

Public Lecture in Memory of Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer

**INDIAN SOCIETY AND THE SECULAR**

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I would like to thank Mr Irfan Engineer for having done me the honour of inviting me to give the Asghar Ali Engineer Memorial lecture. I deem it a great privilege to have been asked, as it commemorates the work of a person deeply concerned with establishing a secular Indian society, and dedicating himself to the furtherance of this objective.

Let me say at the outset that secularism is not just a political slogan, although our political parties have attempted to reduce it to that. So, one party endorses it in theory but hesitates to apply it properly in practice, the other makes fun of it since its foundational ideology is anti-secular. Secularizing a society is deeply tied to the question of the kind of society that we want. That is why perhaps it was widely discussed in the early years of independence, whereas now the attempt is not to give it attention, as it means seriously re-assessing the direction that we are currently giving to Indian society. There was even a tentative suggestion recently that it could be deleted from the Constitution, possibly motivated by the hope that the demand for its inclusion will be forgotten.

If, however, we want a secular society then that involves a change of mind-set, we would have to cease to think of ourselves as identified primarily by religion, caste, or language, and start thinking of ourselves primarily as equal citizens of one nation, both in theory and in practice. This involves mutual obligations between the state and the citizen applicable to all. The relationship of other identities such as religion, caste, language and region, will inevitably become secondary. These latter have to be adjusted so as to ensure that the rights of citizenship together with what they entail, remain primary. Eventually the state will not be expected to provide patronage to any religion or to support any religious organization. This is a change that has barely begun and is already meeting with deliberate negations from some quarters.

In this lecture I would like to consider three aspects of what is involved in any discussion of Indian society and the secular. I would like initially to explain how I would define the secular, since I find that the generally accepted definition prevailing in India is inadequate and not everyone agrees on the definition. I shall then take up the question of how the social functioning of religions in India differed from the European experience and therefore in India religion has to be considered in association with caste and not in isolation from it. Finally I shall say something on where the priorities lie for the process of secularizing Indian society.

### *Definitions*

I would like to begin by trying to explain what I mean by the terms secular, secularism, and secularizing. Secular is that which relates to the world but is distinct from the religious. Secularism involves questioning the control that religious organizations have over social institutions. It does not deny the presence of religion in society but demarcates the social institutions over which religion can or cannot exercise control. This distinction is important. Secularizing is the process by which society changes and recognizes the distinction.

When the term was first used in 1851, 'secular' had only one basic meaning. It argued in support of the fact that laws relating to social ethics, values and morals, had been created by human society in order to ensure the well-being and harmonious functioning of the society. They were neither the creation of divine authority, nor did they require the sanction of divine authority. Religious authority may claim such a sanction but in effect the laws can exist without it. Authority lay in reasoning out what was best for society by those who constituted that society. Authority was exercised through laws. Social values therefore, frequently had their roots in reasoning and rational thinking. This was especially needed where the intention was and is to establish a moral code that required the agreement of the entire society and was not linked to any particular religion.

What this means is that the laws and social values that govern society should be observed as laws in themselves and not because they carry divine sanctions. They have their own authority distinct from religion or caste. Religion involving belief and faith in a deity and in an after-life, and such like, continued to exist. However, civil

laws were promulgated and upheld by the secular authority. Secularism therefore is not a denial of religion but it is a curtailment of the control that religion has over social functioning, a control exercised through diverse religious organizations.

This theory had a variety of consequences. One was that it allowed people the freedom to think beyond what was told to them as being religiously correct. Again this did not mean throwing religion overboard, but disentangling the codes of social behaviour from religious control. This did not make people immoral as some had feared, since the threat of punishment for breaking laws was enforced, and punishment came immediately in this life. It was not postponed to the next life as in religious codes. So it made people think about the purpose of their laws and that is always useful. The observance of the law is strengthened when people understand why it exists.

Most people are socialized into religion from childhood and do not question it. It gradually becomes a psychological support and as such there is even less need to question the belief. Having to reason things out is never as easy as just accepting what one is told. It means that people have to learn to think independently. This can be facilitated if the kind of education they were given enabled them to reason out their decisions. The alternative was to make them dependent on an unknown supernatural power. The explanation of everything being part of divine plan and sanction was not always the answer to simple questions. Therefore, education involved searching for explanations other than those based on faith and belief, or possibly even honing these if there was evidence. But preferably social laws began to be drawn from enquiring into both the natural and human world in which we live. So the explanations for social laws became an essential part of education and of thinking about the implication of being secularized.

Religion had originated as a personal, emotional need. For many it remains so. This extended to explanations of how the universe functioned which was attributed to a supernatural power that was held in awe. Gradually however this personalized religion became a complex organized religion and took the form of institutions ambitious to control society and politics. With this change religion became powerful both as the focus of belief, and as an authority controlling social institutions through

various religious organizations. In some places its power paralleled that of the governing authority – the state. It is this particular aspect of religion that the secular person wishes to see curtailed and kept separate from the functioning of the state. This makes it necessary to concede the presence of the secular in the constitution of a democracy. The distinction between religion and the religious control over social institutions is important because we often overlook it in saying that secularism denies religion altogether.

Secularism then takes on an additional meaning. The state having authority over the making and observing of laws by human agencies, should be distinct from religion since religion has its sanction from another source, namely faith and deity. The authority of each was clearly different. Let me repeat, that the secular is not a denial of religion. It is not the equivalent of atheism. Secularism does not mean expunging religion. But the control of religious organizations over social laws and institutions has to be limited.

