**The pitch for subaltern secularism**

In the shifting sands of politics, Mani Shankar Aiyar and Lalu Prasad Yadav are two politicians who have remained steadfast on one question of principle — Hindu-Muslim harmony. Both are outstanding orators with a sense of humour, but the commonality ends there. Their lives and histories are far wide apart otherwise. Mr. Aiyar thinks and speaks in English; Mr. Yadav does so in Hindi, in fact, in Bhojpuri. Mr. Aiyar is 83, and Mr. Yadav is 75, but their paths have never crossed, though they were Ministers in the same Union Cabinet under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Their parallel lives make a metaphor of the crisis of Indian secularism.

**The trajectory across the years**

Mr. Aiyar went to Doon School, St. Stephen’s College and joined the Indian Foreign Service. Mr. Yadav went to a village school and then college in Bihar. Mr. Aiyar describes himself as a ‘secular fundamentalist,’ the title of one of his numerous books. Mr. Yadav has not written any book (though he has lent his name to a biography of himself titled, Gopalganj To Raisina. He has, however, scripted a social coalition of Bihar’s subalterns and Muslim minorities, by stopping the rath yatra of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) veteran L.K. Advani and ordering his arrest in Bihar in 1990.

The India International Centre in New Delhi is considered a nerve centre of English intellectualism. In 2006, Mr. Yadav, then Union Minister of Railways and leader of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) — the second largest contingent in the ruling UPA coalition and in power in Bihar — applied for membership of the IIC. The screening committee of the IIC, in its wisdom, decided that Mr. Yadav was not fit to be its member. “I should not have applied,” Mr. Yadav said later. “It is not my place.” The IIC never explained its decision. The scholar and politician, Karan Singh, who had sponsored Mr. Yadav’s application, resigned as the IIC’s life trustee in protest.

Mr. Aiyar, of course is a member of the IIC, which is the gated community of India’s English speaking secular elite. He wears his command over the English language on his sleeve. In contrast, Mr. Yadav’s humour is often social criticism. And when he turns that on his opponents, they too laugh, as when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in splits listening to Mr. Yadav taking him down during the debate on a trust vote motion in the Lok Sabha in April 1999. Mr. Yadav cites village life, Kabir, Rahim, Buddha, Krishna in his speeches.

Mr. Aiyar would cite Orwell, Kipling and Shakespeare and his humour is often at the cost of his opponents. In his running battle with a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh-leaning editor in Delhi, he would repeatedly recall that he went to Deshbandhu College, a far cry from the Stephanian world. Ever ready with one-liners, whether to take down an opponent or eulogise a friend, he used to be a joy when it came to sound bites. And in 2014, he gave the winning slogan, not for his party the Congress, but the target of his ire, Narendra Modi. “Let him sell tea,” he quipped in response to a question, on a former tea seller’s claim to the top post in the country.

Mr. Narendra Modi is opposed in the subaltern terrain by Mr. Yadav. Around the same time that Mr. Modi (born 1950) was selling tea in Gujarat, Mr. Yadav (born 1948) was herding cattle in Bihar. Much before Mr. Modi’s chaiwallah story became an international bestseller, Mr. Yadav had sold his. In the same speech cited above, Mr. Yadav said about his wife Rabri Devi, “It is the beauty of Indian secularism that a poor woman from the village is the Chief Minister of Bihar,” charging the BJP with trying to destroy it.

Mr. Aiyar spoke within the gated community. Mr. Yadav spoke to those without gates and homes. Their secularism ran on parallel tracks, not agnostic of each other, but fostering a mutual hostility. The English elite could never accept Mr. Yadav and his like; though a Union Minister, the IIC would not admit him. Mr. Yadav had his own views. In the speech in 1999, he reminded Yashwant Sinha, fellow Bihari, and Indian Administrative Service-turned Minister in the A.B. Vajpayee cabinet, “We faced struggle and jail. In Delhi, there are intellectuals like you who are always in power.…”

The communities that were mobilised by Mr. Yadav (and his counterparts in Uttar Pradesh such as Mulayam Singh Yadav and Kanshi Ram), the Hindu subalterns, over the decades, sensed the contempt they faced in the English world, particularly when more of them were educated. They would in turn be attracted to the BJP’s pitch for honour within Hindu society. That turned out to be the moment for what scholar Sajjan Kumar terms subaltern Hindutva that Mr. Modi mobilised in 2014. In 2024, its contradictions are surfacing, but the reckoning of 2014 was long in the making.

**Vernacular, subaltern secularism**

In the early 2000s, when the BJP was gradually moving to the centre stage of Indian politics, Alok Rai wrote this about the need for vernacularising — more specifically, Hindi-fying — secular values in order to communicate with masses. He said, “The social privilege enjoyed by this (English) elite becomes…a serious liability for the secular and modern value package espoused by them….The English elite will be condemned to confront in the political battlefield the popular energies which Hindi can command with relative ease. The strategic location of the English elite in the apparatuses of power may delay the day of reckoning.….The overwhelming social dominance of English is a threat to certain other things which they value like secularism, like the struggle for a modern society..The association with English and the class that lives off English has become a serious liability for those valued goals.”

The expansion across the subcontinent, of what is today called Hinduism, over millennia, is a story of constant vernacularisation and regionalisation of the traditions that were formed in northwestern regions of the country, called Aryavarta in ancient texts. In new terrains and among new peoples, the carriers of those traditions sought connections by negotiating with local practices. The historian, R. Champakalakshmi, describes this as a process of “interaction, acculturation and accommodation and often confrontation between different zones of language and culture.” This continues into the Hindutva project as well — for instance, in Mr. Modi’s outreach to Tamils.

Secular inquisitors travelled in the opposite direction, cancelling people and practices for the slightest of disagreements and even labelling them regressive or communal. And, with the focus entirely on inter-religious relations and negligence of intra-religious justice, distanced secularism from the subalterns. “Intra-religious domination, i.e., religion-related patriarchy and caste domination, fanaticism, bigotry and extremism got ignored,” writes political theorist Rajeev Bhargava. “...as the intra-religious dimension was ejected from the meaning of secularism…,much to the detriment of its overall value, secularism began to be identified, by proponents and opponents alike, exclusively with the defence of minority rights...especially Muslims.”

**The contest, the challenge**

There is subaltern Hindutva, but the question in 2024 is whether there can be subaltern secularism. Mr. Modi and his principal opponent, Rahul Gandhi, are framing the general election as a choice between subaltern Hindutva versus subaltern secularism. Both of them are facing resistance within their parties to this subalternisation. Mr. Gandhi has brought questions of caste justice into mainstream Congress thinking, besides partnering with parties such as RJD, the Samajwadi Party and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, that represent subaltern groups but also carry their own baggage. But the real challenge before him is reconciling his party’s old elitism with the inescapable turn to the subaltern terrain where the numbers are aggregated. The question is whether he can force Mr. Aiyar to meet Mr. Yadav.