

## THE SECULAR IMAGINARY

Given the popularity and success of the Hindu right in India's electoral politics today, how may one study ostensibly 'Western' concepts and ideas, such as the secular and its family of cognates, like secularism, secularisation and secularity, in non-Western societies without assuming them to be simply derivative or colonial legacies or contrast cases of Western societies? In other words, what is the discourse of secularity in modern India? While recognising that the dominant language of political modernity of Western societies is not easily translatable in non-Western societies, *The Secular Imaginary* elaborates upon an intellectual history of secularity in modern India by focusing on the two most influential political leaders – M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. It is an intellectual history of both idea(s) and intellectuals which sheds light on Indian narratives of secularity – the Gandhian *sarva dharma samabhava*, Nehruvian secularism and 'unity in diversity'. It revisits this dominant narrative of secularity of the twentieth century, which influenced and shaped the imagination of the modern nation-state.

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GANDHI, NEHRU AND  
THE IDEA(S) OF INDIA

SUSHMITA NATH



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## PREFACE

December 2019 was a season of faith's perfection when India saw country-wide protests in response to an Act passed by the parliament which challenged the secular spirit of the Indian constitution.<sup>1</sup> Many of these peaceful protests were accompanied by ritualised reading of the preamble of the Indian constitution, and with this simple act, 'We, the people of India' sought to reaffirm the idea of India as a secular democratic republic. The post-colonial state in India today shows alarming impunity towards individual and minority rights, accompanied by a disregard for and dismissal of norms and values on which the 'idea of India' stands.<sup>2</sup> One such value that has increasingly become marginal and seemingly only of symbolic importance to the state in contemporary India, most visibly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, is secularism. This political ideal, which found expression in the 'Gandhi–Nehru tradition' through popular slogans like 'unity in diversity' and *sarva dharma samabhava* during the Indian national movement and in Nehruvian secularism after independence, from being dominant and indeed one of the defining features of Indian nationhood, stands at the margins today. One may even go as far as to argue that today India is a 'secular republic' only nominally. Right-wing politics today does not simply reject secularism.

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<sup>1</sup> The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow this famous phrase from Sunil Khilnani's book, where he argues that the founding idea of India, based on pluralism and democracy, was not simply a commitment to abstract values but borne out of and rooted in a practical understanding of the compulsions and constraints of Indian politics. Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2012 [1997]).

It has re-defined the secular ideal; it is homogeneous and majoritarian. The Gandhi–Nehru tradition, by contrast, is based on ideals of pluralism and equality. The unfolding crisis in India’s post-colonial history makes it urgent for us to revisit the inclusive ideas and ideals that marked the beginning of this nation. By examining Gandhi and Nehru’s thought and politics on the question of the religion–state–society relationship, this book revisits the Gandhi–Nehru tradition in order to gain moral and political insights that may guide contemporary India’s imperilled secular imaginary. Both the intellectual and political decline of the Gandhi–Nehru tradition of secularity, from a dominant one in the twentieth century to a marginal one in the twenty-first century, are tinged with irony when seen through the lens of intellectual history. On the one hand, late-twentieth-century writings on Gandhi and Nehru are replete with hagiographical accounts. On the other hand, many contemporary writings have moved in a direction where a defence or a critical appraisal of secularism in India is closely tied to a defence or criticism of the personalities of Gandhi and Nehru themselves. In this book, I attempt to move away from such academic proclivities and polemical arguments. By locating the Gandhi–Nehru tradition in the global intellectual history of secularity, in this book, I wish to draw attention to the possibilities as well as the limitations of Gandhian and Nehruvian thought and practice. My hope is that, instead of outright dismissal of ideas and thinkers, we may engage with concepts and ideas in ways that can question and challenge contrived binary narratives, such as those positing religion/tradition/Indian/Gandhian against secular/modern/Western/Nehruvian, and thereby effectively respond to the post-colonial state’s irreverence towards constitutional secularism.

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