Indian society extends beyond the time inhabited by them. Thus, the aim of this book is to explore these narratives of secularity in their sociopolitical context, that is, as they have developed in modern India, as opposed to their place of origin – namely, Euro-America or the West.

THE GANDHI–NEHRU TRADITION

The notion of social imaginary was used by the political philosopher Charles Taylor to express the idea of how a given people imagine their collective social life under conditions of modernity.[30] By calling this book 'the secular imaginary', I wish to convey the idea of a modern social imaginary of Indian sociopolitical life, where 'secular' came to connote both societal tolerance and an impartial secular state.[31] To be sure, this social imaginary, to borrow Ranajit Guha's formulation, may be characterised as a dominance without hegemony constantly at loggerheads with another modern formation – popular sovereignty expressed in democracy.[32] Although Gandhi and Nehru's imprimatur on this tradition may be evident, it nevertheless also developed under

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the influence of other twentieth-century thinkers and politicians in the Indian subcontinent.[33] This Indian social imaginary is also not without shortcomings. To begin with, it was largely elite-driven and often seemed to neglect the centrality of caste (that is, intra-religious difference and inequality) on questions of religious tolerance and equality. In other words, this tradition draws more attention to concerns of intergroup equality and tolerance among religious groups (especially, Hindus, Muslims and Christians), rather than equality within a religious group.[34] Furthermore, conceptually speaking, the Gandhi–Nehru tradition can be confounding in its meaning as it signals dual connotations of tolerance (through notions such as *sarva dharma samabhava*) and secularism (state impartiality). This makes this tradition susceptible to the Hindu right's claim about the generosity and superiority of the Hindu tradition vis-à-vis other religions in the subcontinent visible in its long tradition of tolerance towards other religions and cultures.

However, the Gandhi–Nehru tradition crucially challenges forms of exclusionary ethnonationalist politics, visible in contemporary India, and central to this social imaginary is what Faisal Devji, quoting independent India's first president Rajendra Prasad, identifies as the 'unnational state':

> Instead, therefore, of seeking a solution of the Indian problem in the creation of national states of Hindus and Musalmans, in each of which there will remain a considerable minority of the other community, is it not better to allow India to continue as an unnational state that she is and has been?[35]

This idea of the unnational state, which emerged at a historical moment shrouded by the Western hegemonic conception of the Westphalian (mono-confessional) nation-state, evinced the possibility of a modern (liberal) post-colonial state in the presence of inter-religious plurality.[36] The distinguishing feature of the Gandhi–Nehru tradition is the coupling of the secular ideal, expressed in *sarva dharma samabhava* and 'unity in diversity', with the unnational state. A counterexample of an idea of the unnational state based on anti-secular ideals, which competed against the Gandhi–Nehru tradition, was articulated by the 'cosmopolitan nationalist' Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.[37] Savarkar, whose infamous essay[38] lent its title and influenced the BJP's ideological project of Hindutva, argued that the nation should be based on a common political project rather than on

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ethnicity, religion, culture or language. At the same time, Savarkar also articulated an imagination of the nation, where the minority Muslim community was the chief enemy of India. Given the existence and rejuvenation of such exclusionary nationalist narratives, I believe it is this coupling of the unnational state with the secular ideal of equality of religions which makes the time-worn Gandhi–Nehru tradition especially worthy of a revisit today.

The past three decades have amply demonstrated that modern democracy's majoritarian claims to legitimate right to rule come at the expense of the claims of self-determination of the minorities. In secular non-Western democracies, like India, the deepening of democracy has also meant the rise of popularity of political parties based on majoritarian religious ideologies. In contrast, the multinational state reflected in the Gandhi–Nehru tradition of the twentieth century emerged as a possible post-colonial alternative to the dominant idea of monocultural modern nation-states. Only partially realised (one may even argue imperfectly realised) in the post-colonial Indian constitution, a multinational state based on secular ideals provides a plausible alternative to dilemmas and challenges wrought by modern statecraft and majoritarian democratic politics that seem to have created permanent majorities and minorities in a democracy.[39] The social and religious minorities in India today are more visible and therefore vulnerable to communal and state violence than the 'fuzzy communities' in pre-modern India.[40] This idea of the unnational state, which will appear in various forms in the chapters that discuss the thought and politics of Gandhi and Nehru, along with the ideal of equality of religions makes it possible to talk about a Gandhi–Nehru tradition, despite the fact that these nationalist leaders had very different ideas of India.

NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

In order to shed light on how Gandhi and Nehru's thought and action influenced and shaped the dominant Gandhi–Nehru tradition of secularity in the twentieth century, this book follows a methodology broadly captured by intellectual history. With its focus on sociopolitical ideas and thinkers, in this book I follow a methodology established by studies in intellectual history of political ideas.[41] Where I depart from such studies

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is their excessive emphasis on linguistic contextualism, or 'speech acts'.[42] Here, I take inspiration from Aishwary Kumar's observation with regard to Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste.*[43] Kumar argues that both these nationalist texts were 'equally untimely, addressed to an audience that was yet to be born'.[44] Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, written in 1909, was addressing a nationalist public that was yet to emerge and therefore engaging with epistemic questions, such as 'What is the political?' and 'How does one conduct politics under conditions of colonial domination and subjugation?'[45] His attempts at imbuing new meanings to common concepts, such as *dharma* (religion) and *ahimsa* (non-violence), and use of neologisms, like *satyagraha* (literally, insistence on truth; Gandhi's conceptualisation of passive resistance), cannot simply be understood by focusing on the linguistic conventions of the time. In other words, both his thought and politics may be better understood as an attempt to reinvent the political in early twentieth-century India.

