

**Smriti Tandon**

## **MAKING SPACE FOR NEW SECULAR: RELIGION AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA**

### **Introduction**

Space is not just about the illustration of spatial and geographical boundaries. It is also about the 'aesthetic constitutions of the political' (Jazeel, 2013: 154). Space may be symbolic, which is hegemonised by a certain ideology, much to the uneasiness of the 'other'. Space may be occupying of cognitive structures, which result in the formation of new social groups or newer habitus. When the space is not merely a physical space, it may be created or mobilised. This created space produces forms of power and governmental frameworks for politics (Jazeel, 2013: 154). The Indian political history from the last several decades has been thwarted with mistrust between the majority Hindus and minority religions, especially the Muslims. The numerical dominance and cultural hegemony of one group has resulted in creating space in which religion can be used as a political weapon (Chandhoke, 2015: 20).

### **The secular context**

The idea of secular was compounded with the receding of religion from the public domain. But this secularism did not fade away the religion. The French read into secularism – *laïcité* – as a matter of national identity formed through the revolutions, where the 'primacy of citizenship over devotion' could be accepted (Calhoun, 2010: 1). In the rest of Europe, some institutional arrangement grants privilege to the authorised church. Madood (2012) called it 'moderate secularism', which was separation of church and state, yet some support for a given church. He further elaborated that 'it is here, if anywhere, that a sense of crisis of secularism can be found'. Bhargava (2015: 58) adds to this that 'substantive secularisation' of European societies has led to extensive secularisation of European states. Irrespective of their religious affiliations, citizens here have access to 'civil and political rights which are unheard of in religion – centered states, past or present'. He further points out that the immigration of Muslims in Europe has led to suspicion and doubts about secularism and reflects on the European bias towards Muslims. He believes

---

**SMRITI TANDON** is a Ph.D. Research Scholar at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, *E-mail: smriti.tandon28@gmail.com*

that Muslims will always be at a disadvantageous position as far as European secularism is concerned because the ideals of equality and individual freedom arose after religious homogenisation (Bhargava, 2015: 60). Attaturk's Turkey tried to incorporate the French *laicite* as a modern value and breaking away from the internal Islamist politics. The prohibition of established churches, thereby protecting the religious differences and flourishing of all the religions, was a kind of secularism exemplified in the constitution of the United States of America (Calhoun, 2010: 3).

The Indian secularism is different from that of the western idea of secularism. Gandhi sought secular through the organising principle of *sarva dharma sambhava* (which meant all religions should be treated equally) while Nehru preferred *dharma nirpekshita* (separation of religion and politics) while discussing secular. Madan (1987) believed that religion in India was a way of everyday life. So the concept of secularism, which meant separation of state and religion, was not really relevant in the Indian context. Nandy (2003: 35-36), arguing on similar lines, suggested that the capacity to secularise society had reached its limits and this Nehruvian secularist agenda, which was being followed in India, or what he calls 'official secularism' tended to generalise the religio-cultural life world of the Indian society. Losonczi and Herck (2015: 12-13) while discussing Nandy's idea of secular point out that according to Nandy this official secularism had intentions of limiting the 'democratic process by truncating the political personality of the citizen'. Nandy himself argued that this meant 'pre-empting the creative role which politics might play with religious and cultural traditions [...] and between politics and culture' by separating them completely from each other. He explained that this strategy actually backfired in the Indian scenario as instead of keeping religion outside of politics, it forced it to enter politics by different means. He called it a 'peculiar double-bind in Indian politics' where the 'ills of religion have found political expression' but it has failed to keep a check on corruption and violence in public life through the moral groundings (Nandy, 2003: 37-41). Bhargava (2002) evoked the concept of 'principled distance' between state and religion to explain the distinctiveness of the Indian model of secularism. He argued that the Indian state was the facilitator to the religious practices that were followed by the citizens while maintaining that it could never have a religion of its own. Chatterjee (1998: 347) offered to view secularism as embedded in Western modernity and thereby employed by the Hindu nationalists in order to exclude religious and ethnic minorities from the public sphere of Indian modern institutions. They called the defenders of religious minorities as 'pseudo-secularist' as the defenders spoke of tolerance within the domain of Hindu majority. Chatterjee puts together the model of 'political tolerance' wherein there would be political context for the groups to resist cultural homogenisation and push for democratisation from within (Chatterjee, 1998: 375). Another scholar whose work on 'emergent secularism' is well recognised is Bilgrami (1998: 475). He is of the view that secularism was imposed on the Indian

society instead of being negotiated among the various religious communities. He proposes a negotiated-emergent model based on discursive lines rather than on universal rationality. The secularism in India thus comes out to be a complex one and needs to be positioned in such a manner so as to be fused with religion and politics in its everydayness.

