

5 Is secularism alien to Indian civilization?¹

Romila Thapar

Secularism and (Indian) religion

In choosing to write on this subject it is my intention to try and question the statement that secularism is alien to Indian civilization and that it therefore follows that the secularization of Indian society has no place in contemporary Indian values. This has become the slogan of supporters of Hindutva who project secularism as antithetical to Hinduism. My concern is not with this kind of rhetoric of political mobilization. I would like to address the proposition of secularism being alien to Indian civilization as has been put forward by some scholars in a more thoughtful manner (Madan 1987, 1997; Nandy 1998). My primary concern is with regard to the fact that when secularism is posited as opposed to religion in India, the discussion is generally limited to only a segment of Hinduism, namely Vedic Brahmanism and Puranic Hinduism, and the more extensive articulation of religion in India is not included.

This chapter therefore focuses on extending the meaning of Indian religion to include the religious identity of not just the few, but of the larger population that would be involved in the secularizing of Indian society. Defining religious traditions requires recognizing differences in such traditions from higher to lower castes and from *dvijas* (the twice-born), to *mlechchhas* (those outside the social pale).

In the nineteenth century, civilizations were defined by geography/territory, religion and language. Indian civilization was located in the Indian sub-continent, the dominant religion was said to be Hinduism and the language of the civilization was therefore Sanskrit. Such a definition has many historical fault lines, but since it is the accepted form even now, we may continue to use it, although pointing out these fault lines. Among the fault lines was the way Indian religion was projected. The reference was largely to the religion of the elite and the tendency was to highlight the group of religions that were selected and placed within the rubric of 'Hinduism'. Others, like Buddhism and Jainism, were marginalized.

What is actually included within the rubric of Hinduism are a vast number of sectarian identities – Vaishnava, Shaiva, Lingayat, Shakta, Natha and so on. An overarching label to include all these various religious sects was not used until recent centuries. But the religious identity and praxis that was more closely adhered to was frequently that of the caste. Given the link between caste and religion in India there is multiple religious articulation across a spectrum of belief and social organization. The secularization of Indian society has therefore also to consider the nature of change in caste society. This substantially alters the picture from that of a single, clearly contoured religion.

Protest against caste inequities was common in religious movements that stemmed from the non-orthodox, heterodox traditions. *Jatis* have their own mythologies and rituals and the variations can sometimes be quite specific. A ritual specialist could in the past, through observing the ritual of a *jati*, have been able to identify its *varna* or ritual status, particularly where the code of the *dharmashastras* and *dharmasutras* was also being observed. Interestingly, until recently, *jati* identities continued to be evident even when a *jati*, or part of one, converted to Islam or Christianity, and many conversions were of this kind. What this means is that secularism in India cannot ignore *jati* identities that are differentiated social identities with some sectarian religious forms specific to the *jati*. Because the practice of religion is so closely tied to caste, the nature of religion is not similar to that of Europe, and in the Indian context the secularist dialogue has to include a discussion of the degree of acceptance or rejection of caste, which again makes it different from the European experience.

Extending the meaning of 'Indian' religion

Indian civilization has registered multiple religions as parallel strands with some becoming more dominant in certain times and some emerging as independent religions. There have been degrees of continuity in some cases and some fundamental differences in others. Religions with recognizable characteristics and influential in many parts of the sub-continent, can be listed chronologically as Vedic Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Puranic Hinduism, Bhakti, Shakta, Islam, and what I would like to call the religion of the Guru-Pir tradition. To this may be added the input of Christianity and Zoroastrianism going back to around the mid-first millennium AD but with a more limited spread until recently. The evolution of religion in India is frequently seen only through textual sources with a predisposition to privileging the brahmanical sources and socio-legal codes like the *dharmashastras*. But other religions and religious sects projected other ideas. Nevertheless there is a tendency to juxtapose all the sources and view them as manifestations of a single religion, barring the Semitic religions. However, when seen as independent religious articulations, their variations become apparent and point towards a complexity that is often overlooked.

