

# CRISIS OF SECULARISM IN SOUTH ASIA

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Secularism, or the divorce of religion from politics and public life, is obviously a principle of universal application; but the manner of its implementation differs according to context and culture, resulting in various manifestations. In what used to be the Soviet Union, it was understood as the denial of God and the abolition of religion altogether. That experiment, despite assiduous effort for over seventy years, collapsed, and today church bells are ringing throughout eastern Europe, while in Central Asia, during the last four years, mosques have been built in profusion. In France secularism had a more limited meaning and was primarily concerned with ridding education of Roman Catholic influence. The problem is clearly very different in the countries of South Asia, which attained independence in the forties. They are, for the most part, multi-religious societies and the religious impulse would seem to be, by and large, deeply embedded in their peoples.

One, somewhat drastic, effort at easing the problem would be the expulsion of all those who belong to minority religions; but this is a measure which would not appeal to many. However, even when such a step is taken it does not mean that secularism will be easily established, for fundamentalists of the dominant religion will continue to harass the more liberal believers who seek to rid politics and the law of religious influences. But manifestly the problem is accentuated, by the presence, as in most of South Asia, of followers of diverse religions. Each of these countries is trying to find its own way towards keeping organised religions from distorting and poisoning public life. This is not to expel high ethical principles from everyday existence but to exercise the narrowing influence of religious creeds given an intolerant expression. In Bangladesh, the first Constitution declared secularism to be one of the pillars of State policies; but this was later deleted and Islam declared to be the State religion. However, the Prime Minister while inaugurating a Hindu festival last month, stressed that her Government believed in people belonging to different faiths living together in harmony, and announced that she had reconstituted the Hindu Religion Welfare Trust to make it more effective in giving assistance to the Hindu community.<sup>1</sup> But Bangladesh has had Muslim-Hindu riots

during the last twelve months; in Sri Lanka the problem has been more continuous; while the crisis is particularly prominent today in my own country. A sharp recrudescence in recent years of political aggressiveness among diverse groups of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs claiming religious sanction has climaxed, in the last nine months, in a rich carnival of passion and hate. The focus of the belligerence of the Hindu group was the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Alleging that this mosque had been built in 1528 by a general of Babar, the first Mughal emperor, after destroying a Hindu temple on the site where the avatar Ram was believed to have been born. On 6 December 1992, Hindu fanatics demolished the mosque. Ram, of course, is a legendary character, it is absurd to be precise about the place of his birth. There are in Ayodhya itself several sites which lay claim to this distinction; and it is also doubtful if present day Ayodhya is the same Ayodhya which was said to be Ram's birth-place and capital. It has also been conclusively established that the archaeological evidence brought forward as proof that a temple was knocked down to give place to a mosque, is untenable.<sup>2</sup> Even, of course, if it is true that a temple had been destroyed over four hundred years ago, that is no argument for razing a mosque to the ground now. However, in the present inflamed atmosphere truth, facts and logic seem of little account.

As expected, the demolition of the mosque has had wide repercussions and the aftershocks still rumble on. Hindu-Muslim riots have taken place since then in various parts of India, with over a thousand dead and much property destroyed. High-explosive bombs, aimed at disrupting normal life, have caused hitherto unknown levels of destruction, especially in Bombay, but also in Calcutta, Madras and Delhi. But a few weeks ago, an outcry in Parliament and the press, inspired by the Hindu chauvinistic party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, against the depiction in an exhibition of the story, in the Buddhist jatakas, of Ram and Sita being symbolically brother and sister, led to the administration removing the panel, and the whole exhibition, intended to foster intercommunal amity, being closed down. It was a triumph for the BJP's efforts to reject the endless variations that have evolved, over the years and in different parts of India, in Hindu legends, beliefs and practices and to convert an amorphous religion into a monolithic creed as interpreted by the BJP to its own liking, and to suit its own political interests.