### **Guru shaping the new ways of secularism in India**

The above discussed idea of secularism points out to the lacuna in the understanding of secular. The idea of secular being imported from the western enlightenment era and being forth in the Indian context without any deliberations still makes it an alien concept. Religion in the political context has been used by every political party in power irrespective of which side of the ideological spectrum it may have been. Not being rooted in the life world of the masses, secularism has many a times gone for a toss, due to the opportunism of the political leaders. The religious gurus have a far reach into the worlds of their followers. It is in this space or the lack of it, in which these religious leaders come together to colour the opinion of their followers in matters of political engagements, which they claim are matters of national interest. The key scholarly works of the times reflect that these new age gurus claim millions of followers (Warrier, 2006; S. Srinivas, 2008; T. Srinivas, 2010), and the class of these followers which each guru caters to is different, ranging from lower, middle, to upper. As for Ravi Shankar, the guru has 370 million followers globally (Vyas, 2016), with most from the middle and upper class. His organisation has registered its presence in 152 countries with many international ashrams in India, Poland, Canada, United States, Germany and China and vouches for a stress free and violence free society by employing knowledge and service.

It becomes important to understand how Art of Living Organisation (AOL) fits into the global secular space. It is interesting to observe that AOL, though purely a Hindu ideological outfit with a *brahmin* caste born guru at its helm of affairs, still manages to attract not only Hindu followers but also Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and people of many more religious affiliations from throughout the world. This is primarily because it markets itself as a spiritual organisation with universal human values rather than a stringent Hindu organisation. However, the everyday practices and rituals within the organisation are primarily resting, drawing from the Hindu vedic scriptures and worshipping the large pantheon of Gods and animals that are part of the Hindu culture. The organisation manages to overcome these religious binaries by advocating vociferously for the idea of 'one world family' or '*vasudeva kutumbakam*' by reaching out to the various cultural groups around the world and propagating spirituality as the unifying ideology irrespective of the political, religious and cultural orientations.

In ancient India, the guru (a *brahmin* by birth) played the role of a Counselor to the king (a *ksyatriya* by birth). He was not only an advisor on

religious and social affairs but was consulted on matters of political importance as well. He was known as the *Raj* guru (guru of the State). Many gurus still assume the traditional role of political advisors to the governments because of their close association with the political leaders in power. 'In the new Indian Republic, must politicians hide their gurus, or can they still display them (Jaffrelot, 2012: 80)?' Here, Jaffrelot raises an important concern regarding the coming together of religious and political leaders. He later answers this question by stating that 'the degree of secrecy varies because the association with a guru can reinforce the legitimacy of those politicians who know how to make use of him (Jaffrelot, 2012: 80).'

So the religious and political spaces usually seem to work in tandem in India as the gurus enjoy a natural legitimacy and close proximity to both their followers as well as the state leaders. However, the new age gurus have re-invented themselves with the times and often strategically align themselves with the political elites. The role of the gurus, who have transnational reach, thus trying to create a familiar discourse of secularism, seems inevitable in a country like India, where reliance on gurus is part of the existential reality.

The paper reflects on the renewed synergy of the alliance between Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and AOL during the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Parliament in India) elections of 2014. By outlining the Volunteer for Better India (VBI) initiative and the various mobilisation drives spearheaded under the flagship of guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the paper argues for a change to new secular through good governance module within the Volunteer for Better India (VBI) initiative by creating and utilising the political, religious and virtual space. It becomes interesting to observe how AOL in this process, transforms itself from a religious-spiritual to a civil society organisation with civic and modern values. VBI was not a regular democratic exercise to garner votes. It was about altering the psyche of the citizens by pitching in different plans, as will be described in detail later in the chapter. Such an organised support for a party (here BJP) had never been witnessed in the history of the nation. Though it is not uncommon for the gurus to suggest to the followers, which party one should vote for yet this time a guru, himself strategised a political course of action and personally oversaw the execution of the plans to ensure the victory for BJP. AOL actually attained consensus on democratic grounds rather than just religious ones. It seemed to be a mutually beneficial relationship for AOL and BJP, the benefits of which were to be seen in the coming years with BJP in power. Though what was evident back then was a clean symbiotic relationship between a primarily right leaning party and a Hindu majoritarian organisation. So for this paper, they author views VBI as a recent example to not only understand a shift in the idea of secular, but also to understand the idea of religious space making within a political context.

