The Mandate of the Divine:

Rethinking Religiosity in Modern South Asian Political Poetry and Songs

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Introduction

The narrative of "post-secularism" has gained considerable attention in Western academic discourse, suggesting that religion, once relegated to the private sphere by modernization, is re-asserting its influence in public life. This framework, however, often proceeds from an implicit assumption: that a thoroughgoing process of secularization has already run its course. Such a linear trajectory, moving from a religious past to a secular[1] present and now a "post-secular" future, struggles to accommodate the complex historical experiences of regions outside the West.

This paper takes modern South Asia as a critical site for re-examining this narrative. The South Asian experience with modernity—shaped by colonialism, anti-colonial resistance, nationalism, and partition—did not follow the classical European model of secularization. As scholars like T.N. Madan (1987) and Ashis Nandy (1988) have argued, the Western conception of secularism as the strict privatization of faith found limited purchase. Religion, far from retreating, remained a vital and persistent force in shaping public identity, social ethics, and political mobilization throughout the 20th century.

This study seeks to explore this persistent public role of religion through a specific cultural lens: the political poetry and songs of modern South Asia. It will examine how "religiosity"—encompassing not just formal doctrine but also religious symbolism, mystical metaphors, and ethical frameworks—functioned as an integral component of modern political thought. Poetry and song served as a crucial contact zone, a medium where political ideologies were articulated and mass sentiments were forged.

This paper will explore the possibility that, far from being an archaic remnant, religiosity provided a foundational vocabulary for articulating anti-colonial aspirations, nationalist ideals, and visions of social justice. While explicitly secularist movements, such as those associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)[2], certainly existed, their relationship with the broader culture remains a subject of inquiry. It is noteworthy that even prominent leftist poets often drew heavily on the established metaphors of Sufi mysticism or improvised metaphors of syncretism to convey revolutionary political messages. This suggests the deep permeation of a religious cultural idiom, one that even secular politics had to engage with.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the South Asian case does not represent a "return" to religion (a post-secular turn), but rather illuminates a different, "non-secular" trajectory of modernity. By analyzing the religious dimensions of political poetry, this study aims to contribute to the theoretical debate on secularism, offering a perspective grounded in the cultural history of modern South Asia.

This paper analyses poems written in Bengali, Hindi and Urdu in order to reach an understanding of South Asian political poetry as a whole. However, it is important to note that while these three languages cover a large part of the Indian subcontinent, it cannot be claimed that they represent the entire region. It is also important to note that while the literatures of Bengali, Urdu and Hindi developed in close contact to each other during the colonial era, they also had distinct characteristics and went through different trajectories throughout the twentieth century. While Bengali literature took advantage of modern institutions in the capital city of Calcutta and led the modern turn in Indian literatures, it also successfully avoided division of the language, its script and its literature on the basis of religion. Hindi and Urdu on the other hand grew apart from each other, not only on the basis of the scripts or the vocabulary of the formal register, but also on the basis of which literary traditions they drew from[3]. Yet, the common ground of anti-colonial nationalism bound these literatures together in the colonial era, and scholars like Sisir Kumar Das have argued that a history of "Indian literature" can be written as long as the approach is comparative, and does not reduce it to "a sum total of all literatures produced in Indian languages". (Das 2005, 8)

The paper will first provide an overview of the inherently political nature of modern South Asian literature, before focusing on the specific role and influence of political poetry and song. It will then proceed to a closer analysis of the forms of religiosity found within some notable examples of modern south Asian political poems and songs, in Bengali, Hindi and Urdu. Finally, it will conclude by reflecting on what this analysis reveals about the limits of classical secularization theory and the unique relationship between religion and politics in the region.

The political nature of modern South Asian literatures

The emergence of modern literature in South Asia during the 19th and 20th centuries was not a purely aesthetic or cultural phenomenon. Its development was, from the outset, deeply and inextricably linked to the political and social transformations of the colonial era. The very forms, languages, and thematic concerns of this new literary production were forged in the crucible of anti-colonial sentiment, social reform movements, and the nascent project of nation-building. This section will argue that modern South Asian literatures—particularly in the newly standardized and modernized languages such as Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu—are "political" in their very constitution, a fact that makes the study of their most overtly political genres, like poetry and song, essential for understanding the period.