Civil laws are the spine of a society. They should protect the rights to human life, and they should ensure that there is no discrimination that affects life and work. This is crucial to protecting the points of change in a human lifetime necessitating laws – birth, marriage or even its break-up, processes of education by which a child is socialized into society, occupation and employment, and inheritance particularly of what is thought of as property. These come under the jurisdiction of the civil law. To make this effective, such laws relating to the functioning of society and the social life of humans, have necessarily to provide the basic aspects of welfare in a modern state – the absolute minimum of which are: food and clean water, equal access to education and to health-care for all members of society, and to employment. And this is to be irrespective of religion and caste. If civil laws are to be universal and uniform, as they would be in a secular society, then they must guarantee this. Discrimination on any count would be unacceptable.

So religious authority remains in a secular system but is restricted to governing religious belief and practice. It has been argued that there should be no rigid barrier between religion and the state, but that there can be a negotiated principled distance between them. This can allow for new alignments within the

religion, or between the religions, or between religion and the state. The overall relationship would disallow the dominance of any one religion since each would have equal rights on the state and equal status before the law. Nevertheless, there would be a degree of stipulated separation in this arrangement, in as much as religious authority would no longer be controlling social laws.

This is not of course the same as what is sometimes described as the Indian definition of secularism, namely, the co-existence of all religions. Rulers in the past that supported this idea, such as the two who are always quoted – Ashoka and Akbar are spoken of as providing a kind of prelude to secularism. However, the mere co-existence of religions is insufficient as they can still be treated as unequal and some remain marginalized. When we speak of the religions of India today, we are seldom conscious of the religions of a quarter or more of the population who are at the lower edges of society. The acceptance of co-existence together with equal status before the law, can certainly be a first step. But we do have to ask how far it goes and what should be the next step.

This definition is incomplete since the question of the jurisdiction of religious authority over society, that is crucial, remains unanswered. The intention would in any case be not to put up barriers between state and religion. It would instead be to demarcate the activities that come under a civil jurisdiction and those that would continue to be controlled by the organizations representing religious authority. In a democratic system the equality would be essential, as essential as spelling out who controls which laws.

In contemporary India the co-existence of religions already exists but the secular is less evident and some might even say, virtually absent. Political and state patronage does not invariably distance itself from religious organizations. In fact the two are sometimes closely tied.

Some oppose secularism by arguing that it is a western concept, not suited to India. Should the same be said about nationhood and democracy, both new to post-colonial India? And surely our internalizing of the neo-liberal market economy is a far stronger imprint of the west. To support the secularizing of society does not mean subordinating ourselves to a western or an alien concept, but rather trying to

understand a process of change in our history after independence. Being a nation is a new experience of modern times, and is current now in virtually every part of the world. We have chosen democracy as the most feasible system despite its being a new experience, and a secular society is essential to democratic functioning.

Secularism is the necessary manifestation of a social change that comes with societies that begin to function with modern institutions that are the channels of new political, economic and social forms. It is a concept that accompanies modernization. It assumes new directions in the functions of law and ethics and the relations between religion and the state. We should not look for it in its current form in our pre-modern history. But what we can search for and of which we have evidence was a long and evident tradition of questioning orthodoxies of various kinds, including religious orthodoxies in Indian religions. This began in the first millennium BC and continued unbroken to the present. A deeper study of these schools of thought would make reasoned thinking more familiar to us and would puncture the idea that Indians never questioned orthodoxy. When laws are recognized as made by human societies and not divinely dictated, then negotiating changes in these laws because of social change that has happened continuously in the past, also gets facilitated.

### *Colonial Readings of Indian Religions*

Let me turn now to looking more closely at the specifically Indian aspect of the subject. I would like to comment on how I see the interaction of religions and society in the past, in order to compare it with how it is viewed in our times. Any deliberate social change with sizeable consequences becomes a little easier to handle if one can see the earlier historical forms of the society and its gradual mutation. The present after all emerges out of the past. My argument is that in the important area of the relationship between society and religion we have been nurtured on ideas about religion in India that were constructed by colonial thought on the subject. The colonial perception was in many ways a disjuncture in understanding how religion functioned in pre-modern Indian society. Yet we have accepted it without adequate questioning. So a brief look at the past might be useful.

With reference to Europe, secularism is often described as the separation between Church and State. This is taken as a one-to-one relationship because

generally the religion was a single monolithic religion – Christianity, either Catholic or Protestant. This was so strongly asserted that in past times before the rise of Protestantism, those that questioned Catholic belief and practice were heavily punished as heretics. Some were burnt at the stake, some had to recant and many faced the punitive actions required by the Inquisition. Although Protestantism later was perhaps more flexible the earlier experience was not forgotten. (Incidentally, this single monolithic religion facing the state, is now changing in many European countries with the coming of migrant communities bringing their own religions, and hence the frequent contestations over the secular in society).

This European perspective of religion being monolithic and identified with large pan-European communities, was what the colonizers brought to India, and was the perspective from which they viewed Indian religions. So their reading of Indian religion needs re-investigation. The colonial image of Indian society projected two monolithic religions, the Hindu and the Muslim, and the two religions defined the identity of two nations – the Hindu and the Muslim. They occupied the same territory. They were depicted as largely antagonistic to each other. It was maintained that because of their mutual hostility, a controlling authority from outside was required. This then became one of the justifications for colonial rule. As many historians have pointed out, this image was also imprinted on the history of India, especially on the medieval period, thus reinforcing the distancing between the two religions and also in their ideologies. A shared history was not conceded in this approach to the past.