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The crisis in India, severe and growing in intensity, has deep implications. Secularism is not only on the defensive but seemingly in its last throes and may well be strangled. This onslaught on the principle of keeping religion and public life apart has also gained support from the theory advanced by some political scientists and sociologists that the countries of South Asia can never hope for inter-religious harmony because secularism is an alien, cultural ideology which is not suited to peoples whose religious beliefs are not shallow and whose acceptance of religious rituals is sincere. But in fact secular conduct is part of the South Asian tradition and the current crisis in secularism is far from the historical norm. The area has from time immemorial been the home of several religions. Christianity came in the early centuries after Christ and long before it was accepted in Europe. Jews and Zoroastrians settled in India without difficulty, and Muslims came to South Asia several centuries prior to their becoming a political force. But varying religious beliefs did not generally form a source of social tension. Alongside the maintenance of separate religious identities and often even exclusive social practices, there was also adaptation and interaction among people of different faiths. The influence of Hindus and Muslims on each other can be seen in music, architecture, dress and food, and Hindustani or Urdu is a language with Hindu and Muslim lineage. Nor did the two religions evolve in India in isolation. The most striking development in this regard was the rise of the Sufi movement in Islam and the Bhakti movement in Hinduism. The parallel in Sri Lanka is the influence of Hindu theistic devotionism on Buddhism, and the presence of the images of Hindu deities in several Buddhist temples.<sup>3</sup>

The popular, composite culture in India was not weakened, as the Hindu fundamentalists suggest, by the bigotry of Muslim rulers. It is true that Mahmud of Ghazni destroyed the Hindu temple at Somnath; but there is no reason to believe that he did it wholly out of religious zeal. He was also interested in the immense hoard of wealth in this temple. Human motivation is complex and history cannot be analysed simplistically with mono-causal explanations. Mahmud of Ghazni also destroyed several mosques in Central Asia, which were also reputed to be stocked with treasures; and we know that a Hindu general, named Tilak, was in his service. Babar established the Mughal empire by defeating a fellow Muslim, the Lodi sultan of Delhi, with the help of Rajput chieftains; and he gave several land grants to Hindu ascetics and temples. Basically rulers, then and now, whatever their religion, are interested in the pursuit of power and, when it has been attained, in its retention.

This helps to explain both Akbar and Aurangzeb. Akbar was doubtless a very decent human being,. But if he married a Hindu wife, and insisted that water from the river Ganga should be brought to him wherever he might be for his requirements, it was as much to hold his

empire together and to keep his Hindu subjects from becoming restive as it was to indicate his innate sense of tolerance. A Portuguese Jesuit living in Agra has recorded that Akbar visited the Roman Catholic chapel on three successive days and worshipped the Virgin Mary, the first day according to Christian rites, the next day as prescribed by Islam and, finally, on the third occasion by following Hindu rituals. The Jesuit concluded that Akbar's religious instincts were shallow. It would seem, rather, that Akbar was trying to establish to his subjects, that he, as the symbol of the State, whatever his own religious inclinations, was showing no preference for any particular religion. Like the character in Moliere's play who spoke prose without knowing it, Akbar was being a secular ruler before the word secularism was coined.

Aurangzeb was certainly a more devout Muslim than Akbar; but he was as much influenced by political considerations. The temples which he destroyed were located in areas which had risen in revolt. The temple at Mathura had been built by a Bundela ruler who headed a rebellion. Its construction was seen as an act of political defiance, and its destruction by Aurangzeb as an assertion of supremacy. Temples, mosques and shrines were all symbols of temporal power as well as being religious institutions.

The historical perspective also leads to the conclusion that iconoclasm was not the monopoly of people of any particular faith. Such conflicts as had occurred between Hindus and Muslims had their counterparts in clashes between Hindus and Buddhists and Hindus and Jains. The Bo-Tree in Bodhgaya was cut down by a Hindu general and had to be replaced by a sapling brought from Sri Lanka. When the Sikhs captured Sirhind in 1764, they deliberately destroyed all buildings, including the mosques. Even among the Hindus, Shaivites quarrelled with Vaishnavites and, among the Muslims, Sunnis with Shias. There is no room for generalizations in the matter of religious bigotry.