There were therefore strong parallel traditions challenging orthodoxy in all the religions of India and these tended to give greater weight to social ethics rather than to prescriptive texts regulating religious observances. The most powerful exposition of this comes from Buddhism. Although Buddhism later nurtured its own orthodoxy, the early emphasis on social ethics remained constant and was in turn to influence the form of many other popular religious sects through the centuries. I would therefore like to refer to the early teachings of the Buddha at greater length. The context to these teachings was the unease that many thinkers of the time had with the ideas of Vedic Brahmanism.

Vedic Brahmanism, in the first millennium BC, was the religion of the ritual of sacrifice and therefore the ritual specialist – the *brahmana* – was its key propagator. Its social beginnings are linked to the functioning of oligarchies and chiefdoms as pre-state societies and it drew its political authority from the patronage of clan chiefs requiring rituals of validation with claims of divine sanction. In the process of chiefdoms being transmuted into kingdoms and chiefs evolving into kings, the rituals of validation continued and became the rituals of kingship with a heavier dependence on divine sanction and more so in the centuries AD when monarchies became the normal pattern.

But Vedic Brahmanism had to compete with other religious sects and was gradually reduced to symbolic importance, except among its twice-born practitioners.

Buddhism and Jainism and a variety of heterodox sects were among those that questioned Vedic Brahmanism, and Buddhism was a recognized alternative. These sects reflect the historical changes that began in the mid-first millennium BC with the coming of the state and of urbanization. Their influential patronage came from the non-monarchical clans of the middle Ganges valley and from some royal courts, but equally from the trading communities scattered all over the sub-continent. It is often forgotten that Buddhism had a widespread appeal as well as royal support for a millennium after it was first established, and in eastern India this continued for still longer, commanding the patronage of many communities in various regions. Buddhism and associated religions were collectively referred to as the Shramana religions. Buddhism cannot be dismissed as merely one of the many manifestations of Hinduism since it has been fundamentally different in belief and practice. The catalytic role of Buddhism can be seen not only in the emergence of later schools of philosophy – some confrontational and some supportive – but also in the evolution of aspects of Puranic Hinduism. Even as late as the eleventh century Al-Biruni describing the religions of India, highlights the differences between the Brahmans and the Shamaniyya (Shramanas) (Sachau 1964: 21).

Yet it is largely the texts of Vedic Brahmanism and Puranic Hinduism that are quoted in discussions on the possible antecedents to secular concerns in pre-modern India. Because these texts either show no interest in what are today regarded as secular norms, or else are read to deny these norms, it is held that secularism is altogether alien to Indian culture. My contention is that if one is less selective in choosing the texts from early periods, then it is apparent that there were discussions among various groups on issues that do relate, sometimes directly and sometimes obliquely, to what we regard as significant themes in secular thinking.

The hallmark of Buddhism in the early period was the centrality of social ethics. Buddhism emphasized the relationship between the individual and society rather than ritual and belief in the supernatural. The Buddha was therefore treated in some brahmanical texts as a *nastika* and a *charvaka* – an atheist and a materialist. That the confrontation was recognized is evident from his rejection of the theist view.²

It is in the initial Buddhist ideas that one could search for seminal notions that might be conducive to a secularizing of Indian society. There has been a debate as to whether what was taught by the Buddha can be called a religion since he does not postulate a belief in a deity. However, even though deities are incorporated a few centuries subsequent to his death, the centrality of social ethics remains a constant factor. It may be said that his contention was that a belief in human relations was more central than a belief in deity. The questioning of deity was not limited to the Buddha. Various groups of Lokayata and Charvaka teachers were even more vehement in regarding deities as unnecessary and religion as a foolish aberration. Such views persisted as parallel schools of thought to Brahmanic and Shramanic ideas well into the second millennium AD (Radhakrishnan 1948: 277ff.; Chattopadhyaya 1955). Ethics without religion was an established tradition among many strands of materialist and Shramanic sects and the ethical basis of laws was widely discussed. The Buddha suggested that the existence of a deity was irrelevant, and rejected the traditional significance of Hindu deities. Eternity was embedded not in deity but in notions of *dharmadhamma* (the teaching) and *nirvana/nibbana* (the individual's liberation from rebirth).