The colonial presence was a catalyst in this process in two contradictory ways. First, the introduction of the printing press and the establishment of institutions like Fort William College in

Calcutta facilitated the standardization of vernacular grammars and scripts, often for missionary or administrative ends (Cohn 1996). This technology of "print-capitalism," as Benedict Anderson (1991) famously argued, allowed for the creation of "imagined communities" by enabling a shared, simultaneous experience of language across vast territories. For the first time, a Bengali- or Hindi-reading public could conceive of itself as a coherent linguistic and cultural entity, distinct from both the colonial rulers and other regional groups.

Second, the colonial encounter created the central ideological problematic that modern literature sought to address. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) has argued, anti-colonial nationalism had to operate in two domains. In the "material" sphere of politics and the economy, it accepted the challenge of Western modernity. But in the "spiritual" or "inner" domain of culture, it sought to assert its own sovereignty and difference. Literature became the primary field for defining and defending this inner, autonomous cultural space. Thus, the new literary forms imported from the West, most notably the novel, were immediately repurposed to serve this nationalist project. They became vehicles for excavating a "glorious" pre-colonial past, critiquing contemporary social ills (often as a prelude to national regeneration), and articulating a new, modern identity for the nation-to-be (Mukherjee 2001).

The choice of language itself became a profoundly political act. While a small elite wrote in English, the decision to write literary prose and poetry in the vernaculars was a conscious move to cultivate a "people's" language, one that could both express an authentic national spirit and mobilize a populace beyond the narrow confines of the colonial-educated elite.

The Bengali literary field provides the earliest and perhaps most potent example. The "Bengali Renaissance" of the 19th century was characterized by figures like Raja Rammohun Roy, whose prose writings were inseparable from his campaigns for social and religious reform. This link between literary production and politico-cultural assertion culminated in the work of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. His historical novels, most famously Anandamath (1882), were explicit nationalist allegories. The novel's inclusion of the poem "Vande Mataram" ("I Bow to Thee, Mother"), which seamlessly blends patriotic fervor with the deification of the motherland as the goddess Durga, illustrates the foundational fusion of politics, literature, and religiosity that this paper seeks to explore.

A similar, though more complex, story unfolded in the Hindi-Urdu belt. The development of modern Hindi and Urdu literatures was tragically, and politically, defined by their divergence from a shared "Khari Boli" linguistic base. As Christopher King (1999) has meticulously documented, the late 19th century saw concerted, politically motivated campaigns to champion two separate written standards. The movement for a Sanskritized Hindi written in the Devanagari script was championed as the authentic language of the Hindu community, while a Perso-Arabic Urdu was increasingly associated with Muslim cultural and political identity.

The "father" of modern Hindi literature, Bhartendu Harishchandra, wrote essays and plays (such as the 1875 Bharat Durdasha, or "The Plight of India") that were overt critiques of colonial misrule and laments for a perceived national decline. In the Urdu sphere, figures like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan promoted prose as a tool for Muslim social reform and modernization within the Aligarh Movement. This was soon followed by poets like Muhammad Iqbal, who radically transformed the classical

ghazal and masnavi forms into vehicles for powerful philosophical and political commentary, first on pan-Indian nationalism and later on a distinct vision of Muslim self-assertion (Pritchett 1994). For both Harishchandra and Iqbal, literature was not an end in itself; it was a means of community definition and political awakening.

This inherently political character of literature was formalized in the 20th century with the rise of literary movements possessing explicit political manifestos. The most significant of these was the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), established in 1936. With leading figures like Premchand (Hindi-Urdu), Faiz Ahmed Faiz (Urdu), Sajjad Zaheer (Urdu), and Mulk Raj Anand (English), the PWA had a clear anti-colonial, anti-fascist, and socialist agenda. It explicitly called on writers to abandon aestheticism and use their work to depict social reality and champion the cause of the oppressed (Ali and Rashed 1977). The PWA's dominance over the mid-century literary scene demonstrates that, for the most avowedly secularist writers, political commitment was considered the primary duty of the artist.