### **Art of Living Organisation**

Before examining further, it is essential to know that Sri Sri's AOL Organisation is based in Bangalore, the silicon valley of India. In the past decade numerous corporations and other Multi National Companies (MNCs) have established themselves in the city. The influx of new businesses has transformed the city into the leader of technological, economic, and urban growth in the country. The AOL international ashram and head quarter is located around 25 kilometres from the city and caters to the spiritual and religious needs of millions of people around the globe. The guru himself claims to be a humanitarian leader and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize a number of times with the most recent being in 2014. Like many other spiritual organisations, AOL focuses on various breathing and meditation techniques through *mantras* of happiness. Though the organisation claims a secular base, its philosophy rests in the Hindu practices. By invoking the concept of service, or *seva*, the organisation has established a huge base of teachers and volunteers who work towards maintaining and bringing to operation the tenets of the organisation. It has a huge corpus which is modelled heavily on corporate style of functioning as it promotes a division of labour (Tandon, 2016), but also as Foucault would argue, leads to the disciplining of the minds and bodies (Foucault, 1975). As for Ravi Shankar, the hagiographical details emphasise him as a 'divine human' who has come to be recognised as a mediator in political standoffs internationally.

### **Conditions for the emergence of Volunteer for Better India Initiative**

This section will elaborate on the conditions which led to the emergence of the Volunteer for Better India initiative (VBI). Additionally, it will examine how this initiative, which was veiled as the good governance module, led to the modus operandi for the nationalistic agenda. The fading away of the anti-corruption movement, better known as India against corruption in 2011, saw the rise of many new faces in Indian polity. One of the faces was Arvind Kejriwal, a civil servant activist, who announced a new political party (Aam Aadmi Party - AAP) on 26 November, 2012 with the idea of ushering in alternate politics (Sharma, 2014). Though this movement has waned over the subsequent years, it had shaken the conscience of the people in India. Originally, it was inspired by the Gandhian principles of non-violence and truth, otherwise known as *satyagraha*. This movement had sown the seeds for a larger political turn of events to happen (Sitapati, 2011). This new found enthusiasm had captured the imagination of the masses including those of non-resident Indians who envisaged a corruption free and developed India. Adding to this was the lingering issues associated with a legacy of 10 years of scams and corruption that the Congress led government had left behind. Such was the disillusionment of the leaders of India, several prominent leads, such as Anna Hazare, Kiran Bedi, and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the guru, decided to

come together to fight against this legacy of corruption. This was a huge task at hand and Ravi Shankar took up this opportunity to lead. The VBI was launched in New Delhi on February 3rd, 2013. The leaders explained this was an exercise in nation building and that it was a citizens' collective action programme. The requirements demanded that volunteers provide one hour of service to the nation each day and to be instrumental in bringing about the transformation in the society which one wished to see. The VBI had many objectives, two of the primary objectives included 1) practicing the sacred duty of voting and 2) working towards a corruption free India. Both of these objectives meant that an agenda towards the good governance ideology has to be led by the BJP during the 2014 elections.

### **Good Governance, an electoral idiom**

So what was the good governance module that was being promised to the nation by a party? The entire idea was meant not to restrict the governance but rather to act as a means of interaction between the government and other social actors during the decision making process. The goal was to foster an environment of greater accountability and transparency of the political structures (University Sri Sri Newsletter, 2014). It was aiming towards participatory governance. The idea of good governance seemed to be a dynamic concept that required a critical dialogue to explore it further. How 'good' was the question that would be asked in times to follow? Good governance from whose point of view and for whom? The present hour rested on capitalising on the ills of governance during the past regime and capitalising well to project the development work done by the Prime ministerial candidate in the state of Gujarat. The module of good governance rested on '*sabka saath, sabka vikas*,' which meant 'inclusion of all the people for their development,' but its implementation was never clearly outlined. Thus, it remained an electoral idiom to attain power.

### **i-vote for a better India**

To fulfil the objectives of the VBI, the 'i-vote campaign' started in first week of June, 2013. A meeting of the youth leaders was organised at the International Centre for Art of Living in Bangalore in the last week of August, which marked as the formal inaugural and training for i-vote for a better India (IVBI). There were around 350 youth from different parts of India, aged between 20 to 35 years, who had registered themselves for the training. Each youth took a pledge to do their part to increase the voter turnout and spread voter awareness. The youth were educated about the civic and political structures of the country through videos titled 'Know Your Civic Quotient.' The youths were trained in the process of registering to vote in India, the various forms to be filled out and the appropriate documents that were to be attached and submitted. The myths and misconceptions about voting were

discussed and the youth leaders were trained in how to organise and conduct voting drives.