The kernel of his teaching was in the *dharmma-cakkappavattana-sutta*, the teaching on the 'turning of the wheel of law'.³ This encapsulates the four 'noble truths', *ariya-sacca*, and the eightfold path of 'the middle way', *majjhima pattipada*.⁴ The basis of the four noble truths is the idea of dependent origination, *paticca samuppada*, a theory of cause and effect that becomes foundational to this ethics.⁵ The argument is that suffering is caused by actions motivated by desire and the cessation of this leads to the extinction of suffering and a condition of *nirvana*, which liberates the person from rebirth and future suffering. Understanding the nature of causation is therefore of importance to understanding the human condition and the explanation is not to be found in divine revelation.⁶ Liberation can be achieved by observing the middle way of moderation in actions and ambitions. Essential to this idea is the rationality of the argument linking critical thinking to causality.

His discussion of the middle way as the way of social and moral action is at the core of what can be called his social ethics. The centrality of the householder, *gahapati*, was the lynch-pin in this.⁷ The ethic, based on insight through knowledge, was encapsulated in conduct towards parents, friends, teachers and servants. The householder was not an enlightened being and had to be helped along by explanations of the moral code. Even the attaining of *nirvana* required such help and the Buddha used the analogy of the raft – those that had crossed to the other shore and been liberated by using the raft of enlightenment should leave the raft for the use of others.⁸

Dhamma was the universal ethic of family and community propelled by *ahimsa* – non-violence, tolerance and respect for rights as embodied in codes of behaviour. As a code of behaviour it assumes the equality of all and the rules apply equally to all. The context to this is the story of the *mahasammata*, the great elected one, with whom the state began.⁹ After a long, utopian existence in the remote past, human society gradually began to develop conflicts and contradictions eventually requiring the establishing of rules of family organization and of private property. When even this failed to prevent conflict, it was decided to elect one person to maintain order, to enforce the laws and to ensure the well being of all. The elected one was paid a wage that was a percentage of the produce. There is no divine intervention in this narrative as there was in the Vedic myths of the origin of government, an intervention that continued to be referred to even as late as in the *Arthashastra*.¹⁰ In the Buddhist texts the matter was settled by contract among equals in order to end the disruption of an earlier utopian condition caused by subsequent social disharmony and intolerance. The state was neither a natural institution nor a divine imposition but a necessity required when the actions of a society cause its disruption. Therefore the state has obligations to prevent the disruption of society which it can do by instituting social ethics. The social ethic is so central that the Buddha opposed caste hierarchy because it creates inequality and this in turn encourages disruption.¹¹ The social ethic was to be taught in the *kutuhala-shalas*, the parks on the outskirts of cities and through the preaching of monks.

By way of contrast, the *Mahabharata* also speaks of a social contract in an extract that dates to a period probably contemporary with the recording of the Buddhist texts. In the story of the first ruler Prithu and the establishing of a state there is recourse to a contract. But this is not among the people, probably because they were not regarded as being of equal status. It is a contract in which the *brahmanas* are involved since they control social laws and the making of society and state, all of which derive from the gods.¹² It is intended to prevent the condition of anarchy – *matsyanyaya* – that follows in the absence of a state. The term encapsulates a condition of drought when the big

fish in a pool eat the little fish. The mutual interdependence of temporal and spiritual power, represented by the king and the priest and central to the *Vedas*, is rejected by the Buddhist tradition. The *rajan* in the *gana-sanghas* (chiefdoms) functioned for a long period without dependence on the *brahmana*.

The upholding of *dhamma* in the Buddhist texts was said to be the most important duty of the king.¹³ An attempt was made towards the inculcation of these ideas during the reign of Ashoka Maurya. He developed on the Buddhist doctrine and made a point of calling upon the *brahmanas* and the *shramanas* (the Buddhist, Jainas and other Orders of monks) and members of religious sects generally, to be tolerant towards each other's teachings. All relationships should be based on mutual concern and consideration including those involving parents and children, employers and employees and communities, professions and sects (Bloch 1950: 96–97). He called upon the gods to manifest themselves so as to persuade people of the righteousness of this teaching (ibid.: 98–99; 146–47), but he too did not attribute the teaching to deities. In the Buddhist tradition he became a pious Buddhist king, but his piety was expressed in a concern for social ethics and the welfare of people and not in performing rituals directed at deities.