It would be therefore safe to say that several of the modern South Asian literatures was born political. It was shaped by the technological conditions of print, driven by the ideological imperatives of anti-colonial nationalism, and defined by its role in social reform and community formation. Whether in the religious-nationalist allegories of Bankim, the linguistic politics of the Hindi-Urdu divide, or the socialist manifestos of the PWA, literature was the principal terrain upon which the modern nation was debated and imagined. It is therefore logical to turn to this literature's most concentrated and populist political genre—poetry and song—to understand the specific vocabularies that gave this nationalism its potent affective power.

The role and influence of political songs and poetry

While novels and prose essays were crucial for developing the intellectual and ideological arguments of nationalism, it was poetry—and particularly poetry set to music—that transported these ideas from elite salons to the streets, fields, and factories, transforming them into a shared, affective experience for a mass audience. The influence of this genre is not incidental; it stems from the fundamental properties of poetry itself and its unique capacity to act as a social agent.

The power of political song is a universal and ancient phenomenon, not exclusive to modern South Asia. From the satirical choruses of Greek comedy that critiqued Athenian leaders to the peasant grievances embedded in China's Shijing (Book of Odes), poetry and song have long served as vehicles for social commentary and political critique. In the context of mass political movements, this function becomes even more pronounced. The hymns of Martin Luther, for instance, demonstrate how simple, vernacular song can unite a movement and challenge entrenched authority. Similarly, the devotional songs of the Bhakti movement in medieval India, such as those by Kabir, used a vernacular religious idiom to mount a radical challenge to the social and religious hierarchy of the caste system. This global history underscores that poetry is a foundational human strategy for articulating

collective sentiment and engaging with power.

To understand how poetry performs this function, it is useful to turn to the Romantic theorist Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose "A Defence of Poetry" (1904) offers a durable framework for poetry's social purpose. For Shelley, poetry's primary agency is cognitive and ethical: it "awakens and enlarges the mind itself" by expanding the imagination. This imaginative faculty is, in his view, the very "great secret of morals," which he defines as an empathetic identification with others. When society privileges the "calculating principle"—rigid logic or utility—at the expense of this "poetical faculty," it produces social ills like inequality, despite material progress. Poets, therefore, are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" not because they write laws, but because they cultivate the imaginative and empathetic sensibility upon which a just society must be founded. In a political movement like the anti-colonial struggle, which requires individuals to imagine a collective "nation" and feel solidarity with strangers, this cultivation of empathy is a profoundly political act.

However, this cognitive function is activated and amplified by poetry's form. Unlike prose, poetry is structured by meter, rhythm, and rhyme—formal properties that are not mere ornamentation but powerful mnemonic technologies. This structure makes language far more memorable and repeatable. When a poem is set to music, its mnemonic power is magnified, embedding complex ideas and sentiments deep within collective memory. National anthems, religious hymns, and political slogans are nearly always poetic in form for this precise reason. This "repeatability" allows a poem or song to distill the core arguments of a movement into a portable, durable, and easily transmissible "mantra." It is a form of communication that can sustain a political feeling and strengthen collective resolve long after a prose pamphlet has been discarded.

This synthesis of cognitive, formal, and performative power gives political poetry a unique social agency. Drawing from J.L. Austin's foundational work on speech-act theory, the utterance of a political poem is not merely descriptive; it is a performative event (Austin 2009). The power of such language lies not just in what it says but in what it does in the moment of its utterance — its "illocutionary force." To sing a banned song, as was common during the Indian freedom struggle, is not just to describe defiance; it is the act of defiance itself. Furthermore, in the framework of Kenneth Burke, literature functions as "symbolic action" (Burke 2013). A political song is a strategic, symbolic response to a social situation. It is "equipment for living" under colonial rule; it is a symbolic tool that helps a community name its oppression, process its anxieties, and articulate its aspirations (Burke 1974).