Recent interventions in global intellectual history, which compare 'intellectuals or intellectual practices or ideas and concepts geographically or chronologically',[46] have also influenced this book's methodological commitments. These interventions have found it more constructive to respond to the colonialist lineages of the global by 'recovering resistance to the concept' rather than simply challenging the notion of the global 'as an artefact of imperial domination'.[47] In this book, an attempt is made to demonstrate how, despite a holistic worldview, the Gandhian narrative of the religion–state–society relationship aligns with the ethical commitments of Nehruvian secularism such that one may speak of a 'secular imaginary' expressed in the Gandhi–Nehru tradition. This argument goes much against dominant studies on secularity, mostly emanating from the experiences of Euro-America ('church–state separation') as well as reformist arguments from the Arab world,[48] where arguments of holism necessarily stand opposed to arguments for state secularism because secularism is and can only be understood as the separation of religion and state. Several Indian political thinkers and leaders, however, argued for a secular state which did not envisage separation. Thus, although Gandhi cannot be called a 'secularist', and Nehru was indeed a 'modernist', they both influenced a tradition where the boundaries between what constitutes religion and secular, tradition and modern, Indian and Western were questioned, challenged and reimagined in ways that do not adhere to dominant modular forms.

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The exercise in intellectual history is also refracted through the new developments which have occurred in the field of comparative political theory. For instance, Rochana Bajpai's book *Debating Difference*, which examines group rights in post-colonial India by locating it in political theory discussions on multiculturalism, demonstrates how one may undertake an exercise in comparative political theory without relegating concepts to either derivative discourses or Indian exceptionalism.[49] By addressing India's experience of group-differentiated rights in a wider theoretical context and framework of liberal democracy, Bajpai shows the relevance of Indian experience beyond the ambit of area studies. Indeed, this remains one of the many challenges of the 'underdeveloped branch of comparative political thought' today[50] – to bring to attention non-Western political thought to Western audiences, where the non-West is central to exercises of theory-building and not simply treated as a place of exception or contrastive study. Methods in comparative political theory then seek to achieve the goal of conceptual and discursive comparison in order to decentralise some of the assumptions embedded in the analytical and ethical classificatory systems of Western political theory. Thus, in Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent's opinion, one of the central problems of comparative political thought is 'the epistemological asymmetry that underlines assumptions of discursive equivalence'.[51] To illustrate this point, Freeden and Vincent give the example of 'the frequently asserted dichotomy between secular and religious cultures',[52] to demonstrate the problem of not accounting for the proportionately different weight assigned to various components of a system of ideas in comparative theorisation, as well as the multiplicity of approaches to common ideals, such as religious non-discrimination and state impartiality, also expressed by the ideology of secularism.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In order to engage with the Gandhi–Nehru tradition of secularity in relation to the global intellectual history of secularity, the first chapter opens up a discussion on the so-called Western conception of the secular and its cognates – secularisation, secularism and secularity. The focus of this chapter is both an explanation of the aforementioned concepts and an engagement with the debates on secularism and secularisation,

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with a focus on India. This chapter thus clarifies the use of the family terms related to the secular throughout the rest of the book. In the rest of the following chapters, I frequently refer back to these debates to elaborate upon the narratives of secularity in India. Chapter 2 engages in an intellectual history of Gandhian thought with a focus on Gandhi's *ashram* observances to understand why religion was so central to his sociopolitical life. It seeks to forward an argument about how, despite his holistic vision, Gandhian thought and politics may be seen as compatible with value-based conceptions of liberal secularism. At the same time, the chapter also argues that Gandhian thought provides a counter-narrative to secularisation and secularity. Chapter 3 shifts attention to Gandhian politics to understand how Gandhi applied his religio-moral notions, such as *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* (Gandhi's conception of passive resistance), to politics. In that chapter, I discuss major political movements and issues with which Gandhi was associated to demonstrate how his politics cannot be understood through a liberal framework and language. Instead, I argue that Gandhi's politics can be better captured through, what I call, associationalism. I delineate three different types of associationalism in the sociopolitical field – namely, associational politics, associational activity and associational living – to argue how they create sociopolitical conditions for a society based on the principles of *ahimsa*. Chapter 4 is an intellectual history of Nehru's ideas of secularity. By focusing on Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, I argue that there are two different strands of arguments in his narrative of secularity. I call them the 'nationalist' and 'humanist-universal' arguments of secularity. I argue that these two arguments together give expression to Nehru's idea of secularity that is simultaneously indigenous and universal. In light of the insight gained through Nehruvian secularity, I go on to discuss Nehruvian secularism and distinguish it from the Nehruism of the 1970s and 1980s which emerged under Indira Gandhi's rule. Chapter 5, which is the last chapter in the book, focuses on how Nehru put his political ideals into practice and critically evaluates his engagement with politics both before and after independence. All the chapters together attempt to examine how embedded concepts, like the secular, whose origin is located in a different time and place, are challenged, appropriated and even reconceived by those who may be foreigners to such notions. Thus, the focus in this book is not the origin of concepts but the way political conceptions get articulated in their engagement with historical difference. This study of secularity in its

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