The concept of majority and minority communities identified by religion further consolidated the idea of religion being monolithic. In addition it fuelled the politics of religious identities. Claims of the majority community were juxtaposed with the aspirations of the minority communities. Social and political claims and demands were projected as religious. Such an understanding of society obstructs the functioning of democracy. Permanent majority and minority communities are contrary to the norms of democracy. The creation of caste and religion-based vote-banks in the electoral system, are not exactly conducive to democratic functioning. A majority that is viable as a democratically formed majority, requires the larger number of people to come together, in support of a particular issue, and irrespective of their other affiliations. The constituents of a democratic majority therefore change with

each issue, and there is no permanent majority community with a specifically defined membership.

Anti-colonial nationalism tried to confront this image, since broad-based nationalism has to be inclusive and bring in a range of opinion and it draws on a shared history. The shared history is crucial. I would like to quote Eric Hobsbawm who wrote that history is to nationalisms what the poppy is to the opium addict. It is the source. It feeds, in this case, ideas of identity. Anti-colonial nationalism did not question the monolithic nature of religious communities. Instead it focused more on denying their antagonism, preferring to project just the co-existence of religious communities. This became central to its idea of secularism and has come to be called the Indian definition of secularism. But it did not succeed as we can see from the events of the present. One reason was that the colonial view of religion in India was (and it continues to be), also foundational to the ideologies of what are now referred to as religious nationalisms, those that went into the making of the communal landscape of India. A century or so ago the reference was to the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha. These were perhaps fewer religious orthodoxies when compared to ideologies using religion for political mobilization. Today religious nationalism includes a range of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and other religious organizations, politically ambitious and anxious to continue their control over community laws to ensure a political constituency. History is not shared, it is divisive and it becomes the arena of battle.

We may well ask, was this actually the way in which religion functioned as part of Indian society from early times? Or have we not looked analytically at our past and that of the role of religion in our earlier social institutions. What forms did these organizations take, how did they exert authority, and why don't we examine which sections of society supported which kind of organization?

I would like to argue that the historical picture of religions in India was complex and was not a simple binary. It seems to me that there were two sets of relationships that need to be examined. One was the way in which religion and society interacted. Religious groups consisted of a range of sects rather than monolithic communities, and the social linkage was through caste. It was linked to forms such as



*varna*, *jati*, *zat* and so on. This combination of sect and caste mediated in turn, the other relationship, that between the religious sect and the state. In this there was no Church to bring together the sects into a single entity. The state having to relate to individual sects gave the relationship a different flavor.

In the Indian scene the crucial relationship lay in the connection between multiple religious sects and many castes. The sect propagated belief, the caste often determined its social context. Status was measured through an inter-dependence of the two. Upper castes across religions, whether they observed caste restrictions strictly or not, tended to be more closely associated with the formal manifestations of the religions, generally text-based; whereas the lower castes that were much larger in number, tended to be more flexible in their religious identities. Caste determined the social code, maintained formally by those who claimed to be educated and knew the law. Few people knew the texts or the sources of the laws. For most people it was the hearsay of tradition, the lore maintained by the *jati*, and perhaps the experience of the daily routine. Codes after all are ultimately man made, however much they may be backed by claims to divine sanction as maintained by the voice of religion. The authority of caste and sect over the social code has to be replaced in our times by a civil law common and applicable to all. This will require looking afresh at civil law to ensure its secularity and its endorsement of social justice. Both are familiar as values but their application in social institutions is new.

### *Historical Perspectives of Religions in India*

Many valuable and meticulous studies have been made of religious texts that have enhanced our understanding of these texts. However, less attention has been given to examining the institutions created by various religions, both to propagate their beliefs and as agencies of social control. Rather than focusing on monolithic, undifferentiated religious society in general, what may be more insightful would be if we study the link between caste and sect in order to comprehend the interface between religion and society in our past. The link between caste and sect had a flexibility or fluidity that monolithic religious communities lack. We could then ask whether rigidity lay less in religion and more in caste discrimination? In that case the colonial construction of religion in India that we have readily accepted, would have to be scrutinized afresh. Perhaps we need to look more carefully at how caste, or even

elements of class, in past times and now, shaped and are shaping the relations between religion and society. Which groups in society support which politico-religious organizations and why?

In pre-Islamic times there are no references to any monolithic type of Hinduism. Interestingly what we today call religions are not mentioned as such, but what are mentioned are two broad categories of sects that propagated their distinctive ideas. These were the Brahmana and the Shramana. A basic differentiation was based on belief in or denial of, divinity; and theories about the after-life. Brahmana referred to Brahmanic beliefs and rituals. Shramana referred to the *shramanas* or Buddhist, Jaina and other monks of the heterodox orders, the *nastika* / non-believers, and their followers. These latter sects rejected the *Vedas*, divine sanctions and the concept of the soul, and were consequently associated with more rational explanations of the universe and human society. Within each of these two categories there was recognition of a range of distinct sects with varying beliefs.