Finally, this perspective aligns with the New Historicist concept of the "circulation of social energy" (Greenblatt 1988). A powerful political song absorbs the disparate anxieties, hopes, and resentments of a populace and re-injects them back into the culture, but now in a focused, coherent, and repeatable form. It does not simply "reflect" the social world but is an active agent in negotiating and shaping public opinion. In the context of the South Asian freedom struggle, a movement that relied on mass mobilization and a deep affective commitment, political poetry and song were therefore not a decorative accompaniment. They were a primary engine of the movement itself, functioning as mnemonics for ideology, performative acts of protest, and the very "equipment for living" for

a people engaged in the project of self-rule. It is in this genre, where politics and popular affect converge, that we can most clearly trace the vocabularies that gave the movement its meaning—and, as this paper will now explore, that vocabulary was often saturated with religiosity.

Religiosity in political songs/poems in South Asia

An examination of 20th-century South Asian political poetry reveals that religiosity was not a monolithic force. It was, rather, a rich and flexible vocabulary, a deep discursive field from which poets drew to articulate a wide spectrum of political positions. Far from a simple binary of "religious" versus "secular," this poetry demonstrates a complex entanglement, with religious idioms being deployed for transcendent, nationalist, revolutionary, and pluralist ends. This section analyzes these various, and often contradictory, articulations of religiosity, demonstrating that the political imagination of the era remained deeply engaged with religious thought.

【The Transcendent Divine as National Guide】

A significant stream of political poetry framed the nation's aspirations within a transcendent religious framework. In this model, the divine—often a universal, monotheistic God—exists as an entity separate from and superior to the nation. The nation, in turn, is a community of subjects who appeal to this divine authority for guidance, strength, and deliverance.

Rabindranath Tagore, steeped in the monotheistic and universalist ethos of the Brahmo Samaj, is a principal exponent of this view. His Bengali poem "Bharata Bhagya Bidhata," a part of which would become India's national anthem, is structured as a hymn to a singular, eternal "Dispenser of India's Destiny" (Bhagya Vidhata).

Jana-gana-mana-adhinayaka, jaya he	Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people,
Bharata-bhagya-vidhata	Dispenser of India's destiny.
Panjaba-Sindha-Gujrata-Maharata-	Thy name rouses the hearts of Punjab, Sindhu,
Dravida-Utkala-Vanga	Gujarat and Maratha,
Vindhya-Himachala-Yamuna-Ganga	Of the Dravid, and Orissa and Bengal.
Uchhala-Jaladhi-taranga	
Tava shubha name jage	It echoes in the hills of the Vindhyas and Himalayas,
Tava shubha ashisha mage	mingles in the music of the
Gave tava jaya-gatha	Jamuna and Ganga and is chanted by
Jana-gana-mangala-dayaka jaya he	The waves of the Indian sea.
Bharata-bhagya-vidhata.	They pray for thy blessings and sing thy praise.

Jaya he! Jaya he! Jaya he!	Victory, Victory, Victory to Thee[4].
Jaya jaya jaya, jaya he!	(Nussbaum 2009, 13)

The poet envisions this entity as the "ruler of the minds of all people," guiding the nation's journey through history. The nation is the subject of divine providence, not the object of worship itself. Similarly, in Gitanjali (Song 35), the poem "Chitto Jetha Bhoyshunno" ("Where the Mind is Without Fear") is a direct prayer to "my Father" (pitoh), asking God to "hit mercilessly" (nirdoye aghat kori) and "let my country awake" into a "heaven of freedom." The political goal—a free, rational, and united nation—is imagined as a state of being granted by a divine hand.

