



In The First Person

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A much-read, much-used copy of the *Gita* on my father's bed-side table was like any other book. Loved for just being a book of profound import and used for a meditative practice. My father was not a temple-goer, and abhorred ritual and rite as his early life taught him that unequal power resided in the people who performed them. I am, for good or bad, my father's daughter.

Growing up, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were just fascinating tales of courage and deceit, greed and generosity, lust and devotion, ambition and sacrifice. The *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales*, *Chanakya* and *Chandragupta Maurya*, *Nala Damayanti* and *Akbar and Birbal* were devoured through great illustrations in my large collection of *Amar Chitra Kathas*. Growing up in Godrej Colony with the greatest diversity in my classroom at Udayachal High School led to a complete assumption of celebrating the different-ness of customs and cultures. I did not know any other way. In fact until I began to sink deeper and more meaningfully into my work at EdelGive, I had not realised the cocoon that I had grown up in. I never viewed Shah Rukh Khan's numerous portrayals as Rahul as Hindu; just Indian. Mohammed Rafi's famous Man Tarpat Hari Darshan ko Aaj set to music by Naushad was just that: a great devotional song reposing faith and trust in a higher power. The lens of religion or caste or even class did not colour my view of the world.

That is why the discourse today of re-visiting what it means to be secular leaves me in a state of great pain and anguish. How did this come to pass?



Md. Rafi and Naushad | Image Courtesy: Flickr.com

I began learning yoga about 15 years ago and was introduced to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (believed to be written in approximately 200 BCE) by my teacher, Jehangir Palkhivala (you will have guessed from his name that he is Parsi). The sutras need to be taught as while they may seem simple on literal translation, they are profound and lay down the principles of living should one choose to *"achieve stillness, or attain comfortable control of the oscillations of the mind to be in a state of yoga"* (Sutra 2/Chapter 1).

I don't profess any academic or expert knowledge on the subject at all but I know this: Nowhere in the Sutras is God (as we now interpret the word) or even Hindu mentioned. Patanjali's reference to a higher power is in the form of Isvara, loosely translated as the Lord. In fact, some Sanskrit scholars believe that Patanjali is not theistic (enough).

For me, the most important aspects of their Sutras is what they teach about ourselves and how we function as human beings. And these teachings are therefore universal.

I grew up in an India where the opening page of every text-book contained the National Pledge¹. The words Divide and Rule served as a warning, lest we forgot the mantra of our colonial masters, and Unity in Diversity were salutary and celebratory of a country so differentiated by caste, religion and language that India was never thought to survive as a nation².

Among the many things that have kept the idea of India alive and intact, it is the Constitution³ of India that has played the most important, central role. We chose the word SECULAR in our Constitution, because the leaders of the time refused to base nationhood on a single religion or language.

Jawaharlal Nehru was particularly insistent that India not become a “Hindu” Pakistan. Indeed, the stark difference between the two Pakistans, East and West as originally created, bears testimony to the path countries take when their foundation is based on a religious or alternately a secular identity. Pakistan chose to be an Islamic Republic, while Bangladesh chose to be a secular republic after toying with being Islamic (when it was East Pakistan and later in 1977, when President Zia ur Rehman and President H M Ershad under martial law administrations began the re-Islamisation of Bangladesh). In 1996, Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister and reverted Bangladesh to being a secular state as it was at its birth in 1971. On almost all indicators, from GDP growth, per capita income, life expectancy, female labour participation, population growth rate and infant mortality to the global hunger index, the two countries have had diametrically different outcomes since independence in 1947. Shekhar Gupta’s Cut the Clutter⁴ highlights the remarkably different trajectories traversed by these two nations.

1. The National Pledge of India

India is my country and all Indians are my brothers and sisters.
I love my country and I am proud of its rich and varied heritage.
I shall always strive to be worthy of it.
I shall give respect to my parents, teachers and all elders and treat everyone with courtesy.
To my country and my people, I pledge my devotion. In their well-being and prosperity alone lies my happiness.

2. **Winston Churchill**, predicted that after the British left the subcontinent, “India will fall back quite rapidly through the centuries into the barbarism and privations of the Middle Ages”. He also thought it likely that “an army of white janissaries, officered if necessary, from Germany, will be hired to secure the armed ascendancy of the Hindu”. Extract from [The New Statesman](#)

3. The Preamble of India

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;
IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this 26th day of November 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION

4. **Cut the Clutter** - CAB-NRC, India-Bangladesh ties & breaking popular myths about our friendliest neighbor – [The Print](#), 12th December 2019

In a sense, was secularism the environment I grew up in or was it pluralism? A strict definition of secularism holds that religious ideas have absolutely no place in the public arena. Any appeal to the divine is ruled out. So the idea of secularism is way beyond distinguishing the institutions of religion from those of governance; instead, the religious and the political should be entirely separate spheres.

