

SECULAR THOUGHTS

Without equality, democracy and social justice, which are three interrelated factors, secularism cannot exist as a positive value in society.

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This essay is based on a paper presented at a seminar organized by Social Scientist and SAHMAT in New Delhi to felicitate historian Romila Thapar and her contribution to secularism.

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Secularism in India appears to have begun its journey with a dead weight around its neck – an irreconcilable resolution of realizing communal harmony without creating the material and ideological foundations to generate and sustain it. Without equality, democracy and social justice, which are three interrelated factors, secularism cannot exist as a positive value in society.

I HAVE known Prof. Romila Thapar for about 45 years, most of it as a colleague at the Centre for Historical Studies of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Romila, as she is called by almost everybody – from her eight-year-old grandnephew to all of us present here – had helped to set up, organize and give a distinct academic orientation to the centre. Her commitment to the interest of the centre has always been a notch above personal considerations, a principle without which no institution of excellence can be built. The exacting standards she set for colleagues and students by her personal example of continuous scholarly pursuits provided the ambience for the academic work of the centre. That she has been a team person who believes in democratic functioning of institutions has accentuated the quality of her contribution.

In the field of historical research, Romila's works stand apart, both in narration and in interpretation. The writing of ancient Indian history during the post-Independence era found in her one of its outstanding practitioners, who brought together modes of analysis and interpretation with a theoretically nuanced innovative methodology. The quality of her contribution to historical scholarship is so well known that it needs no reiteration, so also the fact that the large corpus of her work has been a major intervention in contemporary social and political life. The past often figures as a powerful force

in the struggles of the present. So it was during the recent Hindu communal resurgence, using history as a means of mobilization. In countering the misuse of the past, Romila's study and interpretation of ancient Indian civilization has served as a major intellectual resource.

The importance of Romila's work is not limited to the retrieval of secular history from the biased interpretations of colonial and communal historians, which in a variety of ways many others also have accomplished. Her contribution is of a different order, marked by a qualitative change in the prevalent method of historical reconstruction. Her intellectual journey from the times of her initial research on the history of Asoka to the more recent interpretation of the Somanath temple episode reflects a quality of scholarship ever vigilant to engage with the latest trends in the discipline.

Not that alone. She combines with remarkable ease scholarly pursuit with social commitment in a manner that her well-informed opinion lends direction to many a public issue. The controversy over the Babri Masjid is perhaps the most well-known example. In the campaign against "the political abuse of history", a term she coined, during those difficult days of Hindutva resurgence, exploiting the history of Ayodhya, Romila was in the forefront – writing, speaking, protesting and fasting in defence of the ideals of secularism. The Hindu communal cabal hated her because they could not disprove her facts or refute her interpretation or contradict her arguments. At the same time, she entertained serious reservations about the practice of secularism, particularly its pursuit by the state. It is most appropriate, therefore, that the seminar to felicitate her is devoted to a critical reappraisal of the way secularism was conceived and practiced.

Debate on Secularism

The concern of academic debate and public discussion as well as creative representation of secularism has been mainly political: the relationship between state and religion, interrelationship between different communities, and interdependence of secularism and democracy. A common bond connecting these three issues is the quest for religious harmony, which in course of time came to be identified with secularism. In politics, almost everybody swears by it although

very few practise it. The identity of secularism with religious harmony is well pronounced in creative representation. The popular Hindi film industry, for instance, has exploited its emotional possibilities in blockbusters such as *Sholay* and *Zanjeer* by celebrating the sacrifice of characters committed to the pursuit of religious harmony. In contrast, serious cinema has demonstrated how fragile the commitment to religious harmony can be, as was so brilliantly captured in Govind Nihlani's *Tamas*, based on Bisham Sahni's novel by the same name. The journey from *Sholay* to *Tamas* indicates the vast areas of emotion, consciousness and culture that still remain unexplored both in academic investigations and in creative representations. As secularism appears to be weakening in the face of the more emotional appeal of communalism, understanding the vicissitudes of the former beyond their political dimension demands closer attention.