So in India, as in other countries of South Asia, down to the mid-eighteenth century, the general custom was to live and let live. This was not, of course, what we today understand as secularism in the full sense. One looks for a more positive concept than mere tolerance. Though religion was not in those days a vital influence in the public behaviour of either rulers or peoples, yet there was a marked dichotomy between the followers of the different religions. In particular, those who had begun in India and Nepal to regard themselves as Hindus kept to themselves as against people of other faiths and also promoted segregation within the Hindu fold by the practice of caste. But even the consolidation of European imperialism from the 1750s and the consequent rise, over a hundred years later, of the spirit of new, modern nationalism. The concept of a nation is an European idea which grew to importance in the 18th century. Britain

was integrated by the Act of Union in 1707, France was more tightly knit by the Revolution of the 1789 and the Napoleonic wars, and Germany and Italy were fully united in 1871. The criteria of European nationhood were ethnic homogeneity and a common language. These principles are still extant, as can be seen by the "ethnic cleansing" that is now ravaging south-eastern Europe and the acceptance in Germany of blood and language rather than territory and place of birth as the qualifications for citizenship.

With these assumptions, it was natural that the British rulers declined to accept that the peoples of India and Sri Lanka, of mixed stock and without a single language, could have the potential for a cohesive nationhood. It was asserted that these peoples were not, and could never be, nations. As Winston Churchill observed as late as 1930, "India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the Equator." It was thought that India was no more than a cluster of religious communities which had never got on with each other. Sir Francis Younghusband summed up the general thinking in 1930: "the animosities of centuries are always smouldering beneath the surface." In Sri Lanka too the assumption that the past consisted mainly of perennial conflict between races and groups was a product of colonial historiography.

The belief that South Asia consisted of plural societies divided by religion which could never cohere into nations was belied by the fact that nationalism in this part of the world had different origins from what one found in Europe. The British gave these countries administrative and commercial unity; and the growing indigenous middle classes, taking advantage of the ideas, institutions and even the language brought in by the foreign rulers, responded by asserting their own identity. What one had before the advent of the Europeans was not a bundle of religious communities but a network of principalities; and when the British replaced this with their own unified rule, South Asian nationalism was born as a reaction to imperial domination. It was a creative force that was the product of the colonial relationship, and it enabled a degree of social mobilization and political participation that possibly could not have been achieved in this context by other means.

That nationalism in South Asia had a different basis from that in Europe meant also that it was not xenophobic and

restrictive but absorbent and inclusive. It was inspired not by ethnic exclusiveness and a fortress mentality guarded by a single language but by pride in a shared past and common aspirations for the future. At its root lay, as Jawaharlal Nehru described it in 1945, "essentially a group memory of past achievements, traditions and experiences." But it was also more than that. It drew strength from a psychological conviction of these new nations, as a body of people who have done great things together in the past and who hoped to do great things together in the future. This makes the national identity of the South Asian countries more akin to the approach of the United States rather than to that of the European

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peoples. The United States has a history of just over two hundred years but it is held together by the belief that it is striving for certain moral absolutes: "that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights." The American national identity is built up by the struggle, still far from over, to attain the full plenitude of these values. Multi-culturalism, anchored to liberal principles, is the enduring basis of national unity. The acceptance of a measure of separateness helps to bring the Americans together. Such an identification of the nation is alien to

the conventional European mind, as exemplified by the remark of Hitler about the United States: "That is no nation; it is just a mess." But nationalism in South Asia is on the same lines as that of the United States, and its leaders have more in common with Jefferson and Lincoln than with Bismarck and Cavour.