A significant difference between Brahmanical and Buddhist texts also lies in the concept of the *chakravartin* (the universal monarch). The Buddhist *chakkavatti* was the *dhammika-dhammaraja* (the king of righteousness or the righteous king), aware of the advantage of a society governed by dhamma. His claim to be regarded as a *chakkavatti* was because he turned the wheel of law/dhamma.¹⁴ This was unlike most *kshatriya* heroes in Brahmanical texts who were *chakravartins* because their campaigns brought them victories over their enemies. The latter were also expected to promote the law but this was law pronounced by *brahmanas* with the claim that it was sanctioned by deities: it was specific to caste and was conditioned by social hierarchy. The Buddhist understanding of law did not incorporate hierarchical differences and had universal application. The Buddhist concept of the *cakkavatti* does not detract from the recognition of power and sovereignty. Both of these require that the state ensure what we in modern parlance would call democratic functioning and concern for the welfare of its constituents. The highpoint of these functions were openness of thought and speech, observance of laws, insistence on frequent assembly to discuss matters of state and the equality of all. The need for frequent assemblies was because the authority to rule was derived from those who constitute society, as is evident from the story of the *maha-sammata*. What might have been a corollary to equality was the reference to wealth being acquired through labour, effort and righteous means.¹⁵ Wealth should not be spent on useless rituals or on campaigns, but should go towards supporting livestock, agriculture, trade and administration.¹⁶ It is repeatedly stated that the *chakkavatti* has to provide sustenance for the poor apart from ensuring good administration and general prosperity.¹⁷ Stealing and violence arise from poverty; therefore, in order to prevent poverty, the king must punish those who break the law.¹⁸

It is significant that Buddhism and Jainism were among the early religions to acknowledge the right of a woman to choose to become a renouncer and join an Order of nuns. This was not absolute freedom but at least it permitted an alternate way of life to the conventional one. That this was appreciated by women is evident from the sentiments expressed in the *Theri-gatha* compositions of Buddhist nuns. Religious sects influenced by Buddhism accorded the same freedom to women who were also among their more respected practitioners.

By the mid-second millennium, Vedic Brahmanism was being superseded by Puranic Hinduism as the popular religion which competed with Buddhism and Jainism. There were attempts to appropriate the more attractive aspects of Buddhism, particularly when Buddhists themselves turned from treating deity as irrelevant to deifying a spectrum of beings. It is debatable whether the centrality of *karma* and *samsara*, with the individual being responsible for his/her liberation from rebirth through his/her actions in this birth, was first popularized through Buddhism or through Puranic Hinduism.

The Bhakti tradition as part of Puranic Hinduism focused on particular deities, pre-eminently Vishnu and Shiva. Although some threads of Puranic Hinduism endorsed aspects of Vedic Brahmanism, the sheer diversity of the former led to differences from the latter in various significant ways: in the evolving of individual deities worshipped as icons; in forms of worship embodied in the rituals of *puja* as distinct from the *yajna*; in the emergence of temples as permanent places of worship; and in belief especially in *samsara* and *karma* (actions and rebirth of the soul). Liberation from rebirth was the responsibility of the individual, but unlike Buddhism, Puranic Hinduism made liberation dependent on devotion to the deity. That the change from Vedic Brahmanism was substantial is indicated by the currency of new texts such as the *Puranas* and *Agamas* written to explain the mythology, ritual and worship of emerging deities and added to from time to time (Chakravarti 2001).

Formal ritual was however by-passed by many teachers, hymn singers, preachers, 'holy' men and women, who emphasized a personalized worship. This coincided with a particular emphasis on social ethics, although the deity dominated the ethic. Bhakti was a personalized devotion to a deity or the personification of the divine, and the worshipper could choose whom to worship and how to worship. This flexibility allowed religious boundaries to be relatively fluid. The initial following was from among non-elite groups with an overlay of local forms of worship, but there was a gradual filtration upwards. Those who created the Bhakti movements in various parts of the sub-continent for over a millennium belonged to castes ranging from *brahmana* to Dalit (Lorenzen 1995, 2004).

