The shift towards a concept of secularity for accommodating religious diversity in India has become more apparent in the 1980s and 1990s. The development was particularly influenced by the decline of state secularism as the basis for national identity and ascendancy of the majoritarian religious nationalist narrative at this time. This does not necessarily imply that other ideas and forms of secularity are absent or might not gain importance in the future. As Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchhardt have pointed out, research on the everyday perspectives and culturally saturated imaginaries of social groups is still scarce. One might add here the important role of (visual) media and technologically mediated communication. Alev Çinar, Srirupa Roy and Maha Yahya argue that non-state actors as well as privately owned media “have played a central role in elaborating and consolidating normative public imaginaries of the secular”, and it is again in relation to the public circulation of images that secularism as a norm has been negotiated, subverted or contested since the 1980s.

Yet, surprisingly, the role of advertising as an important visual medium operating across various platforms is rarely studied in the context of visual secularities in India. An almost paradigmatic visualization of this minoritising bent can be found in an advertisement for the Surf Excel detergent released shortly before Holi (the festival of colors) this year. The one-minute long ad, titled Rang Laaye Sang (colors bring you together), features two children, a girl and an evidently “religious” - Muslim boy. While all the other children in the clip are wearing “non-traditional” clothing (and religious - Muslim boy. While all the other children in the clip are wearing “non-traditional” clothing (and hence not visually marked as Hindu or religious), he is wearing a shalwar kameez and taqiyah (prayer cap). The girl dares other children to throw balloons filled with colored water at her while she is seemingly enjoying the splashes. As it turns out, she had her clothes purposely stained until other children ran out of balloons for her Muslim friend to reach the nearby mosque to offer namaaz without ruinating his white clothes. The ad ends with a female voice telling us that stains are good if you get them while doing good: “Agar kuch acha karne daag lag jaaye, toh daag achhe hain.”

The Surf Excel campaign instantly received an enthusiastic response and many journalists as well as twitter users lauded its positive message of “togetherness” and “communal harmony” for conveying “the true essence of India, which lies in its unity in diversity.” However, the backlash soon gained momentum too when calls for boycotting the product and the “foreign” company that “shoves ideals of partial secularism down our throat” started trending on social media. Reactions to the ad quickly became polarized to an extent that made a more nuanced discussion seemingly impossible, as negative comments were immediately associated with “Hindutva bigots” or “bhakts”. Yet, the fact that the visual religionization of Muslim minorities is extended, or understood to shape even young children’s perceptions of each other, surely deserves critical attention.

Given the risk of boycott calls and internet trolling, what motivates advertisers and companies to “intervene” or engage in a “rehabilitation” of secularism in India today? Does cause-related marketing create a different platform for new ideas on secularity and how they might work in Indian society? These are some of the questions I wish to explore further during the following months.