To counter the spread of such nationalism, its opponents laid emphasis on the religious factor and facilitated the spread of communalism, or the ideology that social and political consciousness is based on a real or supposed religious identity. Fertile ground for this retrograde effort was provided in India by the circumstantial fact that regional imbalance in economic and social development led to the classes who gained most from British rule in the early years being predominantly Hindu; and use was made also of backward social customs such as the ban on inter-marriages and even of dining together to widen the growing gulf between Hindus and Muslims. As Tagore pointed out in 1906 when the British were being generally accused of inciting inter-religious conflict, "Satan cannot enter unless there be a flaw." But the combined effect of economic disparity, social disharmony and official policy was for religion in politics to weaken national



endeavor and ultimately to disrupt national unity. Religion outside its own private sphere is a divisive force and has nothing to contribute to nationalism in South Asia. But the nationalist leaders, while recognizing this broadly, often slipped in practice and frequently used the religious idiom to gain the support of the masses. All these causes together had the spiralling effect of ending in the partition of India, a frenzy of communal rioting and the murder of Mahatma Gandhi.

In the campaign to create Pakistan, Jinnah argued that religion was the core of South Asian nationalism and the nations in this area were formed on that basis. But once Pakistan came into existence he sought to make it a secular and not an Islamic state.<sup>5</sup> He did not, however, live long enough to ensure the success of his turn-around strategy; and the futility of seeking to hold the new state together by the bond of a common religion was seen in the break-away, years later in 1971, of Bangladesh. No stronger proof is required that religious nationalism in South Asia is built on a foundation of sand. As for independent India, she sought to move away from a steep descent into savagery and to put together once again the broken jigsaw of national identity. There were still millions of Muslims in the country who preferred not to migrate to Pakistan, and India would have to revert to the old secular tradition which had been clouded by recent aberrations. She would have once more, to quote Tagore, "to listen to the muffled footsteps of the past which beat in our blood. Secularism as sited to the modern age in South Asia meant freedom of conscience, equality of all citizens before the law irrespective of religion, creed, caste or sex, equal opportunities for all, and the neutrality and equi-distance of the state from all religions. The principles of national cohesion would be the divorce of religion from politics and public life, the separation of the state from the churches of all faiths, the insistence on religion as a private matter for the individual with no bearing on civic rights or duties, and freedom for the practice of diverse forms of religious worship provided no problems of law and order were created. These secular values both make historical experience meaningful and draw strength from their own logic. They are an integral part of a modern, civilized outlook and form the policy best sited to the countries of South Asia. They provide the social cement required by multi-religious societies striving to become healthy democratic communities. Secular conduct is the only way of making certain that no one is treated as a second-class citizen on the ground of religion.

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What is worrying is that these principles do not as yet seem to have taken firm root in our countries. To provide for one religion having "the foremost place" while assuring to all freedom of conscience and other fundamental rights is to compromise on secularism and to render the country, as a leading jurist of Sri Lanka, has said, neither a theocratic nor a secular state. In India too the governments have been faltering in the process of promoting a secular society. The Constituent Assembly resolved in 1948 that communal political parties should be banned, but no action has been taken till now on this resolution. A bill to this effect is at present being circulated, but legal difficulties are such that its passage is facing stout resistance. The banning of cow slaughter was made, despite the protests of Gandhi and Nehru, one of the Directive Principles of State Policy. These Principles cannot be enforced and in fact no steps have been taken in any part of the country to ban the slaughter of cows; but a concession had been made in the Constitution. This is a violation of the principle of equality before the law, for Muslim women are at present being denied the rights given to Indian women of other faiths. There is no room in a society which declares itself to be secular

for inequalities which claim religious sanction. Religion should have no role not only in politics but also in the law.

If a common civil law has not become a reality in India, a primary reason has been the desire to treat the minorities with consideration. The failure is the result of the collision between two principles, each of which is by itself proper. The misbehavior of minorities has to be dealt with sternly; but attention has also to be given to winning them over and making them feel at home. The problem of minorities is basically one for majority communities. The test of secularism in India is not what the Hindus think but how the Muslims and the other communities feel. Minorities may sometimes turn aggressive out of a sense of grievance or insecurity; but far more dangerous is the sectarianism of the majority community, for it masquerades as nationalism and frequently degenerates into a form of fascism. As Nehru said as long ago as 1933, "Honest communalism is fear; false communalism is political reaction." To distinguish between shades of communalism and consider one of it to be legitimate is to weaken the logic of secularism and open the door to explosive possibilities. But Nehru was right in the general drift of his thinking that the consolidation of secularism is a problem of social psychology. The



minorities may be driven by concern for themselves to act wrongly; but there is no justification or rational explanation for the majority community to behave in a similar fashion. Only if the Hindus in India are secular can the minorities be helped to become secular.