This structure is also central to Muhammad Iqbal's Urdu poem "Lab Pe Aati Hai Dua" ("My Plea Comes to My Lips as a Prayer"). Composed as a children's anthem, it is a supplication to God (Khuda). The poem's political content is undeniable: it asks for a life dedicated to the watan (nation) and a heart filled with empathy for the "poor" and "those in pain." Yet, this nationalism is framed entirely within a devotional act. The nation is a cherished part of God's creation, and serving it is a form of pious, moral conduct blessed by God, who remains the ultimate source of all value.

【The Deification of the Nation】

In a contrasting but potent articulation, the boundaries between the divine and the nation are intentionally blurred, often to the point of fusion. Here, the motherland is elevated from a mere territory to a sacred being, a goddess worthy of worship, and the anti-colonial struggle is transformed into a religious duty.

The foundational text for this model is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's "Vande Mataram" ("I Bow to Thee, Mother"), which appeared in his 1882 Bengali novel Anandamath. The poem is an explicit act of devotion, equating the land (desh) with the mother (mata). This identification is not merely metaphorical; Bankim Chandra directly transposes the iconography of Puranic goddesses onto the map of India. The motherland is the goddess: "Thou art Durga, Lady and Queen, / With her hands that strike and her swords of sheen... Thou art Lakshmi, lotus-throned." [5]

This sacralization of the nation is also evident in Makhanlal Chaturvedi's Hindi poem "Pushp ki Abhilasha" ("The Desire of a Flower").

Chah nahi main surbala ke Gahno mein guntha jaun	I have no desire to be woven Into the jewelry of a celestial nymph,
Chah nahi, premi-mala mein Bindh pyari ko lalchaun,	I have no desire to be strung into a lover's garland to tempt the beloved with my beauty.
Chah nahi, samrato ke shav Par, he Hari, dala jaun,	I have no desire, O Lord, to be placed Upon the corpses of emperors,

Chah nahi, devon ke shir par Chadhoon,	I have no desire to be offered upon the heads
bhagya par ithlaun.	of gods And boast of my good fortune.
Mujhe tod lena vanmali,	Pluck me, O Gardener,
Us path par dena tum phenk,	And throw me upon that path,
Matribhumi par sheesh chadhane	Where many heroes tread
Jis path jaaven veer anek.	To offer their heads for the Motherland.

The poem, written from the perspective of a flower, stages a powerful choice. The flower rejects all traditional forms of high-status devotion: it does not wish to be offered to the gods (surbala) or to adorn an emperor's body. Its sole desire is to be "thrown on that path" (us path par dena tum phenk) upon which "heroes go to offer their heads" (veeron ne sheesh chadhaye) in service of the Motherland (matribhumi). In this formulation, sacrifice for the nation is presented as a higher calling than traditional religious worship itself. The nation has effectively superseded the gods as the ultimate object of devotion.

【Religious Vocabulary for Revolutionary Agendas】

A third category involves poets, often with secular, leftist, or progressive ideologies, who skillfully repurposed the deep-seated cultural grammar of religion for revolutionary ends. They recognized that to mobilize the masses, an abstract language of "revolution" was insufficient; what was needed was the affective power and moral certainty embedded in familiar religious narratives.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Urdu poem "Hum Dekhenge" ("We Shall See") is a masterwork of this strategy. Written against the Islamist military dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq, the poem co-opts the very language of Islamic eschatology to critique the regime.

ham dekheñge	We shall see
lāzim hai ki ham bhī dekheñge	It is inevitable that we too shall see
vo din ki jis kā va.ada hai	That day which has been promised
jo lauh-e-azal meñ likhkhā hai	Which has been destined since time began
jab zulm-o-sitam ke koh-e-girāñ	When the weighty mountains of tyranny
ruuī kī tarah uḌ jā.eñge	Will waft away like cotton
ham mahkūmoñ ke pāñv-tale	Below the feet of us oppressed
jab dhartī dhaḌ-dhaḌ dhaḌkegī	This earth will quake and tremble
aur ahl-e-hakam ke sar-ūpar	And on the heads of our oppressors
jab bijlī kaḌ-kaḌ kaḌkegī	Bolts of lightning will crackle and strike
jab arz-e-ḳhudā ke ka.abe se	From the sacred abode of humanity