This duality continues to be used with reference to what we call religion, over a period of 1500 years. The earliest mention is in the edicts of Ashoka (*bamhanam-samananam*). The later quotations from the account of the Greek visitor Megasthenes refer to his statement on the *Brachmanes* and *Sarmanes*. In the travel accounts of visits to India of the Chinese Buddhist monks in the latter part of the first millennium AD the distinction is present. It is also present in the book of Al-Biruni of the eleventh century AD, where the Shamaniyyas were said to cordially dislike the Brahmanas.

Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* of the twelfth century AD refers to earlier hostilities between Shaiva sects and some Buddhist monastic orders; and inscriptions from south India refer to violent disagreements between some Shaiva and Jaina sects. Interestingly they used the same abusive terms for each other. The grammarian Patanjali of the early centuries AD, refers to the two, adding that their relationship can be compared to that between the snake and the mongoose!

This underlines the fact that there were among the multiple sects some that adhered to the orthodoxy and others that were supporters of the heterodoxy. The

advantage of sects over monolithic religions is that sects shade off from the very orthodox to those far less so. This allows the less orthodox to assimilate new beliefs and this is not treated as heresy. The heretics function in a stream of their own. This allows for the occasional, even if marginal overlaps at the edges of both categories. When confrontations became acute violence was resorted to.

A distinction ought to be made at this point between sect as used in the Christian sense and sect as used with reference to Indian religions. The words used more frequently in Sanskrit and in later Indian languages present a spectrum of meaning, suggesting that these were the more familiar concepts. Thus *pashanda*, was originally neutral but gradually incorporated a sense of heresy and whereas opponents may use this term it was not used in self-definition. *Shakha*, suggests a branching off from a bigger organization. But *patha*, *pantha*, *marga*, suggest followers along a path of thought and action that can be fairly freely formulated. *Sampradaya* is more often a doctrine transmitted through teaching. Sects therefore are not breakaways from monolithic religions. Their authority comes from independent founders, some being historical figures, they follow a distinctive organized form and much of their teaching is oral to begin with. Belonging to a sect is more frequently than not by individual choice. The larger body of people is often from the lower levels of society but this does not debar anyone from the upper castes.

A third category that is not listed as such in early texts was that of those that were discriminated against because of their low caste, or lack of it. They had their own belief system and forms of worship. The creation of a sect was open and led to a plurality that became characteristic of religion in India, irrespective of which religion. This constitutes an important aspect in understanding the relationship between religion and society. Such relationships differ from society to society. We cannot assume therefore that the role of religion that emerged for Europe can be applied automatically to India – a mistake made by colonial scholarship. This does not imply that the meaning of secularism can change, but that the manner in which it is introduced into a society may vary.

Whereas the history of Shramanism takes a more linear form with some segments branching off from existing segments, the history of Brahmanism is less

linear and more complex. An early phase was Vedic Brahmanism focusing on the ritual of sacrifice, the *yajna*, invoking many deities and especially Indra and Agni, and performed by upper castes. These beliefs were questioned by a variety of heterodox sects pre-eminently the Buddhist and Jaina but including many others such as the Charvaka and Ajivika. This category came to be called Shramana. Incidentally the heterodox groups tended to provide generally rational explanations about the formation of social institutions and established a critical tradition of questioning orthodoxy, eventually establishing their own orthodoxies.

By the Christian era a more individualized belief system and ritual came into being with a focus on other deities – Shiva and Vishnu. Sects of worshippers came together differentiated by particular deities, as for example, the Vaishnava Bhagavatas and the Shaiva Pashupatas. From the seventh century onwards religious belief and worship was prevalent in the form of devotional sects, what we call the Bhakti sects. They arose at varying times in different parts of the sub-continent. The earliest recognizable as such were the Alvars and Nayyanars in the south. Subsequent to this were many in the north, with or without links to the southern tradition. Some among these reflect the striations of new religious ideas.

Both Brahmanism and Shramanism received hefty patronage and became wealthy, powerful, established religions. This gave them status and enabled them to control social laws.

Donations were made to individually named sects, rather than larger religious entities. This continued to be the norm even in later periods when references to monolithic religions begin to be mentioned.

Centres of the wealthy sects strengthened their identity when they also became the nucleus of education. This added to their authority and they could induct the elite and contribute towards elite culture. Frequently sects with large followings and authority began to function as castes in themselves, as for example, the Lingayat sect in Karnataka, and some would include the Varkaris of Maharashtra.

More loosely defined were the Kabirpantha, the Dadupantha and the Nathapantha in the north, among many others. Most kept their distance from the formal religions and only occasionally might draw from them. Some even opposed them, in part because the sect was the articulation of the lower castes with a smattering of upper castes that no longer conformed. Unlike the formal religions, some accepted the participation of the untouchables and most discarded caste segregation.

A few of these sects sought a connection between the dominant religions. A few others tried to revive earlier belief system but gave them a new form. Among these was the sect founded by Ramananda who resided in Varanasi in the mid-millennium. The Ramanandi sect revived the Vaishnava worship of Rama and re-introduced the conservative features of Bhakti in contra-distinction to the teaching of Kabir, Nanak and Dadu. In colonial records however, they tended to get assigned to one or the other of what were regarded as the two dominant religions.

There is a hesitation in recognizing these sects as representing another way of articulating the connection between religion and society. Because of the multiplicity of sects it is sometimes difficult to demarcate clearly between them and what have been called the formal religions. The latter term refers more often to the religion as formulated by the upper castes or the dominant castes in a region.

