

Arguably the dominant interpretation of secularism in Indian political culture since before Independence gives a special emphasis to "tolerance." In this view, Indian secularism is rooted in a distinctive Indic or Hindu tradition of religious tolerance. Indeed, Hindu tolerance continues to be understood by many to facilitate religious liberty in India. Yet in recent decades, the ideal of Hindu tolerance has been invoked most vociferously by proponents of the Hindu Right, in service of systematic persecution of the Muslim minority and violent campaign against the free propagation of religion by native Christians and foreign missionaries. In this paper, I document the influence of Hindu tolerance not just on contemporary formulations of secular politics, but also on secular historiography. I make a case for the importance of constructing a narrative that can both account for the historical emergence of this secular ideal, and make visible different configurations of religious liberty, identity, and civility in the Indian past.