Scholars have tended to sift the various strands of Bhakti according to deity, language and emphasis on ecstatic devotion. But there is also the question of certain sects articulating a greater concern for social issues. This is apparent in their insisting on equality, not only in the eyes of the deity but also among worshippers, and setting aside or opposing caste norms in favour of a universal social ethic, as evident in the compositions of Dadu, Raidas, Kabir and Nanak, among others. The Virashaiva movement of the twelfth century is an example of a sect that opposed caste hierarchy and gender disabilities and even questioned political sources of power. As such it was both a movement for religious reform as well as social protest. Similar to other such movements it had a large enough following to enable it to evolve into a major caste itself – the Lingayat. Opting out of caste inequality even within the sect strengthened the aspiration towards a universal ethic. They shared no common body of doctrine across sects, were frequently opposed to brahmanical doctrine, but were firm in their commitment to the ethics of social equality. That caste inequality continued should not be seen as the failure of these movements, since a major part of society conformed to their views. The filtration upwards tended to encourage new forms and objects of worship, but the message of social protest was set aside by the dominant castes. The acquiescence of the lower castes in this mutation has yet to be examined.

The Bhakti religious articulation had regional manifestations and used the regional languages. There is a tendency to collapse all variations of Bhakti into one movement, but the manifestations differ to a greater or lesser degree even within regions, and this diversity should be recognized apart from the two broad divisions of Nirguna and Saguna. There were mystics but there were also those who protested against the inequities of social functioning.

After the arrival of Islam, the choice of teacher and deity widened and ranged across Hindu and Muslim articulations of the divine. In this the Sufi teachers were a focus, merging with local society in some instances, and using the local idiom. The dialogue with some Bhakti sects, such as the Kabirpanthis, nurtured much innovative thought. Worshippers were seen as equal in the eyes of the deity and of the devotees, and to that extent there was a negation of social hierarchies. But the negation was not sufficiently universalized. The contribution of the Sufis in parenting to some extent the popular religions of the second millennium AD has been written about but needs further exploration. The tension between formal Islam as reflected in the *shari'a* and that as practiced and preached in the institutions of various communities encouraged by the more liberal Sufis, provides many insights into relations of power, formal and informal religion, and the life of communities (Alam 2004: 81ff.; Eaton 1978).

The Shakta religion overlapped with some of the Bhakti teachers as also with the Sufi sects (Bhattacharya 1996, 1992). The latter gave religious sustenance to the *pirs* and *faqirs* who held a similar status to that of the *gurus* and *sants*, and gradually the two mingled. *Gurus* and *pirs* included those that had been brought up as Hindus and Muslims but had forsaken the formal boundaries of these religions to follow the more fluid teachings and practices of the Shaktas, the Bhakti *sants* and the Sufis and sometimes to move beyond even these teachings. As late as the nineteenth century the Meos of Rajasthan for instance were not clearly identified as either Hindus or Muslims but followed the teachings and rituals of the *darvesh*, *jogi*, *jangam* and *sammayasi*. A century later there were substantial attempts by the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jama't to convert them to a brahmanized Hinduism or to formal Islam (Mayaram 2004).

Among the many striking expressions of worship among both Hindus and Muslims was the widespread following of Satya Pir in Bengal (Roy 1983). This pattern can be seen in many parts of the sub-continent. Recognizable characteristics are the absence of formal religious boundaries and the premise of social equality.

In discussions on Indian secularism and religion, the impact of Islam is, with rare exceptions, either ignored or else it is confined to the Islam of the royal courts and a few elite groups. Confrontations between the latter and the more popular sects are generally disregarded.

Those not in the upper levels of society expressed their religious needs through what I would like to call the Guru-Pir religion. This has been the religion – in all its varied manifestations – of the majority of Indians, for at least the last five centuries, or even earlier, with an inheritance in some of the earlier heterodox forms. It was a religion frequently propagated by renouncers. They spoke of personal devotion to any deity with a spirituality that underlined social ethics, expressed in a message not only of tolerance but also of social equality and a concern for the human condition. Equality was not limited to an underlying principle of the relationship among those who supported this kind of religion but was extended to all men and women. The good society was central to their concerns with a committed advocating of its principles in however generalized a form. These were not incidental sects but were the mainstream religion at

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the broadest level of functioning in most social communities. Religious institutions claiming legitimacy from these ideas did exist, but their role was far more marginal than the institutions of the formal religions patronized by the elite.