sab but uThvā.e jā.eñge	All false icons will be lifted
ham ahl-e-safā mardūd-e-haram	When we, long denied, faithfuls
masnad pe biThā.e jā.eñge	Will be seated in places of high power
sab taaj uchhāle jā.eñge	All crowns will be tossed
sab taḳht girā.e jā.eñge	All thrones will be smashed
bas naam rahegā allāh kā	Only God's name will remain
jo ġhā.eb bhī hai hāzir bhī	Which is mysterious but also present
jo manzar bhī hai nāzir bhī	Who sees and can be felt
uTThegā anal-haq kā na.ara	The slogan will rise: "I am the Truth"
jo maiñ bhī huuñ aur tum bhī ho	Which is I and you are, too
aur raaj karegī ḳhalq-e-ḳhudā	And then God's creatures will rule
jo maiñ bhī huuñ aur tum bhī ho	Which is I and you are, too
	(Dhir 2022, 336)

It prophesies a political qayamat (day of judgment) when "mountains of tyranny" will "waft away like cotton." By declaring Lazim hai ke hum bhi dekhenge ("It is inevitable that we too shall see"), Faiz frames the revolution as a divine, historical inevitability. The "faithfuls" (ahl-e-safa) who will be " seated in places of high power" are not the religious orthodoxy, but the oppressed masses. The poem's revolutionary climax comes when it prophesies that only the name of God will remain (bas naam rahega Allah ka), immediately redefining this ultimate authority as jo main bhi hoon aur tum bhi ho ("Which is I and you are, too"). This powerful line subversively equates the divine sovereign with the sovereign people, transforming an Islamic concept into a radical call for democracy.

In a different vein, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Ramdhari Singh Dinkar both drew on vigorous, world-affirming aspects of Hindu tradition. Nazrul's "Karar Oi Louho Kopat" ("Those Iron Gates of the Prison") is a revolutionary call to action infused with Shakti and Shaivite energy.

Karar oi louho kopaT	Destroy those iron gates of prison,
Bhenge fel kor re lopat rokto jomaT	demolish the blood-stained stony altars
Shikol-pujar pashan-bedi	of chain worshipping!
Ore o torun ishan	O youthful Shiva,
Baja tor proloy-bishan dhongsho-nishan	blow your horn of universal cataclysm!
Uduk prachir prachir bhedi	Let the flag of destruction
Gajoner bajna baja	rise amidst the rubble of prison walls
Ke malik? Ke raja? Ke daay shaja?	of the East!!
Mukto-swadhin satyo ke re?	Play the music of the festival of Shiva!
Ha ha ha paaye je hashi,bhogobaan porbe phaNshi	Who's the master? Who's the king?
Shorbonashi-shikhaye a hin totthyo ke re?	Who is it that punishes the truth of freedom?

Ha ha ha paaye je hashi,bhogobaan porbe phaNshi	Ha! Ha! Ha! It's a laugh--
Shorbonashi-shikhaye a hin totthyo ke re?	God is to be hanged?
	Rumor-monger--
	who teaches this pitiful "trugh"?
Ore o pagla bhola,dere de proloy-dola	O you forgetful Madman --
Garodgula; Jorse dhore hachka taane	shake -- shake the prisons
Maar haaNk Haydaari haaNk, kaNdhe ne dundubhi dhak	with your forceful cataclysmic pulls!
	Send your Haidari call,
Daak ore daak; Mrittyu ke daak jibon paane	play your war-drums--
	call Death
Nache oi kaal-boishakhi	towards Life!
Katabi kaal boshe ki?	There, the Baishakhi storm is dancing--
De re dekhi Bhim karar oi bhitTi naari	are you just going to sit through your days?
Lathi maar bhangre tala!	Let's see
Joto shob bondishalaye	you shake up the foundation
Agun jala agun jala fel upari	of that terrible prison.
	Kick - break the locks!
	All those prisons--
	set them on fire,burn them down, uproot them forever!
	(Islam (Kazi) 1999, 128)

He calls on the youth to "destroy those iron gates of prison" and bring the blooming, youthful sacrifice, invoking the destructive-creative power of the gods to achieve political liberation.

