



Reading in the absolute night: Re-evaluating secularism in illiberal democracies

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ABSTRACT


In this article, I engage with Manav Ratti's book *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (2013) through three frameworks. First, I consider the book within two historical phases, 1989–2014 and post-2014. I argue that reading Ratti's book through the latter phase has implications for the problem of enchantment in populism. Second, although postsecularism is the central concept in his book, I draw attention to how Ratti, subtly, provides a capacious and emancipatory conception of secularism itself that is particularly productive for the post-2014 phase we inhabit. Third, I turn to Dalit literature as a site where rationalism is evoked in a way that is not reductive and bureaucratic in the Weberian sense. Might Ambedkar-inspired Dalit texts help us rethink rationality more capaciously?

KEYWORDS

Postsecularism; secularism; enchantment; populism; Gandhi; Ambedkar; Dalit literature; Modi; Indian politics; pluralism; rationality

Given the unforgiving rationalism of the modern secular state and the violence of organized religion, Manav Ratti in his book *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (2013) seems to deem the binary of religion versus secularism as having practically failed and conceptually inadequate. *The Postsecular Imagination* (hereafter *PSI*) then is a search for an imagination that attempts to go beyond these binaries and hegemonic categories (such as nationalism and liberalism) so as to reimagine other forms of co-existence and pluralistic lifeworlds. *PSI* opens in a cold New Delhi night in 2008, a night of 'unrelenting cruelty' (Ratti 2013, xvii), and closes with a personification of faith journeying 'into the risks of absolute night' (Ratti 2013, 207). Such dark imagery for a book so interested in resuscitating enchantment in this world. Perhaps this is because, as Ratti repeatedly acknowledges, the project is 'risky' (Ratti 2013, xx) and that it emerges in the 'precarious space of risk' (Ratti 2013, xxii). He decides, 'Yes, it is a risk. But it is one worth taking' (Ratti 2013, xxvi). I was persuaded. That was 2013. Now as an Indian edition of *PSI* is slated to appear, I re-read it more carefully, more aware of the risks. It is a different time, a different context, the night is darker and colder. Is this the time to wager? I affirm the need to take the risk, but with trepidation.

From this space of risk, in what follows I shall make three broad arguments. First, I suggest that the book's first edition appeared in what might be considered the '1989–

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2014 phase' of history, while I currently re-read the book in the 'post-2014 phase' that stands for a decisive shift from the earlier one. This has several implications, but I raise only one here, concerning the problem of enchantment in populism. I think *PSI* has two broad and interrelated concerns. One is the problem of disenchantment and rationality, the other is the problem of pluralism and civil peace. I suggest that perhaps enchantment in populism might be more in tension with pluralism and civil peace than the book admits to. Second, although postsecularism is the central concept in his book, I draw attention to how Ratti, subtly, provides a capacious and emancipatory conception of secularism itself that I find particularly productive for this 'post-2014 phase' we inhabit. Third, I turn to Dalit literature as a site where rationalism is evoked in a way that is not reductive and bureaucratic in the Weberian sense. Might Ambedkar-inspired Dalit texts help us rethink rationality more capaciously?

I

PSI is situated in a post-Cold War global conjuncture of the so-called clash of civilizations. Unlike the Cold War, which was a conflict internal to values of the Enlightenment, Ratti is intervening in debates framed as a clash of values between Enlightenment and its Other. He goes on to dismiss this binary: neither the violence of organized religion as in the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, or religion in the guise of nationalism as in George Bush's American 'war on terror', nor the disenchantment of financialized world systems colonizing all human relations. Instead, Ratti turns to a particularly postcolonial diasporic consciousness of writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, and Allan Sealy as providing a mediating perspective – their 'borderline existence' (Ratti 2013, 26) as opening up the binaries and gesturing toward a possible 'third space' (Ratti 2013, 26) beyond the two. From this diasporic non-place, Ratti observes that the secular state has become elitist, top-down, disconnected from other non-state modes of living together, and intellectually alienated from long traditions of interreligious tolerance. This problematic leads Ratti to the main thrust of his argument, which is the notion of enchantment. Faith, awe, wonder, and transcendence are dimensions of experience that infuse the everyday with values and inspire a brave new imagination journeying into the unknown of the postsecular. Enchantment is a deconstructive approach to texts, a mode of reading for a 'postsecular belief' (Ratti 2013, 18, 161) that Ratti calls 'faith' (Ratti 2013, 18). Faith is a marker of going beyond the secular (disenchanted, rational, hegemonic, western, colonialist) 'without falling prey to the ideology of the secular that defines such belief as irrational, intolerant, and unmodern' (Ratti 2013, 18). The postsecular faith is without dogma, it is open-ended, an attempt to imagine a secularism beyond the secular.

