

Why Indian Communists Need to Soften Their Stance on Religion

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Not challenging BJP's instrumental use of Hinduism for political appeal and dismissing all forms of religion as obscurantism is the political equivalent of leaving an open goal.

Indian secularism, Ashis Nandy [wrote](#), is not the opposite of the word sacred but that of “ethnocentrism, xenophobia and fanaticism”. Unlike its Western meaning that stresses the strict separation of religion from politics, the dominant version of secularism in India prescribed equal respect for all religions, while being equidistant from all of them.

This peculiarly Indian version of secularism has, right from the days of the anti-colonial struggle, commanded the allegiance of all major secular parties, with the notable exception of just one group – the Communists. Communist parties, chief among them the CPI(M), still swear by the standard Western ideal of an oppositional stance towards religion – which they hold to be an indispensable part of progressive politics.

Recent events, however, suggest a tentative flirtation with religion even in this redoubt of secularism, at a time when the party is facing an increasingly powerful electoral challenge from the Hindu right. This seemingly cautious softening towards religion is, however, already generating a backlash from the more ideologically steadfast members of the movement. A [photo](#) of CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury holding a ritual earthen pot on his head, which went viral on social media, provided the latest flashpoint to this growing debate.

It turned out that Yechury had kept the pot on his head at the request of a group of local women celebrating the Bonalu festival, but hadn't himself participated in the celebration. However, that did not stop many Marxists, especially in the academia, from publicly musing whether this amounted to a growing willingness to compromise with 'obscurantism'.

This hypersensitive antipathy towards any religious symbolism was not surprising, given that it has always characterised Indian Marxism, especially in its academic form. Marxist historian Perry Anderson provocatively had laid the [blame](#) for the Partition at Mahatma Gandhi's door. Anderson condemned Gandhi for having 'injected a massive dose of religion-mythology, symbology, theology – into the national movement', which by increasing the 'Hindu' appeal of the Congress and alienating Muslims from it, sowed the seeds of Partition.

More recently, Marxist political scientist Achin Vanaik pressed this idea that any accommodation with religious symbolism or values, far from providing a shield against extremist Hindutva, is its very facilitator. In his [book](#) *Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities*, Prof Vanaik traces the rise of Hindu nationalism and the failure of Indian secularism to counter it to the unwillingness of mainstream liberal politics to distance itself, in rhetoric and symbolism, from Hinduism, particularly in its 'civilisational' form. This accommodation of Hinduism in mainstream politics, right from the

freedom struggle under Mahatma Gandhi, made it easier for Hindutva to make inroads into the Indian psyche.

The position of the wider Marxist community has always been, as Prof Vanaik argued, that the only antidote to Hindu communalism is not merely strict secularism in the political terrain but the long-term secularisation of the civil society. Secularisation here refers to a process of a steady decline in a society of religious values, religious identity and religious influence that accompanies the coming of modernity.

Therefore, Prof Vanaik remarked that “the longer-term battle to defeat communalisms and fundamentalisms must be waged on the terrain of civil society, where the democratic process must be stabilised and secularisation deepened”.

The resilience of religion

However, it is unclear whether this process of secularisation has deepened even in the states where the Communist party has enjoyed long spells in power. Both West Bengal and Kerala remain deeply religious states, where the vast majority still identifies as religious and public celebrations of festivals draw as much fervour as anywhere else in India.

Across the world, Marxists have underestimated the resilience of religion, which they maintain is ‘false consciousness’ that is bound to wither away in time under the irresistible influence of progress. In the former Soviet Union and Communist-controlled Eastern Europe, where, for many decades, religion was sought to be eradicated from public life and gradually from ‘life itself’, the spectacular resurgence of religion tells a different story. In a recent Pew [survey](#) of 18 ex-Communist countries, huge majorities professed their faith in Christianity, from 71% in Russia to 87% in Poland and 88% in Serbia. This profession of faith was also [linked](#) with loyalty to the nation and socially conservative views.

This has, in turn, contributed to the stunning [rise](#) of right-wing parties across Central and Eastern Europe, where right wing regimes espouse a home-grown, ‘Christian’ variant of democracy taking power in Poland and Hungary. In Russia, Putin leads an authoritarian regime in tacit [alliance](#) with the Orthodox Church.

This experience lends more credence to Nandy’s [explanation](#) of militant Hindutva rather than the one provided by the Marxists. In a secular regime, when religion is isolated from creative interactions with politics, without the nudges towards progressivism that politics can provide, religion remains frozen in time. And when it finally finds expression in public life, it tends to emerge in a more regressive or militant form. Moreover, the experience of the former Soviet sphere also severely undercuts the Marxist faith in a top down secularisation process that will act as a bulwark against the reactionary right.

In a deeply religious country, where people derive many of their beliefs and systems of meaning from religion, it is challenging to practise politics in a completely secular idiom. While the Communists have shown that political success can be achieved in such a country despite an approach that is explicitly oppositional to public religion, it is now also displaying the limits to that approach.

Reality check

The Communist party could perhaps afford to distance itself from religion as long as its main electoral opponents were other professedly secular parties, such as the Congress and the TMC. Partly because their electoral base is now being challenged by an increasingly powerful BJP, from

Bengal to Kerala to Tripura, they are slowly waking up to the need of a visible acceptance of religion.

In contrast to the party's central leadership and their intellectual supporters, the state and local leaderships of the party, more grounded in popular sensibilities, have already started their steady march towards this detente with religion.