Similarly, Dinkar's "Jantantra ka Janam" ("Birth of the Republic"), written to celebrate India becoming a republic, radically subverts traditional devotional imagery. He invokes the "thirty-three crore" (tetis koti)—a number resonant with the traditional count of a Hindu pantheon (devta)—but applies it to the people of India. He directs the reader's worship away from temples, stating that the real gods are the farmers and laborers toiling in the fields and breaking stones (devta... khetan mein, khalihano mein). By crowning the common citizen as the true divine sovereign, Dinkar uses a potent religious vocabulary to legitimize the new democratic, secular republic. Sahir Ludhianvi's "Jinhe Naaz Hai Hind Par" ("Those Who Are Proud of India") from the film Pyaasa (1957) provides a final, biting example. The song is a scathing critique of post-independence hypocrisy, culminating in its final stanza. Here, Sahir invokes revered female figures from both Hindu and Islamic traditions—'Hawa ki beti' (Eve's daughter), 'Yashoda ki ham-jins' (Yashoda's kin), 'Radha ki beti' (Radha's daughter), 'Zulekha ki beti' (Zulekha's daughter)—to highlight the suffering of a modern woman forced into prostitution. By juxtaposing these sacred ideals with grim reality, he weaponizes the nation's own religious-moral language to expose its hypocrisy, pointedly asking where the 'proud Indians' are to save the very women they claim to venerate.

【Syncretic Religiosity for Communal Harmony】

Finally, a fourth category demonstrates a proactive use of religious syncretism to foster communal harmony and a composite national identity. Here, poets consciously drew from multiple religious traditions to build a shared civilizational narrative. Iqbal's "Saare Jahan Se Achcha," for example, remains an enduring anthem precisely because its celebration of "Hindustan" is civilizational, not sectarian. It speaks of mountains, rivers, and a mazhab (which here implies creed or way of life rather than organized religion) that does not teach enmity (Apas mein bair rakhna)[6]. Kazi Nazrul Islam was perhaps the most dedicated practitioner of this, writing both Islamic ghazals and Hindu kirtans with equal fluency. His "Durgom Giri Kantar Moru" ("Vast is the Mountain, Desert, and Wilderness") is a prime example. In a famous verse, he issues a powerful rebuke to sectarianism: "Hindu na ora Muslim? Ei jiggashe kon jon? / Kandoari! bolo dubichhe manush, shontan mor maar!" ("Who is it that asks, are they Hindu or Muslim? / O Helmsman! Say: 'Man is drowning—the child of my Mother!'"). In this critical intervention, Nazrul subordinates religious identity to a more urgent, shared humanity, identifying all as children of the same motherland (Mother India). This poetic command was a direct tool for forging a composite, anti-colonial nationalism.

It is important to note, of course, that these four categories are analytical conveniences, not rigid, mutually exclusive containers. Many of these works overlap, and this very fluidity demonstrates the deep, complex, and inseparable entanglement of the religious and the political in the South Asian imagination.

Rethinking the secularization debate in South Asia

The political modernity of South Asia presents a challenge to established Western theories of secularization. The classical thesis, which presumes a public-sphere "disenchantment" and the retreat of religion, finds little traction in the subcontinent's history. As scholars like T.N. Madan (1987) and Ashis Nandy (1988) have argued, secularism has largely been a fraught, state-led project, not a widespread social process. Consequently, the "post-secular" framework, which implies a return of religion, is equally ill-suited to a context where it never departed.

This paper has argued that an archive of political poetry and songs provides a unique insight into this problem. Moving beyond elite constitutional debates, this medium reveals the "political imagination" of the populace. As a form of "equipment for living" (Burke 1974), these songs offered symbolic strategies for navigating a period of profound upheaval. Their power, rooted in the mnemonic force of rhythm and the "performative" energy of public utterance (Austin 2009), made them the primary vehicles for shaping and circulating a new political consciousness.