Given this background I would like to differentiate between what I call formal religion and religion as practiced. Formal religion is heavily dependent on texts, on the correct performance of ritual as directed by priests and specialists, and on the organizations that emerge from these that become the centres of authority particularly in matters relating to the pattern of living. Religion as practiced, is observed by a far larger number of people. It refers less to texts and organizations of propagation and far more on oral traditions of teaching and worship.

In Indian social history the second form of religion has actually been more immanent than the first. The first was always prominent at the political level for obvious reasons of political identity and action, and status, as in court chronicles and more important inscriptions and religious texts. Modern writing on religion did not

distinguish sufficiently between these forms of religion and the more popular ones. The former was therefore taken as representative of religion in general. Historians are now beginning to recognize the greater significance of the second form of religion for society at large.

### *Islam in India*

With the arrival of Islam and more so the presence of the Sufis the exploration of religious ideas expanded as also the number of sects. There were more orthodoxies of various kinds but also more heterodoxies. The latter in some cases questioned the former or otherwise could hold out mixed belief and worship. This was rejected by the orthodox but was frequently popular with the larger number of ordinary people.

The new presence was indicated by the elaborate mosques and mausoleums built by royal patrons and the wealthy. The religious endowments became richer and richer as do all the endowments to well-patronized religions. As in the case of the Buddhist monasteries and the Hindu temples and *mathas*, these endowments tied to *khanqahs* and *madrassas*, also enabled their recipients to participate in the world of scholarship and in the world of politics. More detailed studies of new social institutions that came under the control of religious authority would be revealing.

As in earlier times the sect remained the popular religious identity among the majority of people. This becomes more evident if we look at two processes involving the coming of Islam – settlement and conversion. But before I do this let me comment on the single association that is frequently made on the coming of Islam to India, namely invasion.

At the popular level the arrival of Islam is projected largely in terms of invasion and conquest, mass enforced conversion, and the political events that followed. But even if we limit our sights to invasion, despite this being historically limited, there are aspects that we have to consider and which we willfully ignore. Invasion means traversing an area and negotiating with a variety of populations.

Invading armies from the North-West would have met large groups of people with varied patterns of living. There were many who were pastoralists, such as the

Gujjars and Jats, some of whom were converted to Islam but a large number continued with their earlier religion. The reason for this needs investigation. Some of the pastoral Jats mutated into the peasantry of Sindh and Punjab and among them some groups converted and many did not. The same was the case with artisans in towns producing items for trade, where artisanal groups tended to convert in some trades, such as weaving and metal working, whereas the merchants involved in the commerce, remained as before. The continuity of caste names and ethnic identities common to more than one religion, as among the Jats, is a give-away of the process of conversion. The pattern is repeated in other parts of the country. Wherever there are common caste names among more than one religion, those castes that today are labeled as Hindu are usually in larger numbers. The picture that is presented of mass conversions in the wake of invading armies is an exaggeration often embroidered upon by eulogistic chroniclers of the rulers. Their figures cannot be taken at face-value and have to be seen in the context of other evidence. Armies do not convert and what is wanted at the point of the sword is not a convert but wealth.

There were other avenues of social mixing that presented different, more innovative social and religious forms that were often more long-lasting and built upon the values that people cherished. These were more easily found in the settlements of traders, migrants, Sufis and such like.

Mohammad bin Qasim conquered Sindh in the eighth century AD. There is a diversity of texts that speak of these times from different perspectives. The *Chachnama* comments on how the area is to be governed. Among its suggestions is that existing practices should not be heavily disturbed, and as it turned out, whether deliberately or accidentally, they were changed to some extent but were not overturned in Sindh. The presence of pre-Islamic religions continued.

Another associated text is the *Devalasmriti* that shows a concern about problems of conversion and reconversion. It does not appear to be deeply concerned about the situation but does prescribe rituals for reconversion. What is significant is that these are referred to as *shuddhi* / purification, and the ritual itself is symbolic of a new birth out of being buried in dirt. *Shuddhi* would suggest an emphasis on caste purification for which the term was used, interestingly even in the nineteenth century

by social reform organizations. Women abducted by the *mlecchas* were also taken back into their original caste after the ritual of *shuddhi*. Was caste purification more problematic for a reconversion, than religious commitment, or was it subsumed in such belief?

*Shuddhi* was necessary we are told because the person converted had lived with the *mlecchas* and as a consequence, had fallen out of caste. *Mleccha* again was the term often used in preference to using 'Muslim', even at times for rulers that were otherwise being eulogized. Its connotation was that of a social rather than a strictly religious identity.

But the new feature that reflects actual social and religious change was different from these two. It is reflected in other texts and in inscriptions from western India. This was the emergence of new sects from out of an amalgam of existing sects of various kinds with the belief system of those that settled among them generally connected with maritime trade and occupations. Inter-marriage together with the continuity of some rituals and beliefs often linked to local custom brought about new sects. The Bohras evolved from a mix of indigenous and imported belief systems, not surprising among traders, and inter-marriage with local communities. Some Bohras traced their origin to Shi'ah sects but there was a controversy as to whether they could claim to be Muslims as they also used Hindu rituals. Subsequently there were the Khojas emerging in a similar way in Gujarat and western India and also retaining some local belief and rituals. These diversions raise interesting questions.

