

The Breakdown of Post-Colonial Secularism in India

*Something Exceptional-Typical – Violence in
Jabalpur, 1961*

Sahar Khan

Acknowledgements

“We are addicted to our thoughts. We cannot change anything if we cannot change our thinking.”
 – *Santosh Kalwar, Nepalese writer (b. 1982)*

The evolution of thoughts, specifically early intellectual formations around modern India’s sectarian¹ problem, serves as my subject of study. Far from the thought process of a nation, here I would like to thank some immediate and some distant shapers of *my* intellectual formation. Firstly, I am grateful to my two thesis readers Professor Joel Beinin and Professor Thomas Blom Hansen for their intellectual guidance and moral support from the early stages of conceptualizing and researching through to final stages of writing. Thank you for saying “discipline” when my indulgent thought-addiction overpowered and therefore impeded my writing productivity. Additionally, I would like to thank History Professor Carolyn Lougee Chappell who, in the early stages of my thinking for this project, exposed me to the benefit of the micro-historical approach, of studying the seemingly insignificant but illuminating historical detail.

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¹ Sectarian and communal will be used interchangeably. “Communal”/“Communalism” are terms used in South Asian scholarship to categorize conflicts based on religious/ethnic/sect-based divisions. Outside of the South Asian academic lexicon, this is referred to as “sectarianism.”

Intermittently, I make recourse to a discipline of thought that, without being my major, has impacted my knowledge-world.² My father specializes in neuroscience and, in the unconscious way that a child cannot help but inherit some of their parents' idioms of thought, his way of thinking undoubtedly seeps into my own. For this reason, I can identify neuroplasticity and the neuroscience of emotion and reason as two concepts that dovetail with my study's emphasis on the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate factors and/or knowledge-worlds. Neuroplasticity, replaced the older orthodox view that the brain is a physiologically static organ by positing that the brain changes throughout life due to interactions and subsequent changes between human behavior, the physical-material space and neural processes. In simpler terms, there is a symbiotic process whereby the brain's physical *form* (the sizes and structures of certain brain parts) and the brain's chemical *substance* (the reactions and movements taking place within those parts) recreate each other. By thematizing this history linguistically,³ I suggest that language is the *form*/structure of our thought that houses and organizes that which is thought and thereafter expressed – knowledge, the *substance* of thought.

A different duality in another area of thought is posed by Marxist-structuralist thinkers who often qualify the infrastructure of economics as the rational and decisive historical factor while dismissing cultural/religious factors as belonging to the private realm of the emotional, ephemeral, amorphous and indecipherable. American Literary Critic Frederic Jameson speaks about this analytic dichotomy in his discussion of historical fiction:

“...one of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is, the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between what we have come to think as the domain

² The knowledge-world, conceptually similar to Michel Foucault's concept of *épistémè* and Thomas Kuhn's *paradigm*, is a term I use to identify different “ways of knowing/ways of doing” based on languages. The second part of this hyphenated term comes from the way in which each of the three languages studied, through their different spatial, temporal and tonal voices, create worlds of their own. These worlds impact the knowledge they produce and vice versa.

³ I use sources in English, Hindi and Urdu.

of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power: in other words, Freud versus Marx...”⁴

However, this division between the emotional (libidinal/unconscious/private) and the rational (cerebral/conscious/public) domain is not analytically productive at the level of the brain. Cognitive neuroscientist Antonio Damasio studied people with damage in the parts of the brain that generate emotions. All of these patients, whose brains functioned normally except for the impairment of emotional processing, were unable to make decisions. Though the exact connection between emotion and reason is not explicitly understood by neuroscience or philosophy, one can say that human behavior and choices cannot be reduced to mere reason and/or the extension of these rational faculties as manifested in economic and/or political institutions. Hence, certain Urdu documents are analyzed in an attempt to enter the private domain that the English and Hindi sources do not explore due to their more typical origination in the secular Indian nation-state’s public domain.

Given Damasio’s findings that our intellectual or rational formation is connected to our emotional well-being, I wish to thank my family and friends, the emotional backbone to my intellectual endeavors. My mother, Ruhi Khan, helped me read and translate the Hindi and Urdu sources; her dramatic narrations lightened the laborious and meticulous labor of transcription. My siblings Samar, Sarah and Abdullah Khan “kept me real.” My friends, some who worked with me into the wee hours of the morning and others who remembered to send me texts and emails of encouragement, kept me going. Thank you Alok Vaid-Menon, Ashley Chang, Flora Wang, Maritza Urquiza, Nadia Smati, Nayeli Gallardo, Sabeeka Siddiqui, Samar Al-Qatari, Sam Storey and Sekhar Paladugu.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 69, accessed April 22, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466493>.