Looking back from the vantage point of 63 years' experience, the practice of Indian secularism presents a mixed bag of achievements and failures. It has succeeded in weathering one crisis after another, so much so that all discussions on secularism start and end with a consideration of either past or impending crises. Yet, secularism has withstood the intellectual scepticism about its relevance by the critics of modernity or its rejection as an alien system by communal ideologues. Moreover, legal and institutional structures have managed to safeguard the secular space through constitutionally guaranteed public institutions. It is indeed true that aberrations have taken place in all these spheres, yet secularism has survived, often precariously, but nevertheless with sufficient strength to make the system work. As Martha Nussbaum has observed, Indian society had reached the brink of religious fascism, but had successfully pulled back, not because of the tactical error of communal forces but most probably because of a tradition – the popular commitment to secularism.

It was because of this commitment that the country overcame the trauma of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, responded powerfully to the massacre of the minorities in Gujarat orchestrated by the local government, and denounced the attack on Christians in Kandhamal by Hindu fundamentalist groups. On all these occasions, Indian secularism asserted itself in a manner that forestalled any further disruptions.

Secularization

This is not to suggest that the biography of Indian secularism can be written as a success story. Far from it. The assaults on secularism witnessed in the recent past were partly a symptom of the weaknesses – some might even say

failure – of secularization in Indian society. Its origin can be traced to the emergence of a public sphere which provided the space for a rational critique of religious practices. The Indian experience shared some of the general features, particularly the attempt to reduce the dependence upon supra human agency and to narrow down the areas of life in which religious ideas, symbols and institutions held sway, but had its own specific character, influenced by social, cultural and political specificities. Yet, the process of secularization that Indian society had experienced was qualitatively different from what happened in most other countries, including countries in Europe. In Europe, secularisation was integral to the intellectual and cultural movements represented by the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Central to these movements was the influence of humanism, which accorded primacy to human beings and their problems of existence. Even if the social depth and intellectual intensity were missing, the Indian historical experience was not devoid of an effort to privilege the secular. However, the social base of secularization in India being a weak and culturally colonized middle class, it was incapable of ushering in an intellectual and cultural transformation, which would lay the foundations of a modern society.

Yet, the colonial period did witness a rational critique of religious practices, a humanist alternative for social ethics and a universalist philosophy for social harmony. In the absence of a social base powerful enough to nurture these ideas, they could not usher in a secular alternative that could transgress the caste and religious boundaries and create an independent ethical code. This was compounded by the nature of social and religious reform which, instead of dissolving caste and religious influence, tended to reinforce them. As a consequence, social identities were built around primordial loyalties, which served as a major factor in the making of political consciousness. This trajectory of social development forced the secular to retreat into the space in which religious ideologies held their sway. The Indian form of secularism struck roots in this space dominated by religious ideologies, the formation of which was partly aided by the socio-religious reform and partly by the intervention of the colonial state.

Communitarian Context

The character of secularism in India can be understood only in the context of the social composition and cultural make-up of its society. The communities of the pre-colonial period, experienced in their local settings, both material and ideological, a fundamental change during the colonial administration. A feature that influenced this process was the religionization of small and diverse communities that

existed on the basis of their economic and social functions. Their sense of identity, circumscribed by the local conditions, was slowly eroded by the forces unleashed by colonial rule. The 4,000-odd communities that the Anthropological Survey of India had identified, on the basis of their life patterns, belief systems and social structure, eventually came within the parameters of one religion or the other. The constitution of religious communities was thus a predominantly colonial phenomenon. In pre-colonial times, religion was a perceived and experienced reality, but it did not generate trans-local consciousness. A partial change occurred because of the community-based conception of society and consequent administrative measures propagated by colonial rule.

Communal conflicts, which became quite frequent during the colonial administration, further strengthened community consciousness. For the colonial state the conflicts were not politically unwelcome. Administratively, however, it was necessary to contain them. As a result, two strategies were employed by the colonial state for their resolution: suppression of violence, on the one hand, and the creation and incorporation of civil society into the colonial system, on the other. The first was invoked when violence threatened to disrupt the normal transactions, and the second, as a long-term policy of hegemonisation. In pursuit of the second the government gave representation to Indians in administrative, legislative and advisory bodies on the basis of a fair distribution of patronage to the members of different religious communities. Be it representation in the organizations sponsored by the colonial government to ensure its presence and influence in civil society or elections to legislative councils or nomination to executive and advisory bodies, the government took care to distribute patronage according to community affiliation. The official recognition of the representative character to religious communities had unintended consequences: first, it facilitated the construction of internal solidarity and cohesion of communities, and secondly, it imparted to the communities an overarching character.