The IVBI initiative was a pan India social initiative of AOL to harness the services, time, resources, and skills of their citizens to build a better India. It was projected as an effort towards taking up responsibility in development of a prosperous and responsible democratic nation. The youths were the main agents of change and the drive aimed at tapping their energies and zest for change to promote nation building activities. It was professed that voting for the right party and the right candidate would ensure progress of the country despite the last 10 years of stagnant progressive change. At that time, the present Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, was the BJP candidate, and was pitted against the then Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, under whose leadership the country had witnessed multiple accounts of corruption.

The i-vote for better India's national report outlines the following goals. 'Voter awareness, which included educating the individuals, especially the youth, about the importance of being part of the democratic process and using their right to vote to bring about social change. Voter registration, which required assisting individuals in registering to vote and decreasing the unregistered voter base by at least 33%, and increasing the ratio of male voters to female voters (currently at ~ 0.8). Voter deletion was also included in these aims, which cleaned the electoral rolls to reduce the ratio of fraudulent voting which is currently at ~ 20%. The other goal was to increase the voter turnout by 20% where it has typically been around '40-60% depending upon the region' (IVBI, 2014:04).

The importance of each vote was highlighted to the youth leaders. Some facts and figures in the national report outline that around 200,000 citizens in every constituency were not registered to vote, 70% of these unregistered voters belonged to 18-24 years age group. The average winning margin is ~ 74,000 votes or less than 5% of the total vote base in the constituencies. 'If 50 people in each booth decide to register and vote, the election would have a different impact' (IVBI, 2014: 04). These figures highlight the importance, as illustrated by the BJP initiative, to increase voter turnout to enhance the likelihood of victory.

This campaign relied heavily upon society registration drives. Volunteers across the country visited individual households, raising voter awareness and reminding the citizens of the importance of each vote. Often, these efforts would include volunteers interacting one on one with people and helping many obtain a voter ID card. Furthermore, there were college registration drives which aimed to tap the energies of the youth. Like many elections worldwide, the youth voter turnout was likely to determine the outcome of the election so the VBI leaders across the nation visited colleges to encourage all young adults to vote. An ingenious strategy was put forth at the

national level where a competition was designed to encourage youth voting. Known as the Vote-athon, the leaders were tasked with enrolling colleges into a competition to determine which college would register the maximum voters nationally.

Another interesting activity followed by the VBI was to take to the schools. Here children of the age group of 8 – 16 years, as the official voting age in India is 18 years, were educated about the importance of voting which in turn was conveyed to their parents and elders at home. Hearing one's own kids speak of the importance of voting and the impacts on growth and development of the nation, made an impact on the parents likelihood of participating in the electoral process. The tagline, "You have taught us how to count, now we'll teach you what counts the most," was a popular campaign slogan at the time.

The voter campaign was not just about making face-to-face connections but was also about raising political discourse on topics from morality and ethics. The VBI joined hands with the election commission bodies of 10 states in India, ensuring that all the work done by the volunteers was legitimately accepted by them along with their full support and co-operation. From the states of Jammu & Kashmir to Karnataka and across Assam to the interiors of Maharashtra, a wave of change was brought about by more than 10,000 volunteers working selflessly towards a vision of the better India. There were more than 100 *Nukkad Nataks* or Street Plays performed, quiz competitions conducted, 500+ voting awareness rallies, including many bike rallies, 1,000+ voting awareness drives, and even marathons (Run for a better India). Even a *Desh bhakt* (patriotic) week was organised from the 20th of January, 2014 – 27th of January, 2014 in which more than 10 Indian states participated with their volunteer groups (VBI, 2014: 14).

The volunteers were constantly working day in and day out trying to meet at least 10 new people every day and requesting them to fill a happiness survey. This survey not only had questions about their own personal happiness and unhappiness but also inquired about what change they wanted to see in their country and asked whether they have a voter ID card? If not, the volunteers assisted them in obtaining one by taking their contact details and giving it to those volunteers working closely with the election commission. The sacred duty to vote was the national duty and the volunteers played on this sentiment by urging people to not only vote but vote for the right candidate (here Modi) whom they envisioned would empower the country. They cheered with slogans like '*Ek din soogey to panch saal roogey*', which suggested that if you do not vote because you chose to sleep on the day of voting, you will weep for the next five years because of a wrongly elected government. Another slogan was '*Sab kaam chod do pehle jake vote do*', which meant that you leave all your other work and go and vote first and foremost.