The hesitations of the Indian state since 1947 have been reinforced by other developments tending to the same result of weakening secularism. No political party has desisted, especially since the mid-sixties, whatever their pious disclaimers, from exploiting religion as a lever of political mobilization. The spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the world is both evoking a response and rousing a countervailing reaction. Again, just as the Jews were denounced in Nazi Germany as a threat to the economic prosperity of the nation, so in several parts of India, Muslims are being made the scapegoats of increasing economic decline, especially in retail and small-scale business and this feeling is accentuated by the envy roused by the flow of money from the Gulf to Muslim families. Nor is it without significance that many of the disputed religious sites constitute valuable urban property.

Both Sri Lanka India and are historically evolved plural societies, where religious communities were not political facts. But tolerance was necessary for their survival, and the emperor Asoka, who figures in the past of both peoples gave voice to the ethical virtue of respecting the beliefs of others. By honoring other faiths one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others.<sup>6</sup> But the colonial rulers regarded our societies as fractured permanently by religion and gave active assistance to the spread of the communal virus. Several public figures stressed that problems such as poverty, hunger and illiteracy were far more basic and had nothing to do with what religion one professed; but their efforts to reassert these priorities failed.

With the coming of independence, the governments of India and Sri Lanka set out to build on their wholesome past of the precolonial era and to transform themselves into modern, secular democracies. However, particularly in recent years a narrow, exclusivist chauvinism has been gaining strength. The crisis has not yet reached in either country the point of no return; but if the siege of the basic principles is to be lifted, clear thinking and prompt action are required. Democracy in South Asia can survive only if there are political structures broadly acceptable and capable of adjusting to the demands of various social groups. Frameworks of regional autonomy

which will isolate the extremists, be it in Srinagar or Jaffna, require immediate attention.

The sense of a nation is found among a people who identify themselves with each other; and this does not imply a flattening, homogenizing process. The right to belong and the right to be different within that belonging are not contradictory. If such measures as devolution succeed, there would then be space for long term responses. The practice of keeping religion out of public life has to be resumed, developed and adapted to suit the requirements of the modern age. Without secularization, no multi-religious society can hope to be modern and democratic. For secularism is the corner-stone of an egalitarian, forward looking India or Sri Lanka, with religious pluralism, full civil liberties and equal opportunities.

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A problem which goes to the root of national life in both our countries can only be solved by raising the broad level of civil society and building up the human factor at every point. Education on the right lines, quickening of the process of economic betterment and measures of social justice would all provide the necessary impetus. The way could be paved for this action by taking on Article 27(ii) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka which says "The State shall create the

necessary economic and social environment to enable the people of all religious faiths to make a reality of their religious principles with religious principles understood with moral values common to all religions." Then would be restored the state of mind, the almost instructive feeling which is the core of secularism, which once animated our peoples and which could now provide them with the robust, democratic culture of a modern society.

#### Notes

1. Report of Begum Khalida Zia's speech at Dhaka, *The Hindu* (Madras), 12 August, 1993.
2. D. Mandal, 1993, *Ayodya : Archaeology after Demolition*, Delhi.
3. R. Gombrich and G. Obeyesekere, 1988, *Buddhism Transformed*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
4. Letter of a Jesuit from Fatehpur Sikri, 18 July 1580. J. Correia - Afonso (ed.), 1980, *Letters from the Mughal Court*, Bombay, p. 58.
5. See his first address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, G.W. Chowdry (ed.), 1967, *Documents and Speeches on the Constitution of Pakistan*. (Dhaka 1967), pp.22-23.
6. Rock edict XII.