However, I don't remember there being a studied absence of religion in our public lives. In a country like India, given the multiplicity of religions (secularism was originally termed separation of church and state), wouldn't pluralism be a more realistic (and aspired for) state of being? In fact, if we are to be truly secular, how does one explain the oath of public office?⁵

Pluralism welcomes all to the public arena: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis and atheists alike. Pluralism believes that asking believers to take off their faiths the instant they enter the public arena is practically impossible and religion can perhaps never be fully separated from politics. However, the fact that one's religious principles will have broader philosophical and political implications does not allow one to offer only religious arguments on behalf of a given policy; indeed there is a benefit to emphasizing secular political arguments. But that does not mean that references to broader religious ideals are illegitimate⁶. Perhaps the best way to describe this difference is in this story about Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister and Dr. Rajendra Prasad, independent India's first President, from Ramachandra Guha's excellent book, *India after Gandhi*.

[Nehru's and Prasad's] differences came to a head in the spring of 1951 when the president [Rajendra Prasad] was asked to inaugurate the newly restored Somnath temple in Gujarat... When the President of India chose to dignify the Temple's consecration with his presence, Nehru was appalled. He wrote to Prasad asking him not to participate... Prasad disregarded the advice and went to Somnath...

5. **Oath of Public Office:** I (name), do swear in the name of God (or solemnly affirm) that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as by law established, and that I will faithfully discharge the duty upon which I am about to enter.

6. **Pluralism versus Sectarian Secularism**, Fred Bauer, [National Review](#), 2nd April 2015

... The prime minister [Nehru] thought that public officials should never publicly associate with faiths and shrines. The president [Prasad], on the other hand, believed that it should be equally and publicly respectful of all. Although he was a Hindu, said Prasad at Somnath, "I respect all religions and on occasion visit a church, a mosque, a dargah and a gurdwara."

Secularism sometimes forces us to obscure parts of our history simply to maintain a narrow secular vision of India. Leaving aside the large swathes of religious and political thought that enveloped this country from the beginning of known history robs us of the experience of the rich culture and heritage and political and other beliefs that led to the evolution of India as we know it today. Many of our founding fathers came from all faiths and believed in divine power. Much needed social reform came from both atheists and believers.

My idea of pluralism comes from the celebration of the magnificent diversity that this country offers and the principles of tolerance of, and respect for all that to me are basic human principles. Today, there is a massive movement towards diversity and inclusion in all corporations and institutions with definitive research showing the significant positive impact that this has on their financial performance balanced decision-making. Why then not extend it whole-heartedly to the social and political sphere of our existence?

Of the 196 verses of the Yoga Sutras, the one referred to earlier is the centre-piece to being a good human being. But Patanjali also says that should one choose to "achieve stillness, or attain comfortable control of, the oscillations of the mind to be in a state of yoga", one should be aware of the five afflictions that prevent living in clarity. In Chapter 11, sutra 3, he says:

"Avidya asmita raga dvesha abhinivesah panca klesah"

“Avidya” is ignorance or actively being in a state of not seeing the true nature of reality, not just the ignorance of not knowing a fact. “Asmita” is egoism, an attachment to the ego. Having a healthy functioning ego is not the problem; unexamined attachment to its products is definitely one. “Raga” is attachment or strong desire and “dvesha” is strong aversion. Both are a form of attachment, one positive, the other negative. A gourmand loves food, while an anorexic avoids it. But both are attached to it, one in acquiring and the other in avoiding it. And “abhinivesah” is fear of death which interferes with our ability to remain in the present. I also interpret it as a single-minded focus on creating a legacy as a way of clinging to life; without reference to the inescapable impermanence of everything around us.

I did not intend to dive into interpreting a deep text, but aren't these five kleshas all around us today? Won't a realisation of this and a purposeful understanding of our rich, magnificent collective history enable us to enjoy this absolute wonder that is India? Won't moving away from the bite-sized intelligence of Twitter and WhatsApp to reading the numerous rich texts of our heritage lead to less avidya, raga and dvesha? Won't a concerted understanding of our birth as a nation and its foresight-laden Constitution be a pathway to build greater tolerance and indeed embrace our remarkable and unique diversity?

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