### **The Role of the Guru during the IVBI**

The guru took personal interest in ensuring the win for BJP. The volunteers and the devotees of the organisation were all influenced by the way guru (Sri Sri Ravi Shankar) campaigned on behalf of Modi. He would often describe his work in terms of developmental markers of the state of Gujarat. Modi was hailed as the ideal Prime Minister candidate and a great future leader of the country. Many devotees of the organisation who accept the Guru as an incarnation of Krishna (a Hindu God), spoke of Narendra Modi consulting guru for all major political decision making, just the way Krishna guided his friend Arjun, guru was guiding Modi. Such interesting comparisons were commonly heard in the field. The rationale for voting for BJP for most voters was the fact that the guru's words ensured bringing about a change.

There were 400 volunteers in Bangalore itself. During the meetings in the Ashram, the guru usually met the volunteers and spoke to them in person. Documentaries on the state of the country were showed as reasons why the country needed development and good governance. Guru's messages always highlighted how the previous government had left the country in a lurch and how the AAP (Aam Aadmi Party), which had been formed after the India Against Corruption Campaign, was still a newbie. The guru's speeches never failed to mention how a true Indian could not let the nation slip away in the hands of a '*kacha*' party (not a very seasoned political party). He spoke of the ambitions of AAP to spread its base nationally in spite of his personal suggestions to Kejriwal, the AAP party head, to first establish itself in the state elections within Delhi. He believed that a '*khichdi*' sarkar or a coalition government was not what the country needed. It needed BJP to win with complete majority. The guru made everyone pledge or take *sankalpa*, to work towards the same vision together by promising '*sangachhdvam*,' which meant 'we all will move together as one'.

### **Overseas Volunteer for Better India**

Being a new age guru, Ravi Shankar has devotees globally. His organisation receives generous donations from the urban upper class Indians based outside the country. It was upon his insistence, that the Overseas Volunteer for Better India (OVBI) was launched in May, 2013. It aimed at providing a global platform for positive transformation to 23 million Non Resident Indians. The most significant contribution of the OVBI, was the creation of the Android App for the voter registration, known as Connect. The use of social media was to bring about the projection of Indian-ness. There were 'Google hangouts' with eminent personalities who inspired the 'second generation Indian-American community to make a difference back home'. The President of the OVBI, Suresh Vasu, spoke of combining the financial and intellectual resources of the NRI community to 'combat the ills facing our

country today' (IVBI, 2014: 38). This initiative saw people from all walks of life come together to work towards a better India.

The OVBI organised and celebrated various cultural and patriotic events and tried to instill the feeling of nationalism and pride within the community of Indians. Also there was a feeling of electing a party with the development and good governance agenda and a leader who could lead and be representative of the Indian community abroad. As a result, the OVBI is appropriately viewed as one of the influential factors in the Lok Sabha elections which enabled the return of a number of Indians to cast ballot.

### **The Role of Social Media and Corporate support for VBI**

Social media had an extremely pivotal role to play. For any initiative to grow and scale in the manner VBI did, will need good dissemination of information. This election had the highest youth voter turnout on record. Facebook was the most heavily trafficked website that was used in raising voter awareness. For example, various Facebook groups were created to help the voters register. These groups created a virtual space for dialogue about various issues and also acted as a platform where people could post their creative ideas in contributing towards the initiative. New friendships thrived here as each person asked 5 others to join and the virtual world soon saw the thousands coming together to garner support for the cause. It became fashionable and trendy to update inked selfies on Facebook pages after casting vote. There were online instructions circulated and the VBI app, Connect, became popularised. There were more than one hundred thousand new voters registered through Connect (IVBI, 2014: 37). It was not only user friendly but would also inform the user on the election days. This was the smart phone revolution that captured the virtual space.

Twitter handles like @SriSri, @bangaloreAshram, and @I\_VBI were used by the guru and those organising the movement to spread the message and give direction to VBI. Thousands were tweeting for the campaign. People started to follow their favourite candidates on twitter. Here they could ask them questions directly and seek answers and promises for a better future of the country. Narendra Modi witnessed 11.1 million tweets about him from January 2014 to May 2014 which was 20% of all election related tweets (Indian Express, 2014). As it emerged clear that Modi was about to become the next prime minister, his twitter followers on @NarendraModi went up from 3,986,878 to 4,091,739 (India Today, 2014). His words were read very closely by the followers as well as the Indian media. His present twitter following is around 22.1 million (Indian Express, 2016) up from the earlier 4 million.

The initiative saw more than 40 informative videos posted on YouTube. These videos were in four different languages, registered hundreds of views, shares and likes, and promoted the need to bring BJP to power (IVBI, 2014:

39). A helpline number was created by partnering with Just Dial to further help aid voter questions, such as where their polling stations were located (IVBI, 2014: 39).