What the analysis of the examples presented reveals is not simply the presence of religion, but its indispensability. The programmatic secularism of groups like the IPTA, while significant, highlights the difficulty of fabricating a new political vocabulary from scratch. For most other

political projects, religiosity was not a relic to be discarded, but an essential resource that provided what a purely rationalist language could not provide. It could also be argued, of course, that this is what makes the contribution of socialist and rationalist cultural groups challenging and therefore important, but that is a topic for another paper.

Religiosity, firstly, offered a pre-existing, non-negotiable moral authority. By grounding claims for national freedom in a transcendent order (as in Tagore or Iqbal), leaders and poets articulated a legitimacy that stood above and outside the logic of the colonial state. Second, it provided a language of affective power. The deification of the nation (as in Bankim) tapped into deep reserves of devotion, transforming political duty into a sacred calling capable of demanding ultimate sacrifice.

Most significantly, religiosity furnished a dynamic and widely understood ethical vocabulary for justice. Progressive and even revolutionary actors (like Faiz, Dinkar, and Nazrul) found that religious narratives of messianic deliverance, divine justice, and moral reckoning were the most potent tools for critiquing oppression and articulating a vision for a new, just society. This vocabulary was not abandoned because it was simply the most effective "social energy" (Greenblatt 1988) available, already embedded in the public consciousness.

Therefore, the language of politics and the language of religion in South Asia did not so much separate as co-evolve. This study concludes that the classic secularization debate, with its focus on the disappearance of religion, is a distraction. The evidence from the subcontinent's political poetry points to a different modernity—one that is not "post-secular" but rather one in which religiosity itself was modernized. It was continuously re-appropriated, re-interpreted, and re-imagined to serve as the very language of political change, from transcendent nationalism to revolutionary democracy. The critical question, then, is not whether religion shaped modern South Asian politics, but how it was, and continues to be, the dynamic and contested medium of its articulation.

Notes

1 In South Asian political contexts, "secular" can mean "non-sectarian", which is markedly different from the original sense of "non-religious" or "worldly". In this article, the word "secularism" is used in the original sense.
2 The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) is a left-leaning cultural association formed in 1943 which had an enduring effect on the theatre, film and music of India.
3 See Das (2005) for a detailed discussion about the interrelation of the literatures of the Indian subcontinent.
4 Tagore's own translation
5 It has however been pointed out that the novel portrays the Muslims as the main enemy, not the British. Also, the parts of the song often omitted while singing portray an armed Hindu goddess, which has been a matter of controversy.
6 Iqbal however renounced his nationalistic and pluralistic ideas later in his life and instead adopted a pan-Islamist view of the world.

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The Mandate of the Divine: Rethinking Religiosity in Modern South Asian Political Poetry and Songs

SHEIKH Tariq

Summary

Western academic discourse frequently centers on “post-secularism,” a framework suggesting that religion is re-emerging in the public sphere after a period of modernization. However, this linear assumption —from religious to secular and back— fits poorly with the historical reality of South Asia, where the strict privatization of faith never truly occurred. This article critiques classical secularization theory by exploring the enduring power of “religiosity” within modern South Asian political poetry and song. I argue that religious symbolism and ethical frameworks were not archaic remnants, but integral parts of how the nation-states were imagined.

Drawing on Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu literature, the study analyzes how poetry functioned as a “contact zone” for forging mass political sentiment. The analysis highlights four distinct ways religiosity was deployed: invoking a transcendent divine guide (as in Tagore and Iqbal), deifying the nation (Bankim), repurposing theological grammar for revolution (Faiz), and utilizing syncretism for communal harmony (Nazrul). Ultimately, the paper contends that the South Asian experience is not a “post-secular” return to religion, but a distinctive “non-secular” trajectory where modern politics and religious vocabularies co-evolved. In this context, religiosity served as an essential resource for articulating justice and resistance.

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