The role of the renouncer in Indian society, as a figure of moral authority reaching beyond a single religious identity also has a bearing on social ethics (Thapar 2002a, 2002b). Some renouncers opted out of social obligations, others who were not identified with a particular religion, emerged as preceptors to communities and preached an ethic of social responsibility. Mysticism apart, many more renouncers were concerned with the mainsprings of society and how these could be directed towards the welfare of its constituents at all levels. It is as well to remember that this moral authority lay in not only challenging deity – as in the multiple myths of gods fearing the power accumulated by *rishis* through asceticism – but also in legitimating political and social protest. Gandhi's adoption of the symbols of asceticism was not an individual quirk or a Hindu identification but was the continuation of a long tradition of linking moral authority, as distinct from religious authority, to protest.

The colonial state recognized only the formal religions of what it called Hinduism and Islam and put everyone in either one or the other slot. It is ironic that colonial ethnography is now among the sources of information on the Guru-Pir religious articulation during recent periods, as are the Gazetteers and Censuses; yet, the distinctive religious identity of such groups was not recognized when these data were being compiled. This was despite the powerful oral tradition through which this articulation was, and is, preached and practiced. The followers of these teachings were the lesser of the lesser breeds without the law, and therefore almost socially invisible except to evoke a certain curiosity. The rhetoric of the colonial interpretation of Indian society as constituted of two monolithic communities was all pervading. The socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth century, where they were responding to these colonial interpretations, were circumscribed middle-class movements and tended to marginalize the religion/s of the majority of Indians. Nor did nationalism give recognition to these, despite Gandhi's appeal to mass audiences (as distinct from political parties), being couched in terms that echoed the Guru-Pir tradition. The religious nationalisms that are dominant today have no place for religious articulations that cannot be firmly located in one of the two major religions viewed as monolithic. The battle over places of worship and the insistence on converting them from one religion to the other is a case in point. This battle occurs in places where earlier adherents of all kinds of religious sects would have worshiped together.

Religious sects of the Guru-Pir tradition have often been described as the middle ground between Hinduism and Islam. My argument however is that this is not the middle ground but the continuation of a religious tradition which modern scholars have relegated to a substratum status (Thapar 2002d). In going through the sources of pre-modern times, such religious articulations tended to be set aside in favour of the more accessible religious expression of elite groups with their easily accessible texts. Interestingly, the popular religious sects tended more easily to discard the norms of the *dharmashastras* and the *shari'a* and emphasized ameliorating the human condition with an ethic that went above and beyond established religion, and the applicability of which preferably was to be universal.

Discussion of the interface between religion and secularism or of the consciousness of ideas related to secularizing Indian society has to address itself to these articulations as well. This is all the more so since these religious articulations have been consistently

and continually concerned about not just the centrality of social ethics but also about actualizing such an ethic. Such an actualizing in the present day involves the relationship between caste, religions, the state and civil society. It is significant that at the level of *jati* there is also an acceptance of the idea of equality within the *jati*.

The close integration between religious and caste identity also raises the question of law and the state. *Dharma* in the sense of law was specified for each *varna* in the *dharmashastras* and although these were not codes of law, they encapsulated ideal norms of social functioning. But what was not captured in the *dharmashastras* was that each *jati/varna* observed customary laws (*achara*), which did on occasion contradict the rules of the *dharmashastras*.¹⁹ This was not peculiar to Hinduism, as there were the same discrepancies between the *shari'a* and the customary law observed by castes that had converted to Islam, as is evident from the differences in the customary law of, for example, the Meos of Rajasthan and the Mappilas of Kerala, both formally Muslim communities. Such customary law was often a continuation of the earlier *jati* practices or resulted from intermarriage between immigrants and local communities. Distance from the norms, if not a refutation of these, may well have been more common than is supposed. Flexibility in law is also reflected in statements that where there was conflict, the king had the right to interpret the law, indicating perhaps a priority for custom over the code.²⁰

Much has been written about the religious tolerance of Hinduism. The link between caste and religion could be one explanation for the relatively greater accommodation of alternate religions in South Asian history as compared to Europe. A religious sect when it attained a critical mass could be converted into a caste or a cluster of castes and be accommodated with a variety of other dissenting groups. The sting of protest was removed by allowing them their own custom and ritual within the boundaries of their identity. The hierarchical placement of social statuses follows some religious identities but since the status has its own social boundaries the religious identities could be more flexible. However, even where religious differences were relatively fluid, social hierarchies were less so. Protestors were not easily accommodated and if possible were relegated to lower caste status. Where religious sanctions prevailed in the form for instance, of the purity-pollution nexus, the status of the untouchable being inherited, was immutable, and was at the receiving end of a fierce intolerance, in many ways worse than religious intolerance. The freedom to choose and practice a religion is not alien to south Asian tradition but caste identity could curtail this freedom; therefore, religious sects seeking a wider following tended to oppose caste hierarchies.