AOL roped in several corporations with big names like Tata Consultancy Services, Hindustan Unilever Limited, Kotak, Yes Bank, GenPact, Oracle, Google, Larsen & Tubro, Godrej, Network 18, 92.7 Big FM, Nasscom Foundations, Tata Motors, and Just Dial as corporate partners for the various VBI events. The Election Commission of India and the State Election Commission also partnered with the VBI (IVBI, 2014: 39- 40).

The election results were declared on May 16, 2014. BJP was victorious, earning 282 seats out of 543 seats. Voter turnout increased from 58% in the previous elections to 66% in 2014. The guru was invited for the swearing in ceremony of the newly elected government, where Maheish Girri, an Art of Living teacher who had contested the elections from Delhi, was given a position in the cabinet of ministers.

Though the VBI was a successful campaign, after the elections, the organisation asked the volunteers to focus on the 'larger social good' through the organisational banner rather than that of the VBI. The website has been taken off the internet and officially nothing associated with VBI exists any more. The irony was that the guru realised that most of the volunteers began to work in projects for the nation rather than doing the organisational work and gradually the momentum and enthusiasm were left to cool down.

### **In the making of a 'new secular' space**

VBI was a historic initiative. The entire VBI was planned and executed to create space for a BJP led government at the centre. The guru himself had suggested being wary of the new found political ambitions of the Aam Aadmi Party. So the ethnography of the initiative exhibits the politics of creating space and how power, be it vested in a religious authority or a political authority, enables one to capture that space. The concept of space itself requires coming together of many forces. There are many contested boundaries which are crossed or overlapped. Here too, the political and national agendas of corruption and bad leadership were put forth as personal agendas to the people of the country. This instilled in every citizen a sense of duty towards the nation. The secret for the success was appealing to the conscience of every citizen and rekindling the hope for good governance and '*ache din*' (good days) ahead. The idea was to not let any vote slip away from BJP by translating every interaction during VBI into a vote. The guru's appeal to vote seemed like that of the 'caste leaders' for vote bank politics. The religious authority of the guru was working at a different realm to convert the religious into political.

The volunteers of AOL led the initiative democratically. They were able to unite Indians throughout the country through the OVBI and VBI. This

success was a result of a combination of a global and local campaign, tapping into both Indians abroad and at home. It was not starkly 'Hindu nationalism' nor was it 'secular politics'. This was a different kind of politics which may be best characterized as a 'new secular' movement. It was about capturing the cognitive space in such a way that the religious and caste boundaries would seemingly mitigate. It was about appearing to move ahead of the secular and communal binaries and was achieved by involving a religious organisation which claimed to have followers of all affiliations. The appeal laid in subtly converting not just the devotees of the religious guru as voters, but also citizens as voters. To achieve this, the virtual space was put to use in such a way as had never been done before in the history of the Nation. With smart phones and access to the internet 24\*7, presence of the political ideologies was made possible. It was a classic Indian reverberation of Arjun Appadurai's (1996) concept of 'mediascape' to connect the Indians world over through forms of media.

Everyone could have an opinion and on social media every opinion mattered. Through the success of the social media campaign, the AOL was repackaging the old ideologies, reigniting patriotic fervour, which all translated to votes on the Election Day. 'Religion is a cultural adjunct to social and governmental structures' (Bourdieu, 1991: 16). The VBI initiative proved it to be true. It was a coming together of religious leadership to support political leadership. Though Bourdieu ignores the potential of religious habitus to transform experience and provoke social change, (Bruce, 2003: 11) yet, the 'pace of social change, the proliferation of new media and the quantities of information' that flow worldwide appear to influence against the 'maintenance of firmly routinised dispositions to action and thought' (Archer, 2012).

### **The new secular**

This was not the 'secularisation' which Warriar (2003: 213-214) had argued for in her study of Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. For her secularisation meant 'a process where religious affiliation comes increasingly to be seen not as a requirement, but as an option'. She argued for 'a decline in the public, community-affirming and socially-binding aspect of religion'. This was not the secular realm which was about tolerance and not inter-mixing of state and religion. This was 'new secular' which had guised the communal under the pretext of an effervescent democracy. The idea of connecting people through 'vote' into a vibrant participatory democracy with a hope for good governance, was indeed novel. Voting for a particular ideology with a promise of development was put forth as sacrosanct by the religious guru. People of all religious affiliations were mobilised to vote in favour of BJP. It saw breaking away from the 'categorical' and 'constitutional ritualism' which is associated with the idea of secular (Ghosh, 2013). Voting itself was herald as a 'sacred duty' which was constitutionally sacred. This sacredness was found in public domain with social and political ramifications.

