Book Review

Sohal, Amar. *The Muslim Secular: Parity and the Politics of India's Partition.* 352pp. Oxford University Press 2023.

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There is no denying that our political climate today is largely shaped by the rise of right-wing nationalist movements. Although the contemporary popularity of populism may have germinated in the "Western" world, it has now well and truly become a global phenomenon. In India the ascendancy of the BJP, a party whose exclusionary policies towards Muslims and Christians is grounded in their belief that Hindus have always been a single distinct people who for centuries have been oppressed by foreign Muslim and British rulers, is just one example of how right-wing nationalism has spread outside of Europe and America. This Hindutva notion of cultural nationalism on which the BJP's political rhetoric is based demonstrates that one of populism's notable themes, namely the struggle of a virtuous people (or the Hindu majority) seeking to protect their cultural values and economic capital from dangerous "outsiders" (which most often appear as the Muslim, but also Christian, minority) indexes how the development of populist movements and the authoritarian majorities that they have produced, threaten the integrity of postcolonial democracies like India and the secular/liberal institutions on which they were founded.

In light of these contemporary trends Amar Sohal's The Muslim Secular: Parity and the Politics of India's Partition is both a timely intervention and an important reminder that the current predicament in which postcolonial states like India are engulfed is a far cry from the emancipatory projects that its anticolonial leaders outlined during the struggle for independence. Much has been written about the ideas of India or Pakistan's best-known founding fathers such as M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Here Sohal turns to some of the lesser examined Muslim voices of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Sheikh Abdullah, and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and their nuanced visions of what a postcolonial South Asia should look like. In turning to members of the political minority as the intellectual conduit through which to narrate a lesser heard story about the Indian anticolonial movement Sohal posits that secularism, the ideology which he argues resides at the heart of their philosophies, was imagined by all three as a means through which to maintain parity, or a sense of equivalence which could not be achieved in India through the arithmatic of representative democracy.

The book examines these utopian visions and the ways in which these political theorists conjured unique answers to the problems which the imposition of the European model of representative democracy created in the subcontinent. According to Sohal, while the colonial state and the Orientalist knowledge it was built upon rearranged "colonial subjects into near-watertight identitarian boxes of race and religion…[and] established two seemingly immovable political categories in the imperial world: majority and minority", those associated with the Muslim secular conceived of liberation as "belonging to an inclusive, supra-majority, in which [they] coexist with the religious majority." (p. 1) Many modern histories of South Asia which have viewed India's struggle for freedom through the telos of partition have often reproduced the colonial argument that Indian identities have been historically fixed. In their view Muslims have always existed as a minority, and hence emancipation for the minority can only be conceived of within the parameters of national liberation. Challenging this account Sohal demonstrates how liberalism and democracy were being reimagined in innovative ways by the Muslim minority. Thinking about nationalism through the lens of the majority perpetuates this othering of the "minority" and repurposes them as an obstacle that needs to be overcome (either through assimilation or elimination) in order to achieve sovereignty. As Sohal contends, shifting the condition of sovereignty to the minority transforms the majority not into "an antagonistic entity that is set against it" but as

part of one's self, a self "to which it [the minority] can indeed belong and which it can uniquely complete without necessarily foregoing its distinct individuality." (p. 2) It is this "third way" that Sohal seeks to chart in his book as a means of demonstrating how political thinkers like Azad, Abdullah and Khan sought to build a secular foundation for the Indian nation.

Recently the topic of secularism has emerged as a notable theme in the historical and political scholarship of modern India. This is not surprising, given the centrality of secularism in the framing of the Indian constitution. As Shabnum Tejani has argued in Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, many Indian nationalists were attracted to secularism because of their aspiration to "knit together and keep intact a national community premised on the freedom of religion". (Tejani 2008) And to do so meant to vanquish the "ascriptive identities of sect and caste that had dictated the outlook and aspirations of so many [Indians] for so long", identities which were seen as being also responsible for the communal violence that had fragmented India and shredded its social fabric during the first half of the twentieth century. (Tejani 2008) Much discussion has ensued about what the nature of this Indian secularism should be. Rajeev Bargava, for example, has asked why secularism in India has to completely disavow religion rather than build a notion of secularism that is premised on spiritual and ethical elements that are universal to India's many faiths or, in other words, a "spiritualised humanist secularism". (Bhargava 1995) Yet as Tejani reminds us, what the emergence of these contrasting theorisations demonstrate is that secularism is not a universal category. Rather its meaning is inextricably linked to the social, historical and political context within which it emerges. (Tejani 2008)

It is precisely the different ways in which Azad, Abdullah and Khan thought of the relationship between religion and politics, and how these respective dynamics were reproduced in their readings of Indian history and culture that Sohal so brilliantly analyses. While each of their secular visions were responding to their localised contexts, they all advocated for a united India. Azad, the first of Sohal's triumvirate and the one to which he devotes the greatest attention, argued that a "new India" had grown since the arrival of Muslims from Central Asia eleven hundred years before. During this period Hindu and Muslim cultures mixed and intermingled, forming a uniquely Indian culture. So deep was the extent of this cultural interdependence for Azad that even though one could perhaps trace the origins of a language or custom to a single source (Hindu or Muslim), to separate them from one another meant "destroying the integrity of modern culture in India altogether." (p. 38) For Sohal it was Azad's ability to fashion a notion of secularism where the lines between the religious and profane had been blurred through which the latter created a conception of a shared national culture which still retained the integrity of Islam and Hinduism.