What was historically significant during these centuries from the eighth to the thirteenth, and later in some cases, was the settlements of Arab traders and the occasional Persian, all down the west coast of India from Sindh to Kerala. Some Arabs entered the service of the Rashtrakuta kings of the Deccan. The senior officers among them exercised their right to give grants of land, and did so, to *brahmanas* and temples, as had been the prevailing custom. This is recorded in inscriptions from this period.

These Arabs inter-married locally and new communities evolved with a new take on existing religions. In traditional Indian style these became new sects. The



Bohras and Khojas have a long history in western India. The Navayats further south in the Kanara region had links to Jaina trading communities and made a point of observing the caste rules of commensality. The Mapillas were important in Kerala and appropriated matrilineal forms and customary law of their caste equivalents. No two among the new sects were identical. Gujarati Bohras had little to do with Malayali Mapillas. Many such sects mushroomed elsewhere where belief, ritual and customary law adopted by settlers did not hesitate to draw from existing practice, especially in relation to civil law. But these have not been sufficiently studied as part of social and religious history, because we tend to look at religion only as monolithic forms. There is little reference to who formed the religious communities.

This pattern continued into later centuries at the level of the wider society. This was despite the emergence of other patterns that arose from political power and administration. Such dichotomies run through history and only their constituents change. The newly emerging teachers of various persuasions attracted support and followers. Until recently these remained the essentials of how a major part of Indians experienced religion, irrespective of having to declare their conformity to formal religions in colonial times. This was prior to the ingress of Hindutva and deliberate Islamization that have considerably hardened the boundaries, and even at times altered practices. Many people today who identify themselves with a monolithic religion, when pressed further will mention their close if not closer, affiliation to a sect or the holy man or woman whom they revere, and who can be of any persuasion. This link is often more pertinent to the lives they actually live. It provides the emotional and psychological strength that is sought from religion. And interestingly, the sects they identify with are generally those that were established within the last thousand years.

### *The History of India in the last Thousand Years*

In the history of India, the history of approximately the last thousand years, referred to as the medieval period, has had a raw deal from religious extremists and politicians in being described as the age when “we were slaves”. The implication of the statement is that it refers to a uniform tyranny of Islamic rule over a suppressed Hindu population. Viewed historically however, the scene differs at many levels. The inter-action between what we today call Hinduism and Islam, had its moments of

confrontation and conflict in the face-offs between competing politics manifested in various ways. This was to be expected initially with the change in existing political authorities at the upper levels of society, and more so where it was accompanied by the introduction at these levels of a new language, religion and culture. Such disruption was by no means new to the Indian political scene, familiar with conflicts between sects of Brahmanas and Shramanas, nor was it uniform throughout the sub-continent. There was substantial variance with regard to where and why it happened and which groups were involved. What these variations were and what caused them are matters we ignore in our sweeping generalizations about Hindus and Muslims in history. Nor was the experience of the coming in of settlers altogether unfamiliar, given that traders and migrants from West Asia and Central Asia had been known earlier in the borderlands and in the coastal areas. The unsettled period in the early second millennium gradually settled into more stable patterns.

Some of the earlier confrontations between groups continued and new ones were added to these. None of this is unexpected in any period of history. But what we often forget when we rush to say that it was a time when “we were slaves” and that the nastiness and oppression was unmitigated, is that it was also a time when striking creativity enriched facets of Indian culture, a creativity that we have made our own and internalized and that we actually respect, often without recognizing its origins. It took two forms.

One was what has been often discussed by historians and has been labeled as the ‘composite culture’. This was largely the mutual borrowing between what we today call Hindu and Muslim religious sects and various facets of cultural expression. It is displayed in an infinite number of ways through language, cultural idioms, customary law and forms of worship. It tends to be more conspicuous among the upper castes, but was probably more quietly internalized by the others. If one insists on the religious binary then where does one place the poetry of Sayyad Mohammad Jayasi’s *Padmavat* or the *dohas* of the devotee of Krishna, Sayyad Ibrahim Ras Khan, both widely popular at various levels. The *gurus* and the *pirs* were such a striking feature of the landscape, were often intermeshed and worshipped by large numbers of common people, that one can’t help but speak of a different religious tradition as the *guru-pir* tradition.

In some cases these extensions and exploration of ideas stemmed from contributions by diverse thinkers, writing in Sanskrit, Persian and the regional languages. Brahmana scholars writing in Sanskrit had close scholarly relations with the Mughals. Literary compendia were composed such as the *Kavindra-chandrodaya* during the reign of Shah Jahan, to which seventy such scholars contributed. This would not have been unusual given that the emperor is said to have had a voluminous library of works in Sanskrit in addition to his collection of other books. We should perhaps learn to appreciate the cultural achievements of some of those who were our rulers.

There were excursions into investigating theories in mathematics and astronomy going from Ujjain to Baghdad and beyond, with Indian scholars at the cutting edge of knowledge. In another area of interest classical Hindustani and Carnatic music was patronized by the courts of Maharajas and Mughals or in the homes of the wealthy. Many lyrics were dedicated to the praise of deities and were sung with fervor by musicians such as Tansen.

The other form that was equally significant was the virtual renaissance that took place in knowledge systems and cultural forms that reached back into the past and re-invigorated it into new forms. Let me give you a few examples of what happened in the tradition that is supposed to have been so oppressed that it almost vanished in the last one thousand years. Let's look briefly at the intellectual liveliness of the time with writing and thinking in Sanskrit and Persian, and in the regional languages, a liveliness that matched that of earlier times, although in different genres and forms of expression. It gave shape in various ways to much, although not all, that we now identify as Hindu in the landscape of our times.