This was a semblance of the secular as the vestiges of Hinduism, which was being guarded until the elections, kept appearing in the public space. So VBI crystallised a 'new secular', shaped in the ideology of governance. The 'new secular' was more palatable, therefore, a religious guru with organisational powers, resting his own ideas in Hindu philosophies, could still create space for such a formidable victory. This secular was neither about trying to project the 'harmony of the religions as a product of modernity' (Madan, 1997) nor completely discussing the 'tolerance of state' (Nandy, 1985) but of creating a discourse for national and religious identities to be linked as one, further contesting the secular. Here within the new secular the democratic forms had assumed new power and salience. It had begun to show that people would no longer shy away from wearing their religious and national values together. It was not pitting one religion against another. It was not flaring communal tensions like the Indian past had witnessed during the partition in 1947 or demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, a mosque in Ayodhya. It was giving expression to the rights and responsibility of citizens without a conflict of religious and national identities. It had ushered an era of increased political participation and visible religiosity where the majority Hindus (~80%) and minorities (~20%) would exercise their right to vote being fully aware of their religious preferences (The Hindu, 2015). New secular was about kindling an 'alternative subjectivity'. It was not about eliminating religion from democracy but of using it politically to ensure that any road to nation building, in the coming years, would have to go through the new secular. It was about taking democratic decisions without losing the awareness of one's moral life. Though it brought religion and state together, yet it was marketable because it was with a promise of creating space for well-meaning democracy.

## Conclusion

The paper has argued for the interplay between the religious and the political agendas to make way for a new secular space. In this paper the conception of the religious space is not about a physical or geographical place which is contested. Rather the paper contributes to the understanding of religious space making by arguing for thoughtful consideration of cognitive spaces which are shaped in the minds of the citizens through the politics of religion and democracy. To explain further, these mental structures are created by the centres of religious power and authority for political advancements. This contributes to the understanding of religious space as a lived reality. The practice of religion in the real world is about convenience and choice which leaves religion to occupy the cognitive space of the believers. In this light how can theorising of religious space discuss only the physical? As Lefebvre (1991 cf. McAlister, 2005:3) puts it 'any given local space in a tripartite synthesis of physical, mental, and social spaces that operate simultaneously [...] Space is always a part of material culture, always social, always produced.'

But the challenge arises when one realises that no more can religious space making be only what it has been till now. There have occurred changes in the ways private and public spaces have been imagined and played out by the religious actors with cognitive being associated with the private domain. But one must not ignore that the private leads to the creation of the public domain. These spaces can no longer withstand being concrete, non negotiable physical spaces but have to transform into intangible and fluid spaces owing to the political and social demands of the times. How can religious space reinvent itself to become a new public space? The answer points to the fact that the boundaries of religion and politics are no more clearly drawn and religion itself witnesses political pressures and many a times succumbs to them.

VBI was actually a demonstration of this attempt to bring the private or religious to the public or political. This paper makes an attempt to show how religious enters the public sphere, though not without contestations. Identity politics in the form of Hindu majoritarianism, the idea of Hindu nationalism and the hegemonic discourse of Indianness perhaps are some of the internal contestations which VBI represents. But the larger politics is played out in the open based on the relationship between a guru and his followers who transformed the national to a 'sacred discourse' and the nation-state to a 'sacred space' which was adorned by the 'sacred event' that was election with a 'sacred duty' to vote. The paper sees an interweaving of religion, politics and the secular. The paper has brought out careful manoeuvring of the camouflaged political propaganda to create a dialogue for the new secular realm. The paper also touches upon social networking as an innovative virtual space for discussing the opinions and for connecting for common agendas, reminding one that religious identities will keep making ways for assertion through political standpoints. The paper opens up newer ways of understanding the politics of religious space making in a country like India where diversified religious traditions keep on reclaiming their space and challenging each other in order to coexist.

#### REFERENCES

- Appadurai A.  
1996 *Modernity at Large*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Archer M.  
2012 *The Reflexive Imperative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhargava R.  
2015 Beyond Moderate Secularism. In: Losonczy P and Herck WV (eds) *Secularism, Religion, and Politics: India and Europe*. New Delhi: Routledge, pp.57-64.