For convenience, I shall mark the situation in which *PSI* was first published as the '1989–2014 phase'. As *PSI* enters the Indian market in this 'post-2014 phase', an epochal shift has occurred in India (but also globally). Now words such as 'secularism' already lie by the wayside. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi has delegitimized the term in popular discourse by linking it with Nehruvian elitism or reducing it to a descriptor of the Congress Party's appeasement of Muslim votes. With the construction, sanctified by the Supreme Court of India, of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya that began in August 2020, secularism has been given its obituary.

But the position of secularism has been replaced not by a return to organized religion, a 'Hindu State' (although the government is ideologically Hindutva), but by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At work is the affective pull of a charismatic populist who came to power stoking fear and hatred of Muslims. Unlike Donald Trump who was elected by a minority of voters, the support Modi enjoys is unprecedented. An *India Today* 'Mood of the Nation' survey from August 2020 showed that a staggering 78% of people found Mr Modi's performance 'outstanding or good', while 17% considered it 'average', and only 5% termed it 'poor' (ThePrint Team 2020). A 95% support for a man defies easy explanation. This is despite his utter failure in handling the Covid crisis, severe economic contraction, decline in infant health and mortality, massive unemployment, and a geopolitical defeat in a border dispute with China. What then explains this support is not reason or the rational choice of self-interested voters, but faith. Mr. Modi is aware of this, which explains his newly adorned beard and long hair, fashioning himself as an ascetic warrior saint, a spiritual guru to the flailing nation. Awe and enchantment are at play here.

One needs to be careful here in not falling back on the binary of reason versus faith and yet be clear-eyed in diagnosing the problem. I believe Ratti is correct to criticize dogma, organized religion, the nation-state, and the reification of rationality and instrumental reason, but in doing so lies the risk of elevating enchantment in all its openness, its courageous journey beyond and into the unknown. One hardly needs to state that enchantment also involves the demonic excess; in its mystery, awe, and rapture, there is the violent, orgiastic, esoteric, and secretive. For Jacques Derrida, reading Czech philosopher Jan Patočka in *The Gift of Death*, this demonic enchantment is also the site of non-responsibility or even irresponsibility unhinged from the injunction of religion (Derrida 2008). There is a reason that Mahatma Gandhi, whom Ratti gives as an example of the postsecular, combined his practices of enchantment – which involved mobilizing millions into a frenzy of anticolonial struggle – with stoic discipline, an insistence upon duty and conscience as a limit. There is a similar contrast (not tension or contradiction) in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992): Almsy's enchantment with the desert as magical, his passion for Katharine as self-destructive, a certain madness in exploring and escaping into the ineffable mystery of this space beyond borders and nations. Compare this to Hana's sense of vocation as a nurse, a professional calling full of tenderness, care, and responsibility. What then is the relationship between enchantment (capable even of the grotesque) and limits, ethics, pluralism (not reason, rationality, borders)? Perhaps secularism in its thin conception, as institutional design, offers a humbler 'check and balance' to the courageous yearnings signified by the prefix 'post'?

Extending these lines of enquiry, I want to briefly compare two discourses of dissent against this Modi devotion. First, on the occasion of the *Bhumi Pujan* ('ceremonial commemoration') of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya (August 2020), Pratap Bhanu Mehta wrote an opinion in which, instead of making a liberal constitutionalist argument against the temple's construction, he penned a personal epistolary confession to *his* Ram: 'Ram. You can be properly addressed just with that name. Any proclamation announcing your triumph, like Jai Shree Ram, diminishes you. The necessity of proclaiming your victory implies you could have been defeated' (Mehta 2020). The column is meant to bring out his intimate relationship with the divine, a deeper and unmediated spirituality

that for Mehta is full of awe and adoration. He uses this rhetoric of personalized devotion as a device to criticize the vulgar political appropriation of Ram for electoral gains. Shashi Tharoor's book *Why I Am a Hindu* (2018) similarly takes on a non-secularist position of a practicing Hindu saving Hinduism from political Hindutva. Contrast this to the response of the Muslims in Shaheen Bagh protesting the government's Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 that seeks to disenfranchise Muslim voters by denying them citizenship. The Shaheen Bagh protestors reacted to this attack not by embracing Islamic symbolism but by appealing to liberalism, the Indian constitution, and most importantly, secularism (Akyol and Aiyar 2020). For the protestors, secularism and the constitution are not alienated elite discourses. Nor are the Muslim protestors invoking an indigenous traditional discourse of tolerance. Rather, this is constitutionalist, rights-based, Ambedkarite discourse, appropriated and instrumentalized by the oppressed. If the oppressed do not speak the language of secular constitutionalism, it is not because they do not understand it – they are denied it by the powers that be (see De 2018). Given this, Mehta's and Tharoor's writings *prima facie* seem like 'postsecularist' reactions to Modi, but hiding underneath is an upper-caste liberal nostalgia for an idealized Nehruvian era (see Shil 2020). To what extent are the Shaheen Bagh protestors secular or postsecular?