Leaving aside for the moment the interaction of Hindu and Muslim cultures and religions, even the activities within the one tradition that is supposed to have been oppressed, is most impressive. Throughout the second millennium AD, from Kashmir to Kerala and in between, there were scholarly Sanskrit commentaries being composed on Brahmanical religious texts from the *Vedas* onwards. Obviously such scholarship was not without patronage. The exegesis on these texts illustrates the high

level of scholarship being widely practiced and exchanged in many centres of that time. Sayana's explanation of the *Rig Veda* is a fascinating glimpse into the mind of a learned scholar of the fourteenth century with its mix of reality and fantasy. Kulluka's extensive commentary on the *Manu Dharmashastra* includes reactions to social changes involving caste and sect hierarchies. Many aspects are discussed at length, including for instance, an assessment of the status of temple priests. This was a new category of brahmanas since temples began to be built and manned by priests after the period when Manu wrote his *Dharmashastra*. The debate on the control and inheritance of land as substantial property and other forms of wealth, led to differences of opinion as in the Mitakshara and Dayabhaga schools of legal opinion. Clearly there were Hindus with substantial holdings of land for whom the laws of inheritance had to be formulated. There were multiple commentaries, digests, discussions on legal texts.

Commentaries from varied perspectives were written on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as also on the classics of Sanskrit poetry and drama. Such commentaries have not only been influential but have also facilitated the work on the modern critical editions of these texts. At another level of interest compositions in regional languages, carried much of the thought and creativity of their own times as is evident in the many versions of the Rama story as in the *Ramacaritamanas*, and the *Kritibas*.

Prior philosophical theories are summarized and the discourses on new schools of philosophy are widely discussed among philosophers. The *Sarvadarshana-samgraha* of Madhavacharya written in the fourteenth century provides a summary of on-going debates. The opening chapter begins with a long resume of the Charvaka system of materialist philosophy, and the author says this cannot be eradicated since many people are sympathetic to it. This was also the time when there was a flurry of discussion and writing on Advaita Vedanta.

At the more popular levels there were even alternate histories, sung as legends by folk poets and bards, very different from the court chronicles. The compositions of the Bhakti teachers were recited and sung throughout the sub-continent and are foundational to what is described as Hinduism today. The *sant* tradition has been in

many ways a major force in the formulation of what we recognize as Hinduism today at the level of belief and worship. This was the tradition that evolved in the historical momentum of the last thousand years. The *bhajans* of Mira and Surdas and of Tyagaraja, and the *bandishes* of the Dhrupad *ragas* were not the compositions of an enslaved people.

### *Caste and Conversion*

An impression has been created that because the Hindus were enslaved, it was easy to put them through enforced conversion to Islam. But historical evidence supports neither of these propositions. Even when there was conversion from a Hindu sect to a Muslim one, we have to keep in mind that often sects and castes were entwined. The chronicles of the Sultans claim that huge numbers were forcibly converted or decimated. Some would certainly have been forcibly converted in order to make the claim and some done away with as is common to invading armies, but certainly not fifty thousand at a time, or anywhere near that number, as the Chronicles of some Sultans claim. We should ask further as to who exactly was converted, and what does conversion mean in a society where the idea is alien, since the Brahmanic and Shramanic sects did not convert.

Our understanding of conversion would be more to the point if we could focus on sect and caste where the evidence exists. Which existing caste or sect converted to which sect of Islam, and what were the social consequences of conversion. This may provide a better explanation than merely referring to Hindus becoming Muslims and not investigating further.

Most of the individual conversions, in small numbers were from those in the upper castes. Many retained their caste identity to claim status. Some local ruling families converted and some married into the new Muslim ruling families although not necessarily converting. Mughal royalty marrying into Rajput royal families and where the women were not required to convert to Islam, is an indicator of negotiations in a politically complex situation. Shah Jahan had the advantage of a Mughal-Rajput descent.

Conversion in larger numbers occurred when a *jati*/caste converted. This was more frequent among lower castes who had been promised a better status but which status seldom materialized. Changing the over-all status of castes would have meant a major social upheaval.

If the converted caste continued with its caste name and occupation as most did, conversion would have had limited social advantage. Status depended on occupations as before and the rank remained virtually the same in the hierarchy. The litmus test of observing caste lay in arranging marriage and from this it is clear that the rules of caste largely continued, reinforced by social sanction. This would explain the over-lapping mixed identities among those not regarded as upper caste and as recorded in the earlier census and in some colonial ethnography.

Sociologists working on societies in India other than those listed as Hindu find that they too function with the system of castes. Even those religions that claimed to be egalitarian could not entirely eliminate caste distinctions and more so between the higher and lower. Rules of endogamy and commensality are observed widely. The presence of caste is particularly strong in discriminating against and segregating Dalits. The excluded Dalit is found in every religion under different names. The Dalit is present even among those religions that claim all men to be equal in the eyes of God. So in addition to those now called Dalits in the broadly Hindu communities, there are the *pasmandas* – the fallen, the oppressed, among Muslims; the *mazhabis* of the Sikhs; and the *churahs* among others. Even places of worship were segregated.