Religions with established institutions such as monasteries, temples, *mathas*, *khanqahs*, mosques and churches sought the patronage of the local king and there was a competition for this patronage. The larger amount of this patronage came from royalty, but Buddhist and Jain institutions in particular also received extensive patronage from the communities of financiers, traders and artisan guilds, and from small-scale landowners (Miller 1992). Whereas communities were more selective in their patronage, in part perhaps because of more limited funds, royalty in India in all periods gave grants and donations to a range of religious sects. Such patronage was not neutral and the range of sects as recipients is striking. The basis for the selection was doubtless conditioned by the politics of these religious sects apart from the personal devotion or assessment of the patron. This is a contrast with European patrons confining patronage to a single sect. A medieval European king making a grant for the building of a mosque in Europe would be relatively unknown, yet this was done by non-Muslim

rulers in western India. There were occasions when for example, a Shaiva Solanki king annulled the grants to Jain institutions made by his predecessor,²¹ but generally Indian royalty seemed to have been aware of the political usefulness of patronizing a number of different sects. This may again have had links with caste and regional interests. The Sultans and the Mughal rulers displayed the same catholicity and in most cases of patronage to non-Islamic sects the intentions would have been varied.

Incidents of religious intolerance often involved competition for patronage. The tensions were not only between the Buddhists and the Shaivas but also between the Shaivas and the Jains, and to a lesser extent between the Vaishnavas and the Shaivas (Thapar 2000: 7–24). At one level, some degree of distribution of royal patronage has been taken as an expression of the co-existence of all religions or even of the neutrality of the state towards religion, but this would not invariably be a tenable argument. The reason for this patronage was the need to juxtapose patronage in a context where the state was expected to be a patron of religion. Religious networks could also be viewed as potential catchment areas of support and loyalty. Quite apart from the personal religious predilections of a ruler, there was clearly an understanding of the function of religious institutions in a political and social context and the balancing of a number of such institutions. In some cases there may have been a policy of playing off one against the other, or in other cases the state indicating its power over the religious institutions. The pattern of patronage, because it was extended to groups that were thought to be politically and socially important or were intended to be made so, extended largely to the elite, whereas those representing larger but disorganized numbers, were generally ignored by the elite. These groups found their patronage among the lesser members of society whose support they claimed.

From proto-secularism to contemporary secularism

An interesting case of state patronage towards building a temple was raised immediately after Independence, when in 1951 a Minister of the Central Government, K. M. Munshi, asserted that the Government of India was financing the rebuilding of the famous temple at Somanatha, raided by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1026, which by now had become an icon of Hindu-Muslim antagonism in the politics of religious nationalism (Thapar 2004: 197–201). Nehru categorically denied the assertion and stated that as a secular government, the Government of India would not finance the building of the temple. A private Trust was therefore established for the purpose. This was a departure from the earlier tradition and to that extent underlines a difference between the policies of pre-modern states and those of a modern, secular state.

Contemporary secularism has to involve itself with contending the politics of religious institutions and religious organizations playing a political role. The dialogue is not about belief and faith but about institutions and politics and about the control of religious institutions and those that administer them over aspects of civil society. Secularism adopts a code of social ethics that challenges the acceptance of inequalities where these are proposed by religious ideologies. Rights have to be sought after and established through codes and practice, and they have to be backed by a philosophy that endorses these rights and which does not require recourse to divine intervention or formal religious institutions.

As the previous section has shown, there is an element of what might be called proto-secularism available from earlier traditions, should contemporary Indians wish to

draw on it. But this is at best an ambience and not an actuality for contemporary secularism, since the values associated with human rights and democratic functioning are of the contemporary world and not of the past. However, drawing from the past has the potential of assisting in the secularizing of society without creating a complete disjuncture with what is believed to be tradition.