II

Reading *PSI* has been an immensely valuable experience because it yields multiple interpretations. Its arguments are open-ended, non-dogmatic, and enabling. When I first read *PSI* in the '1989–2014 phase', I was interested in Ratti's critique of secularism in its coincidence with the Enlightenment tradition, overweeningly rational and bureaucratic – a secularism allied with spiritless materialism, an ideology of progressivism that is indifferent to the suffering it causes. In my earlier review, I lamented that the Indian Supreme Court's secularism is unable to recognize the religious practices of minorities, and that there was a deep alienation between the worlds of secular rationality and a religiously inflected, non-state sociality (Saikumar 2015). The postsecular seemed to emerge as romantic non-reason, an attitude of faithless faith, a hope in the irrationality of miracles.

Re-reading now, in this post-2014 phase, I find in Ratti another secularism, both more implicit and more capacious. This is a secularism that detranscendentalizes categories such as reason, nation, and religion by turning its attention to this world, here and now, and finds in it the enchantment and awe one otherwise yearns for in their transcendental forms. This is what I read Ratti as implying when he argues for 'secular alternatives to secularism' (Ratti 2013, xx). This is Ratti taking back secularism from its Enlightenment co-optation that merely inverted secularism as the other of religion, consecrating 'reason' as the new God. This other secularism is not a European concept but what Sudipta Kaviraj calls a 'lateral elaboration' (Cooper et al. 2017, 164). This elaboration is not an emulation of a western concept but, through figures such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Tagore, a transformation. According to Kaviraj, 'Western political theory already exists in a *double* form – inside and outside the West' (Cooper et al. 2017, 165; emphasis original).

Enchantment and awe, in the case of Michael Ondaatje, are sought by secularizing religion through an aestheticism. Ondaatje's aestheticism is informed by his admiration of the crucifix for its formal beauty rather than as a symbol of sacrifice and indebtedness, his admiration of the beauty of hymns chanted in the Golden Temple, and his admiration of church frescoes and Christian tableaus. To quote Ratti:

Ondaatje will also invoke the aesthetics of the church and of the Golden Temple of the Sikhs but he will *secularize* such institutions by emptying them of their religious meaning. He will also aestheticize them, and such aestheticization is *itself* a secularizing move, 'mere aesthetics.' *But beauty becomes a kind of religion, provoking religion-like feelings* such as awe and enchantment.

(Ratti 2013, 53) (last emphases added)

This raises a question. Beauty can be secularized such that it can provoke awe and enchantment, but why does such enchantment have to be a 'religion-like feeling'? Enchantment could be confused with religion-like feelings, understandably, but it is very much a secular 'this-worldly' move. Perhaps Ondaatje is secularizing the beauty of the Golden Temple in a way that its enchantment neither is lost nor invokes religion? Perhaps he is deepening secularism rather than overcoming it? Ondaatje is resurrecting a beauty that is human, ordinary, finite. The frescoes are beautiful because one day they will vanish due to the passage of time. I experience love and beauty precisely because of the frailty and finitude of my experience (this line of thought is inspired by Hägglund 2019). The connection my family had to our dog was genuinely interspecies, a soul to soul connection, and this too is enchantment. As he aged, this enchantment was strengthened by the imminence of his death rather than a possibility of a transcendent 'dog heaven'. In Ratti's readings of Michael Ondaatje, Allan Sealy, Shauna Singh Baldwin, and others, what I learn is that the world is enchanting *because* it is secular (this-worldly, frail, and finite). What *PSI* therefore does, and this is something critics such as Graham Huggan (2010) miss, is that it deepens and nuances 'secularism' rather than simply state that secularism needs to be overcome. But for this same reason, the prefix 'post' suggests an impatient urge to go 'beyond' secularism such that the latter's capaciousness and enchantments might not be noticed by readers.

A third short comment: Dr B. R. Ambedkar is a complicated figure whose place in *PSI* might, I speculate, be ambiguous. This is because Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism is a postsecular move, but it is a postsecularism that is in search of a new rationality. When Dalit writers suggest that Dalit literature often contains a Dalit *chetna* (Dalit consciousness), what they partly mean is an intellectual orientation that, in its anti-caste agenda, is rigorously rationalist and against superstitious beliefs. This rationalism is traced back not only to Ambedkar, Periyar, and Jyotiba Phule, but also to a grand literary tradition involving the likes of Kabir, Basavanna, and others. Ironically, this invocation of rationalism is full of enchantment: a kind of enchantment that comes from a yearning for emancipation. Maybe rationality of this kind is not always the other of enchantment?

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