Religions in India, irrespective of whether they originated in India or came in from elsewhere at a later stage, functioned in conformity with caste society, although not always according to the *Dharmashastra* rules. Some sects deliberately opposed these but many tacitly accepted them. Discrimination against the lowest castes or those outside caste society such as those we call Dalits today, and the *adivasis*, is characteristic of the formal religions. Similarly the assumption that women are inferior to men, indicated by social inferiority, was a marked feature of these religions, as indeed it was of the socially higher levels of society in general, with a few exceptions. This was despite the fact that in some religions there was the worship of goddesses and mother figures. Such worship made no difference. The worship of

the *kuladevi* existed together with the insistence on *sati* and *jauhar*. In a secular, democratic system, uniform civil laws should ensure gender justice in endorsing the equality of all.

If a range of sects rather than monolithic religions was characteristic of pre-Islamic India, this phenomenon appears to have continued with the larger majority of people even after the coming of Islam. Were the umbrella terms more frequently a convenience when speaking of the other, until they were redefined into the neat binary in colonial times? Some recent scholars have argued that there were perhaps attempts to give definitions to these umbrella terms in the late second millennium, by suggesting a self-perception where similar sects would see themselves as part of a larger unit. The argument hinges on how Hindu is defined in these times as compared to now. The flexibility in the use of the term then and its relative rigidity now, is evident. The initial geographical term ‘Hindu,’ referring to the people of al-Hind, gradually came to be used not for a specific religion but for all those that did not identify with Islam. Terms for specific religions remained vague. Eknath’s delightful banter, *Hindu-Turk Samvad*, written in the late sixteenth century, should perhaps be read less as referring to Hindu-Muslim relations as we understand them today, and more as the general approach of people of that time living in the same place, with varying sectarian identities. What is striking is the little attention that is given to what we emphasize today, namely conquest and conversion.

But the creation of monolithic communities, crystalized in the labels Hindu and Muslim as the identity of these communities, would seem to be the contribution of colonial policy. Resistance in some cases is recognizable largely from the upper castes. For them a new religion could threaten a loss of patronage and power. But the majority either let existing beliefs and rituals continue or else negotiated the change through a number of new sects in the usual way.

### *The World of Today*

We now recognize that our understanding of the historical interactions that took place in the past, do mould current thinking about our identities in the present, to a large extent. They therefore deserve more analytical and precise historical

explorations. We should not allow them to be dismissed by political slogans of various kinds.

In this rather scattered attempt to look at some aspects of the past, I have tried to underline the plurality in the articulation of religion in India, often in the form of sects and their inter-face with caste. I am also suggesting that possibly the weakening of the one is likely to weaken the other. To eventually disengage religious institutions from controlling the functions of civil society could bring about a more equitable society. The process of secularizing society will have to address both religion and caste and to that extent it requires a different kind of analysis from that of religions elsewhere. Now that we have internalized the colonial version of our religions and are experiencing its aftermath in the stridency of dominant religious organizations, we have also allowed some of these to become mechanisms for political mobilization. Secularization therefore will have to be thought through with considerable sensitivity and care. Although it cannot be a rapid change nevertheless, a serious beginning has to be made through establishing confidence all round. Violent attacks are never a solution.

A secular society and polity does not mean abandoning religion. It does mean that the religious identity of the Indian, whatever it may be, has to give way to the primary secular identity of an Indian citizen. And the state has to guarantee the rights that come with this identity. This demands that the state provides and protects human rights, a requirement that at the moment cannot be taken for granted. Such an identity while adhering to human rights and social justice, would also be governed by a secular code of laws, applicable to all.

A beginning could be made in two ways. It would be necessary to ensure that both education and the civil laws are secular. Secular education means the availability of all branches of knowledge to all without discrimination. The content would have to be information giving access to knowledge, and knowledge that has been up-dated; and at the same time it involves training young people to use and understand what is meant by critical inquiry. Given that we are a democracy perhaps we can jointly work out how best this could be done.



Our laws were drawn up in colonial times, although we have made some changes after independence. In a turn to the secular we shall have to comb through the existing laws to ensure that they conform to equal rights for all citizens with no exceptions. Resolving the differences between civil and religious laws of each religion will obviously have to be discussed in the light of their existing social codes, and with those currently controlling these codes. In this process, injustices and discrimination against the minorities and the under-privileged, whether because of religion, gender or caste, will need to be annulled. The continuation of special laws for particular communities, whether they be the laws made by *khap panchayats* or the triple *talaq*, would need to be reconsidered. Law does not remain law if it can be manipulated to allow of discrepancies. This is likely to be the most problematic in our turn towards secularizing society. Isn't it time now for a conscious beginning?

The overwhelming projection of religiosity in the world that surrounds us, sometimes appears to be a surrogate for not coming to terms with real life problems; or perhaps it is due to our having become a competitive society with all its unexpected insecurities. The ostentation of rituals is taken to excessive lengths largely as a display of wealth, a display that most people can ill-afford. For the truly religious the simplest of rituals suffice and sometimes even these are not necessary. Rituals ultimately are an appeal to a supernatural authority to endorse our welfare. Can we instead consider how we can make the reality of citizenship a guarantee of our social welfare, our well-being, our understanding of our world and our wish to bring quality into our lives? The secularizing of society is not an over-night revolution. It is a historical process, and will need time, but hopefully it will be assisted by the recognition that the state and society need to function in a new way. Implicit in democracy is the upholding of the ethic of human interaction. The secularizing of society is an advancing of that ethic.

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