The formation of communities was aided by colonialism in yet another, even if indirect, manner. The changes in the system of communication and improvement in infrastructural facilities brought about by colonial modernization, in however limited a manner, considerably increased physical mobility across the country. The pan-Indian religious communities were no more an object of imagination alone; instead they became part of the experienced reality. Although travel for pilgrimage and trade was common even during pre-colonial

times, it became more extensive and frequent under colonialism.

Apart from the mobility due to administrative and military reasons, there was also movement for personal reasons. In 1830, Engula Veeraswamy went on a Kasi yatra from Madras and wrote a journal describing the land and the people he encountered. Similarly, Vishnu Bhatt Godshe Versikar, a Chitpavan Brahmin, travelled to North India in 1857 for rendering religious services, and his experience on the way sensitized him about the popular sentiments against colonial rule. He also has recorded his experience in a travelogue. The experience of Veeraswamy and Versikar was part of the formation of a larger communitarian identity. A consequence of this physical mobility was that by the middle of the 19th century the social horizon of the people had transgressed local boundaries.

The process of secularization occurring in the context of the historical experience encapsulated above had led to a rearticulation of the relationship between state and religion as well as of different religious communities. What the Indian form of secularism did was to address these two dimensions, but without ensuring the social reach of democracy and justice and, more grievously, without effecting cultural equality. As a result, both state- and society-centric approaches to secularism were exclusively enclosed in the problematic of religious consciousness and hence led to continuous tension between the religious and material conditions of existence. The former was concerned with the relationship between state and religion while the latter focussed on inter-religious relations. Jawaharlal Nehru had told Andre Malraux that the secular project in India was not limited to the creation of a “secular state in a religious society, but the creation of a secular state in a multi-religious society”.

This important distinction demanded a three-way resolution: first, determining the relationship between state and religion; secondly, assigning relative distance between state and different religious communities; and thirdly, ensuring harmonious relationship between communities. The solution proffered was the incorporation of all three issues within a single remedy – namely, secularization of the relationship between the state, religion and community. The solution was based on an Enlightenment view of religion which opposed revelation, dogmatism and superstition. At the same time religion as such was not rejected.

Having thus ensured that the Indian state would not be “irreligious or anti-religious”, the principle of neutrality

towards all religions was adopted. The intercommunity relationship was a more difficult issue, as it was integral to social consciousness, which can be created only through continuous intervention. In the light of such an understanding and approach, the secular project tended to work towards the realization of religious harmony. But secularism is not a product of religious harmony. In fact, religious harmony is achievable only if secularism is in place. But in the conception of secularism in India, religion was implicated in a manner that the state could not dissociate itself from religious matters. Moreover, the realization of secularism depended upon its reconceptualization with secular political and cultural values embedded in it. But the conception of religious harmony as secularism was not sufficiently inclusive to realize this possibility.

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During his radical phase, Nehru had envisioned a modern state completely dissociated from religious concerns. A departure from it to accommodate religious pluralism was in all probability due to the influence of Gandhi for whom religion was “the source of value for judging the worth of all worldly goals and actions”. The Mahatma, considered “the spiritual father of Indian secularism”, sacrificed his life for Hindu-Muslim harmony; yet, harmony remained a distant dream. The question, therefore, is that if religious harmony is not secularism, what else constitutes it in a multi-religious society? The answer perhaps lies in the ability of the state and society to internalise values and ethics, informed by reason and humanism. The social reality that the Indian form of secularism has sought to address is religious plurality and the tensions arising out of it, for which the peaceful coexistence of different religions was adopted as the solution. History has been invoked to trace its antecedents in religious harmony and cultural synthesis from medieval times. As a part of this secular project, Sufi and Bhakti traditions have been invoked, the contribution of liberal rulers like Akbar has been celebrated, and the composite nature of music, architecture, painting, and so on was retrieved. The earliest representative view of this history is the work of Tarachand – who incidentally was handpicked by Nehru to explain the Indian secular tradition to the Western audience – on the evolution of a composite culture through Hindu-Muslim interaction.

