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"STAINS ARE GOOD IF YOU GET THEM WHILE DOING GOOD" BRAND ADVERTISING AS A NEW FIELD OF EXPERIMENTATION WITH VISUAL SECULARITY IN INDIA

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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.¹ 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 Burchardt 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 imaginations 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.² 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.



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As of late, a few multinational corporations, national companies as well as advertising agencies seem to be determined to "visually intervene" in the polarized debate about secularism and religious pluralism. They are, quite literally, seeking to initiate new ways of "seeing" secularity in India. Accordingly, my study will

include a contextualized analysis of highly visible brand advertising campaigns and the debates that surround them. Instead of portraying religious festivals primarily as family events, for instance, the focus is now directed at the social interaction and relation between members of different religious communities. Notwithstanding the good intentions, a *minoritising bent* is clearly recognizable in some of these campaigns. But how can a relationship based on mutual respect and recognition even be imagined, if the inequality and hierarchy between communities are constantly being visually reproduced? Roy uses the term *minoritising bent* to explain how the success of secularism in post-independent India was inextricably tied to the "existence of religious minorities as minorities", while simultaneously affirming the secular state's task of "reforming and rationalizing the majority religion of Hinduism".³ Subsequently, the permanent secular insistence on minority difference simultaneously "worked to constitute Hindu identity as the unmarked centre of Indianness".⁴

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 us 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 are 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 ruining 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 achha karne mein 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"



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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 [sic]" 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.⁵

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.

⁵ DETERGENTADCONTROVERSY:THEBIGGESTSTAIN.CANWEPLEASEKEEPOUR CHILDREN AWAY FROM THE NARRATIVE WHICH SAYS 'WE ARE DIFFERENT BUT TOGETHER'? (2019, MARCH 11). DAILY O. RETRIEVED FROM [HTTPS://WWW.DAILYO.IN/VARIETY/SURF-EXCEL-ADVERTISEMENT-CONTROVERSY-HOLI-IN-MYTHOLOGY-WHY-NO-ONE-IS-RAISING-THIS-QUESTION/STORY/1/29859.HTML](https://www.dailyo.in/variety/surf-excel-advertisement-controversy-holi-in-mythology-why-no-one-is-raising-this-question/story/1/29859.html)

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¹ WOHLRAB-SAHR, M., & BURCHARDT, M. (2012). MULTIPLE SECULARITIES: TOWARD A CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF SECULAR MODERNITIES. *COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY* 11, 875-909.

² ÇINAR, A., ROY, S., & YAHYA, M. (2012). *VISUALIZING SECULARISM AND RELIGION. EGYPT, LEBANON, TURKEY, INDIA*. ANN ARBOR: THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS, 14, 15.

³ ROY, S. (2010). TEMPLE AND DAM, FEZ AND HAT: THE SECULAR ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN INDIA AND TURKEY. *COMMONWEALTH & COMPARATIVE POLITICS* 48(2), 148-172.

⁴ ROY, S. (2010), 156.