In referring to proto-secularism, I am not suggesting that there was an attempt at establishing a secular society in India in c. 400 BC or even later. That this was not secularism is evident from the fact that whereas the appeal was to the individual to adopt a code of behaviour that was derived from values that we would today regard as conducive to secularizing society, there was no requirement that the state should endorse this code or even establish and maintain institutions that would do so. In a secular society the onus is on the state and civil society to establish codes and institutions that would support secular values. The state recognizes the existence of religion but restricts the unquestioned activities of the latter preferably to matters of personal belief. Politics should not function on the basis of religious communities, for the primary identity is the identity of citizens of a nation and not members of a religious community. This space will be contested and has to be won by those in support of secularizing society. But the contest does not concern religion alone and has to extend to all those institutions and structures that are involved with the rights of the citizen.

Secularism as an ideology cannot be imposed, but when the structures that support the status quo are changed, then a secular society may begin to emerge. To that extent the ideology of secularism supports a particular kind of social change. This may be aided if there is a realization that there are antecedents in the cultures of present-day communities that are sympathetic to secular values.

Religious nationalisms have a tendency to appropriate cultural nationalism. Discussions on cultural nationalism need to define the cultures they incorporate. Existing definitions have veered towards the upper caste cultures and religions. The cultures and religious identities of others are set aside. Yet there are other traditions that might even have a larger popular appeal such as those that I have referred to. It is important to the definition and the future of the secularizing of South Asian societies that we explore the wider range of cultural traditions when we search for ancestral elements. Resort to a single religious identity is in any case self-defeating in a multi-religious society. Secularism is not just the confrontation between religion and the state. It requires new initiatives by the state and by the citizens in relation to the essentials of a secularized society. If citizenship is to be the primary identity, it will have to place other identities of caste, class, religion, gender and language, in their appropriate places and will have to define the identities that go into the making of citizenship.

Notes

- 1 This is an abridged version of the article that appeared in T. N. Srinivasan (ed.) *The Future of Secularism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 2 *Digha Nikaya*, I. 32, 46 Brahmajala-sutta.
- 3 *Samyutta Nikaya*, I. 191; *Vinaya*, Mahavagga 1.6.17–26.
- 4 *Majjhima Nikaya*, I. 167 ff. Ariyapariyesana-sutta; III. 71–78 Mahachattarisaka-sutta; *Samyutta Nikaya*, 3. 94–99 Parileyya; II. 12.1 ff.
- 5 *Vinaya*, Mahavagga, I. 1. 1–7; *Digha Nikaya*, II 30 ff.
- 6 *Majjhima Nikaya*, I. p. 160 ff. Ariyapariyesana-sutta.
- 7 *Digha Nikaya*, III. 180 ff. Sigalovada-sutta.

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- 8 *Majjhima Nikaya*, I. 134–35 Alagaddupama-sutta.
- 9 *Digha Nikaya*, III. 84–96 Agganna-sutta.
- 10 *Arthashastra* I. 13. 5–12.
- 11 *Digha Nikaya*, I. 92 ff. Ambattha-sutta; *Samyutta Nikaya*, 4. 398.
- 12 Shantiparvan, 59. 12–29; 94–119.
- 13 *Digha Nikaya*, III. 59 ff Cakkavatti-sihanada sutta; III. 72 ff. Parinibbana sutta.
- 14 *Digha Nikaya*, I. 59 ff; 88–89; *Majjhima Nikaya*, III. 172 ff; III. 65.
- 15 *Anguttara Nikaya*, II, 69–70.
- 16 *Digha Nikaya*, II. 127 ff. Kutadanta-sutta.
- 17 *Digha Nikaya*, II, 139 ff; III. 60 ff.
- 18 *Digha Nikaya*, III. 93 ff. Agganna-sutta.
- 19 Such deviations from the norms are sometimes even mentioned in the texts, as for example, the practice of cross-cousin marriage. There is a debate on the acceptability of custom versus code. *Baudhayana Dharmasutra*, 1.2.3.; *Gautama Dharmasutra*, 11.20.
- 20 *Narada-smriti*, I. 10–14.
- 21 Merutunga, *Prabandhacintamani*, 4.9.175.

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