Several histories have been written and continue to be written to elaborate this thesis. The secular history, however, is not necessarily the history of secular rulers or of secular tendencies. The secular is implicated in the historical process as a whole, namely, in the social, cultural and ideological realm of social existence and their representations. A departure from a communitarian view is therefore a necessary step if secular history is to be retrieved from the problematic of religious harmony. Much of the energy of secular history has been expended for disproving the colonial and communal view of the Indian past being the history of continuous struggles between religious communities and for establishing the tradition of harmonious relations of religious communities. The new directions in secular history have to seek out avenues of historical investigations, like shared values, inclusive social engagements and common cultural participation.

An Alternative View

The inter-community relations have been so discredited in the recent past by the incidence of intermittent religious conflicts that secularism, it is argued, has reached a stage beyond redemption. The inability of the state to observe religious neutrality and to maintain equidistance from religions and the resurgence of communalism which has compounded it are the main reasons attributed to this discomfiture. Moreover, secularism was posited exclusively within the realm of religion, and other areas of human existence, like culture and economy, were not incorporated into the secular conception.

Among the advocates of secularism, Jawaharlal Nehru was quite conscious of the importance of taking cognisance of the compulsions of material life. During his early radical phase, he had emphasised the role of economy in the construction of a secular society: “The real thing to my mind is the economic factor. If we lay stress on this and divert public attention to it, we will find automatically that religious differences recede to the background and a common bond unites different groups.” This opinion of Nehru can be interpreted to mean that secularism can be a reality only within the rubric of social justice. That is why Baba Saheb Ambedkar considered secularism not only a political issue but also a moral issue. In this, Gandhiji and Ambedkar appear to share the same ground. But, in the final analysis, neither Gandhi’s ethical notions nor Nehru’s materialist ideas nor Ambedkar’s sense of justice figured as the principles guiding secularism.

The conception of secularism as religious harmony is based on a monolithic view of religion, which does not take into

account the differentiation within it. Within each religion there are several cultural and social groups, between whom both contradictions and complementarities exist. As a result, religious pluralism and cultural pluralism connote entirely different realities even though they are used as interchangeable by many. The assumption of Indian secularism that the tensions arising out of religious pluralism can be overcome by harmony is unreal because of the cultural and social hierarchies that exist within religion. Because of the prevalence of these hierarchies, attempts to bring about religious harmony cannot cover all followers of any religion. The approach to secularism exclusively through inter-religious relations cannot lead to an abiding solution.

Being so, secularism in India appears to have begun its journey with a dead weight around its neck. It carries the burden of an irreconcilable resolution of realising communal harmony without creating material and ideological foundations to generate and sustain it. Implied in this reality is that the communal harmony attempted at the religious level leaves the internal contradictions untouched. The importance attributed to religious harmony is indeed logical, given the reality of a multi-religious society. But it is not sufficiently inclusive to reconcile the cultural differences. For realising inclusiveness, cultural plurality is not sufficient; what is essential is cultural equality. The Indian form of secularism draws upon cultural plurality, which does not dissolve but accentuates differences and thus tends to undermine secularism. Integral to the concept of secularism, therefore,

is cultural equality; so also are democracy and social justice. Without these three interrelated factors – equality, democracy and social justice – secularism cannot exist as a positive value in society.

The meaning of the Indian form of secularism, beyond inter-religious harmony, which the Constitution had sought to implement through practice, has not been internalised by state and society. No definition of secularism was prescribed at the time of adopting the Constitution or even when the concept was introduced into it in 1976. The meaning, therefore, has been a subject of unending debate. A clearer reformulation of the concept and recovery of its meaning is now required in the light of historical experience and contemporary realities. It cannot be accomplished either by romanticising the indigenous past or by dismissing the ability of vernacular culture to engage with it. The alternative lies in imparting the concept and the values of democracy and social justice and cultural equality.

I would like to end by recalling what Prof. Romila Thapar said in 2002 in her foreword to my book *Before the Night Falls: Forebodings of Fascism in India*: “Secularism has to be retrieved from being a pale shadow of what is projected as religious co-existence, to a system of values and actions that come from insisting upon democratic functioning and human rights.” The success of secularism will depend upon such a reorientation. ■

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