The politics of hate vs politics of secularism

Secularism’s grammar was not adopted to eschew religion; it was a pathway to peace. Today, we have shunned this principle, favouring instead a competitive religious politics that coexists with hate.

The sun sets on 2021 against the backdrop of hate, prejudice and communal poison that is spreading fast and wide.

Last week, we bore witness to the ugly spectacle of the three-day-long ‘Dharam Sansad’ in Haridwar. Uttarakhand, where participants rode on hate and prejudice as a call for genocide against Muslims. As Christmas celebrations began, the anti-Christian mob found its way into schools, on to streets, desecrating statues of Christ and burning effigies of Santa Claus, even as a Member of Parliament gave a clarion call for preventing religious conversion and making reconversion to Hinduism a priority.

At a time when week after week, the mob can disrupt Friday prayers, when lynching in the name of sacrilege is met with political silence, when Aurangzeb is invoked in political speeches, the events of last week cannot be dismissed as isolated or voices of the fringe. Hate and communal poison are today part and parcel of our everyday public life. They are inextricably linked with the project of Hindutva and the current political response to this project. And in their repeated invocation, our democracy lies severely diminished.

The events of 2021 exposed many fault lines that threaten our democracy. In those dark days of April and May as hapless citizens searched for oxygen and hospital beds, the limits of our health system and associated socioeconomic inequities were laid bare. The farm protests and the eventual repeal of laws made visible deep fractures in our economic policymaking, the repeated incidents of violence — recall the brutal killings of farmer protesters at Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh, the young man protesting an eviction drive in Assam, countless citizens being jailed without bail — served as a reminder of the near breakdown of the rule of law and shrunk spaces for dissent. But it is the deliberate stirring of hate and legitimisation of communal prejudice that is the most dangerous — because it attacks the foundation of our democracy and worse, we do not have a political vocabulary to counter it.

Regular readers will forgive me for repeating an argument I have made often in these pages, but the present moment makes this repetition urgent and necessary. The only antidote to hate, prejudice and communal poison is a politics of genuine secularism. It has become commonplace in our public discourse to argue that the appropriate political response to this brand of Hindutva and the hate and prejudice it has unleashed is to steer clear of the discourse on secularism.

The churning underway in the public square, the argument goes, requires a politics steeped in a grammar of religiosity. This is the “mood” of the nation — epitomised by the Kashi extravaganza — and the only viable political alternative is to embrace religion, which the argument goes was the problem with “Western secularism” that sought to actively eschew religion from our public life. And so, you have a political discourse that is actively competing to prove its “religious” (largely Hindu) credentials — the Aam Aadmi Party’s tirth yatra is among its most prominent of electoral promises this season, the Congress is busy defining what a good “Hindu” is. None of this is about promoting hate and communalism, it is argued, rather it is about developing a viable political alternative to the two binary forces that mark our political life: A politics of hate versus a discredited politics of secularism that is detached from religion.

The problem with this argument and the brand of competitive religious politics it supports is that it lacks a grammar for articulating and putting into practice norms to govern a tolerant, plural society. Consequently, when it confronts hate, prejudice, and violence, it has neither the moral authority nor the capacity to negotiate across social bases to create a counter-narrative. We have witnessed this time and again, most recently in the political response to the lynching in a Punjab gurdwara, where the Congress sought to itself in a bind, failing to condemn the lynching and arguing instead for stronger blasphemy laws. It also ensures that the political response to hate is muted at best. It is instructive that political outrage against the Haridwar hate fest is limited to press conferences and Twitter posts, rather than street mobilisation.

There is no argument that India’s experiment with secularism was flawed. But it is important to remember that our founding fathers adopted the principles of secularism in response to the increasing politicisation of religion and widespread communal disharmony that culminated in Partition. The grammar of secularism — all religions are equal in the eyes of the law and that the State shall not propagate any particular religion — was not adopted to eschew religion. Rather, it was a pathway to peace. The challenge for modern India was to demonstrate the possibilities of the practice of secularism that remained true to this ethos. On this metric of democracy, India has repeatedly failed.

But what makes the present moment all the more dangerous is that we have eschewed this principle altogether, favouring instead a competitive religious politics that seems to coexist comfortably with hate and prejudice. Can Indian democracy thrive without the secular ethos? This is the question India must answer for itself in 2022.

Yamini Aiyar is president and chief executive, Centre for Policy Research. The views expressed are personal.