- Bhargava R.  
2002 India's Secular Constitution. In: Hasan Z, Sridharan E and Sudarshan R (eds) *India's Living Constitution: Ideas, Practices, Controversies*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, pp.105-133.
- Bilgrami A.  
1998 Secularism, Nationalism and Modernity. In: Bhargava R (ed) *Secularism and its Critics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.380-417.
- Bourdieu P.  
1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu P.  
1991 The genesis and structure of the religious field. *Comparative Social Research* 13: 1-43.
- Bruce S.  
2003 *Politics and Religion*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Calhoun C.  
2010 Rethinking secularism. *The hedgehog review* 12(3): 35-48.
- Chandhoke N.  
2015 Secularism: The life and times of a difficult concept. In: Losonczy P and Herck WV (eds) *Secularism, Religion, and Politics: India and Europe*. New Delhi: Routledge, pp.19-35.
- Chatterjee P.  
1998 Secularism and Tolerance. In: Bhargava R (ed) *Secularism and its Critics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.380-417.
- Copeman J.  
2009 *Veins of Devotion: Blood Donation and Religious Experience in North India*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Copeman J. and Ikegame A.  
2012 *The Guru in South Asia*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Copley A.  
2003 *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender and Sampradaya*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault M.  
1975 *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Random House.
- Fuller CJ  
2004 *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Ghosh R.  
2013. *Making Sense of the Secular*. New York: Routledge.

- Ikegame A.  
2012 The governing guru: Hindu mathas in liberalising India. In: Copeman J and Ikegame A (eds) *The guru in South Asia: New interdisciplinary perspectives*. Oxon: Routledge, pp.46-63.
- India Today  
2014 Available at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/modi-twitter-following-went-up-election-2014-results-may-16/1/362297.html>
- Indian Express  
2014 Available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/politics/modi-most-mentioned-politician-in-2014-poll-related-tweets/>
- Indian Express  
2016 Available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/pm-narendra-modi-twitter-amitabh-bachchan-followers-2995926/>
- IVBI  
2014 *i-vote for a better India: National report*. The Art of Living registered as Vyakti Vikas Kendra India Trust, Bangalore, pp.1-41.
- Jaffrelot C.  
2012 The political guru: The guru as eminence grise. In: Copeman J and Ikegame A (eds) *The guru in South Asia: New interdisciplinary perspectives*. Oxon: Routledge, pp.80-96.
- Jazeel T.  
2013 Sacred Modernism or Secular Space: The Ornamental Politics of Religion in Sri Lanka. In: Ghosh R (ed) *Making Sense of the Secular*. New York: Routledge, pp.144-156.
- Lefebvre H.  
1991 *The production of space*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Losonczy P. and Herck WV  
2015 *Secularism, Religion, and Politics: India and Europe*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Madan TN  
1997 *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Madan TN  
1987 Secularism in its place. *The Journal of Asian studies* 46(4): 747-759.
- Madood T  
2012 Is There a Crisis of Secularism in Western Europe? *Sociology of Religion*: 1-20.
- McAlister E.  
2005 Globalization and the Religious Production of Space. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44(3): 249-255.



- Momen M.  
2005 Can Secular Liberal Politics Be Reincarnated in India? *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 40(4): 243-260.
- Nandy A.  
1985 An Anti-Secularist Manifesto. *Seminar*.
- Nandy A.  
2003 *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sharma P.  
2014 From India Against Corruption to the Aam Aadmi Party: Social Movements, Political Parties and Citizen Engagement in India. In: Cordenillo R and Staak SV (eds) *Political Parties and Citizen Movements in Asia and Europe*. Stockholm: The Asia-Europe Foundation, Hanns Seldel Foundation, pp.39-59.
- Sitapati V.  
2011 What Anna Hazare's Movement and India's New Middle Classes Say about Each Other. *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(30), 39-44.
- Srinivas S.  
2008 *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City and Memory in a Global Religious Movement*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- Srinivas T.  
2010 *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Tandon S.  
2016 Exploring Well Being in Indian Context. *Indian Anthropologist* 46(1): 63-78.
- The Hindu  
2015 Available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/census-2011-data-on-population-by-religious-communities/article7579161.ece>
- University SS  
2014. Faculty of Good Governance and Public Policy. *Newsletter*, Cuttack: 1-12.
- VBI  
2014 *i-vote for a better India: Technical and Outreach report*. The Art of Living registered as Vyakti Vikas Kendra India Trust, Bangalore, pp. 1-27.
- Vyas J.  
2016 After Patanjali, existing FMCG players may face challenge from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Sri Sri Ayurveda. *The Economic Times*, 17 March 2016.

Warrier M.

2006      Modernity and its imbalances: Constructing modern selfhood in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. *Religion* 36(4): 179-195.

Warrier M.

2003      Processes of Secularisation in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. *Modern Asian Studies* 37(1: 2): 213-253.