In 2016, the Communist Party state secretariat in Bengal [announced](#) that "Durga Puja will no longer be off limits, comrades can be part of organising committees". While many CPM leaders had in the past, in a behind the scenes and discreet manner, been involved in organising Durga Puja and Kali Puja, this official public affirmation of these activities was unprecedented and in line with a larger softening stance on religious festivals. Out of power, the Communists realised that restricting themselves to running of leftist book stores near the *pandals* was perhaps not as effective a means of mass contact and gaining popular appeal.

Last year, when many CPM leaders in Kolkata sent their [greetings](#) on the festivals of Rath Yatra and Eid, with one MLA going so far as attending them, the more radical CPI(ML) attacked the party of selling its principles for electoral popularity, even accusing the party of being "no longer Communist".

In Kerala, the party has increasingly lent its [support](#) to the performances of *theyyam*, a ritual where mostly Dalit dancing godmen are worshipped before upper castes for exorcising evil spirits. While the party explains its participation in these performances, which are decked with red flags and party banners, in terms of fighting injustice and feudalism, many view it as part of efforts to reconcile itself with its largely Hindu cadre and electoral base.

In fact, a senior CPI(M) minister [admitted](#) so much to a newspaper on condition of anonymity. "We have decided to do a lot of things on religion. We have noticed that the BJP and the RSS have increasingly occupied themselves on the religious and cultural front, while we refused to engage with those spaces in the past for ideological reasons," the minister explained.

In politics, successful parties learn from their opponents and adapt their messages to changing circumstances. The idea is to neuter the strong points of your opponents so that politics is always fought on your terms.

In fact, one of the primary reasons for the success of the BJP has been its mastery of this political tactic. While the content of its platform has always been the defence of privilege and the ushering in of majoritarian rule, it expresses itself in the idiom of the left - of grievance and rights.

The BJP fought the political movements of subaltern castes by adapting to their vocabulary of historical victimhood and oppression. It was not the Dalits and other shudras, but Hindus as a whole that had been historically oppressed by a common oppressor. In fact, that is the reason the intensification of the Ram Janambhoomi agitation coincided precisely with the height of the Mandal agitation.

It fought the Congress not by forswearing the ideals of secularism and liberalism, but by discrediting the Congress claim to it, while simultaneously staking their claim to a truer version of these ideals. It has largely succeeded in its attempt, at least in the popular imagination, in conflating the prevailing versions of secularism with minority pandering and liberalism with self-serving elitism.

At the same time, with remarkable audacity, it argued that these ideals of secularism and liberalism were completely compatible with their ideals of a Hindu Rashtra, citing the inherently embracing and pluralistic nature of Hinduism. Even when it indulges in thinly veiled communalism, it

increasingly does so in the modern language of secular nationalism, of uniform civil code and women's rights. Similarly, it defends caste privilege in the name of moving beyond caste, drawing on the notions of modernity and formal equality.

Just as the BJP did not abandon the political terrain of secularism, but fiercely contested its meaning and provided an alternative conception of it, so do the political formations resisting the BJP need to do with Hinduism.

An awakening

The Communists are increasingly realising what other secular parties already know – that providing the Hindu right an uncontested terrain over religion and culture is fraught with political dangers. Not countering the BJP on the authenticity and legitimacy they draw from Hinduism, not challenging their instrumental use of Hinduism for political appeal, not providing the people with an alternate conception of Hinduism that is egalitarian and progressive; while dismissing all forms of religion as obscurantism to be shunned is the political equivalent of leaving an open goal. All the BJP needs to do to score is to show up. Nothing angers the Hindu right as much as being challenged on their political monopoly over Hinduism. That is in fact the reason why Gandhi was the single-most hated figure for the BJP during the Independence struggle, not the secular Nehru.

At a time when the Hindu right has become the dominant political formation of India, and as religion has become a major axis of political contestation, the Communist party can ill afford not to establish a *modus vivendi* with religion. It does not mean it has to fully embrace religion, not least its superstitious and regressive aspects. It just needs to find a way to be comfortable in the presence of religion, to accept its role and importance to society, and to drop its adamant ideological opposition to it. Not getting scandalized whenever its leaders get snapped with a religious symbol would be a start.

To be sure, it is still far-fetched to expect the Communist movement to suddenly break from the severe constraints of its ideology and almost a century of history. Yet extraordinary times can beget extraordinary transformations. In the recent Turkish elections, the [militantly](#) secularist Republican People's party (CHP) of Mustafa Kemal, in an unprecedented move chose as its Presidential candidate, Muharrem Ince, a 'pious' man who [prayed](#) regularly and was unabashed about his religiosity, in an effort to connect with religious voters despite their secular politics.

In order to stop the relentless winning streak of the Islamist party of Erdogan, the ultra-secularist CHP which once drew laws on [how](#) Turks dressed, wrote and thought in order to establish secularism, even [banning](#) the use of the 'fez' cap outside mosques, and which until very recently did not [allow](#) hijab wearing women to become party members, now had a leader who promised to [build](#) the world's largest university for the study of Islam. When attacked by Erdogan as a party that will destroy mosques if they came to power, Ince [replied](#) that he does not even go into the streets without absolution. As it happened, Ince ran a spirited, [better](#) than expected campaign which came within a [whisker](#) of pulling an upset by pushing Erdogan to a presidential election run-off.

The reason the CPI(M) holds the distinction of having the only elected communist government in the world is down to its remarkable ability to adapt. The CPI(M) adapted extraordinarily to a multiparty democracy where the dominant mode of production is capitalism. After decades of downplaying caste in its analysis and practice, it moved towards a fuller understanding of caste and its linkages with class, and reconciled identity politics within its larger political project of emancipation.

Now, it needs to make another leap, perhaps the most challenging of all – the need to pragmatically partake in the opium of the masses.

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