The division between the conception of "secularism as national culture" and the "domain of belief" is something that is imperative for the notion of the Muslim secular. (p. 42) In fact it was precisely by divorcing religion from the notion of a shared Indianness and not making belonging to a common faith a prerequisite for national belonging that Congress Muslims like Azad were able to project India as a shared space. By grounding the distinction between religion and the secular (rather than majority or minority, Hindu or Muslim) as the primary ideological axis on which an independent India should come into being, Azad reimagined India as a culturally and geographically shared space to which all its religious communities could stake an equal claim. In other words, Indian-ness does not come to exist through religious fusion, something akin to the notion of secularism that Bhargava suggests. Rather it is by retaining the autonomy of religion from culture that a national culture comes to define India.

Writing from the province of Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah, Sohal's second protagonist, also prioritised unity between Hindus and Muslims as the anchor of a free India. However, unlike Azad, Abdullah's reading of the secular was heavily informed by his Kashmiri heritage as he sought to "integrate the regional or ethnolinguistic categories of India into his political theory" of the secular. Although Abdullah drew on history to demonstrate the ways in which Kashmir, as a peripheral region, has constantly been oppressed and exploited by the Indian centre since the time of the Mughals, he also employed this history to highlight the shared relationship of Kashmir with Hindustan, how the former was connected to latter "through ages of social, cultural and economic intercourse." (p. 178) Whereas Azad conceived of secularism as a way to replace Hindu majoritarianism with shared secular culture, Abdullah espoused secularism for its ability to protect the minority Kashmiri fragment from being overpowered by the majority Hindustani nation. Drawing on "history and geography to connect Kashmiris to other Indians," Abdullah repurposed secularism as a way of ensuring that an independent India would allow some degree of political autonomy for regions like Kashmir so they could retain the individuality of their cultures. (p. 176)

Ghaffar Khan, the third of Sohal's trifecta, also believed that all Indians possessed a shared common nationality. This unity was born from almost two centuries of oppression by the British and their joint resistance against imperial rule. Albeit sharing with Azad and Abdullah the desire for a collective India, Ghaffar Khan's secular project was "shaped primarily by contemporary ethics." (p. 232) Where Azad and Abdullah often took recourse to history

in order to source their ideas of a national consciousness, Khan's "heightened presentism" meant that the means through which Indians needed to come together was by engaging in ethical acts of "national love". (p. 232)

While Sohal offers a thoughtful interpretation of Azad, Abdullah and Khan among many other political thinkers in India both pre- and post-partition, one of the work's shortcomings is that it fails to situate the concept of the "Muslim secular" within the larger body of scholarship on secularism, and even Muslim secularism, in South Asia. As mentioned earlier Shabnum Tejani, for example, has demonstrated how the concept of secularism was a historically and regionally contingent notion, a concept that meant different things to different communities at different moments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In The Language of Secular Islam: Urdu Nationalism and Colonial India Kavita Datla has argued that the process of secularism played a significant role in shaping how Muslim intellectuals associated with Hyderabad's Osmania University were rendering traditional knowledge nonreligious. Secularism was pivotal in shaping the ways in which those associated with Osmania were rethinking the Islamic tradition in a manner that was also productive for the forging of an Indian citizenship. (Datla 2013) Most recently, Julia Stephens's Governing Islam: Law Empire and Secularism in South Asia has examined how the colonial state and the secular forms of governance it introduced through the institution of law created a "series of parallel binaries that pitted family against economy, religion against reason, and community against the state." (Stephens 2018) Stephens analyses how Muslims, in their attempts to subvert imperial sovereignty and reclaim the autonomy of Islamic law, had to contend with the "profoundly transformative, and deeply coercive, colonial legal project." (Stephens 2018)

Sohal's own theorisation of the "Muslim secular" would benefit greatly from engaging with Stephens's argument. For example, when elaborating on his concept of an "interactive nationalism" Sohal contends that this brand of nationalism drew both on secular and religious traditions. This line of argumentation builds on Stephens's argument which posits that the concepts of "religion" and the "secular" exist in a "dynamic tension". For Sohal as well as Stephens, religion and the secular inform each other, and exist not as fixed categories but mutually intelligible and informative ones. Alongside tracing the links between his account of secularism and Stephens's, Sohal would also benefit by examining the nature of the relationship between his principal actors (together with their ideas) and the colonial state and the way in the colonial state was pushing its own secular ideology. Despite these limitations The Muslim Secular is a provocative study of the ways in which Indians were refashioning modern concepts like secularism in their own ways and employing them to imagine other possible futures.

References:

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