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THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

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I would like to take this opportunity to argue that although serious study of the early past of our society is on the decline with students preferring the lush pastures of science and commerce, nevertheless it remains a crucial area of investigation as it is intimately linked to the present, and more so in the context of our immediate concerns.

It was only recently proclaimed that the end of history had arrived with the victory of global capitalism over socialism. Yet within the short span of these last few years we have witnessed and are continuing to witness, the most dramatic resurgence of ideologies and aspirations which have a distinctly nineteenth century feel to them. These have brought back history if ever it had indeed been ended with a disquieting resonance. I am not referring only to the ethnic confrontations in former Yugoslavia, but more widely to actions motivated by theories of racism and of ethnicity, and of the permeation of religion into politics. Such actions are more than visible in the heart of global capitalism as they also are in the societies of our sub-continent.

The intellectually fashionable periodisation today speaks of history in terms of the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial. The latter two are familiar and subject to much discourse. But pre-colonial history in India is largely unfamiliar to those who conduct this discourse. Nevertheless generalisations are made about the pre-modern tradition in India and these frequently derive from what is assumed to be the tradition, an assumption often based on the negation of that which is held to be characteristic of modernity. There is little hesitation in using colonial constructions of "tradition" or "community" or "culture" in speaking of an earlier historical heritage. A familiarity with the various pre-colonial associations of these concepts is regarded as unnecessary. If, as some historians assert, cultural concepts are to be given priority in historical explanation, then surely these concepts have to be viewed from a historical perspective. It seems to me that this is all the more necessary in a society which even today carries so many "cultural survivals" from earlier times. Part of the reason for this unconcern with earlier history is the theory, disturbing for the historian, that all historical moments are isolated, fortuitous and contingent. The logic of this would justify even the rejection of history, and if the historical moment belongs to a post-colonial situation, its antecedents or mutations from a pre-colonial or a colonial time would be regarded as irrelevant, For a historian, this is unacceptable.

We are being encouraged today to take a fragmented view of ourselves and of our past, where the fragmentation follows from the premises of nineteenth century interpretations of our past, and which had hopefully been replaced by a holistic view when we terminated colonial rule. In speaking of a holistic view I am not endorsing the claim of ruling groups to represent the whole, but am insisting that the relationships between various groups which constitute society be included, even where some of these are confrontational. Fragmentation has returned in many forms, the most prominent being religion-based nationalism, the kind of nationalism which we had believed had been laid to rest at the time of independence.

Added to this is caste and regional chauvinism. Some would view all these as products of the nation-state and argue that once the nation-state disappears so will these, but how this is to happen and what will replace the nation-state remains unclear. For the moment, the nation at least, is visible and apparent. It is more realistic for us to ensure its well-being through action which we regard as instrumental for the common good.

The return to a holistic view requires a reassessment of the relation of civil society to the nation-state. In this the secularising of our society as part of the process of change envisioned in modernisation becomes a central issue. I would like to argue that this is not a matter related only to religious identities and religious nationalism but has implications for the totality of social change. Further, that although it differs from our pre-colonial past, such a secularising is not an attempt at alienating ourselves from our tradition, since the pre-colonial past has, in ample measure, ideas and institutions conducive to the secular.

Secularism in Europe has its own history. Its association with the separating of religion from civic life is only of recent times accompanying the advent of the nation-state and the historical process of modernisation. The meaning of the word has changed in European intellectual history and therefore its exact translation cannot be sought in non-European languages, but as a concept it can be located in cultures where this historical process is taking place. For the Romans "secular" meant a specific period of time, generally a hundred years, marked by holding games and worshipping the gods. Because of its association with a long temporal duration it came to be used gradually as a description of the world which had existed for a long period. This was later contrasted with the Church which had a briefer life. Secular was initially taken in this sense as that which pertained to the world and not to the Church.

To speak of secularism as a western concept superimposed on India is historically incorrect, for it is not confined to the question of the relations between religion and the state derived from the experience of the Christian Church. Within the Christian Church there was a substantial difference between the Protestant induction of some aspects of secularism and the Catholic confrontation with it. The Lutheran Scandinavian countries had few problems with seculatrising their societies the Catholic priests of Italy and Spain, not to mention Latin America, are still battling with it. The crux of the confrontation is not around the religion of the individual or its negation but over the question of the authority of religious institutions or institutions inspired by religious identities over civic life.

By the mid-nineteenth century the definition of secular focused on the question of ethics. It was stated that social morality, central to the secular, should have as its sole basis the well-being of mankind to the exclusion of considerations stemming from a belief in God or in a future condition. The key elements of this morality were legal order, political freedom, individual autinomy and material well-being. These are elements endorsed even by those that find modernisation antipathetic. The emphasis therefore is not on a hostility to religion but on rational and moral principles governing society, principles which oppose the alienation of human beings, or the absence of social ethics. Yet there is a persistence in arguing that the secular hinges solely on the conflict between Church and State. In the definition of secularism, the state is not the arbiter of conflict or co-existence between religions, nor is secularism the ideology of statehood. If we have conceded this to the state then this will need to be corrected by the state having to adhere to the values and ethics of a secularised society.

Where secularism is so interpreted, the evidence from pre-colonial India points to a relationship far more nuanced that it was in Europe and in some ways, dissimilar. This was in part due to the multiplicity of religions from early times and in part to the nature of Indian social organisation which was entirely different from Europe. There were certainly rituals to consecrate a Raja and these were moments of intense religiosity. A new Sultan was announced by having the *khutba* read in his name in the mosque; interestingly how ever, state patronage was bestowed in substantial amounts to a range of what may otherwise have even been conflicting religious sects and institutions. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka encourages respect for both the *brahmana* and the *shramana* although elsewhere the relation between the two is compared to that between the mongoose and the snake. There is an on-going controversy, as to whether Harshavardhana of Kannauj was a Buddhist or a Shaiva, given his endowments and support to both, and this was soon after the time when the Shaiva sects of Kashmir had destroyed Buddhist monasteries and killed Buddhist monks. The Chalukyas of Gujarat built a mosque for the Arabs trading in western India, which mosque was destroyed by the Paramaras of Malwa campaigning against the Chalukyas. Mughal endowments to *brahmanas, jogis* and temples are recorded, even those of Aurangzeb.

Cultural pluralism and its protection was accepted as the duty of the king. His protection of *dharma* was not religion in the modern sense for it enveloped the entire range of social obligations of which religious ritual was a part. This however is not what is meant by a secular society. Secularism is not expressed merely by the state protecting and ensuring the co-existence of religions. But, where there is evidence for this from the past, it increases the potential for locating those historical activities which would be conducive to the encouragement of the secular today.

The notion of a state religion in pre-colonial India also becomes somewhat meaningless when it is apparent that political power was relatively open throughout Indian history. Ruling families frequently came from groups ranked as socially low of from obscure families, where some made an effort to cover this up with fancy origin myths and claims to *kshatriya* status. But in the process of becoming politically established, they tended to carry their religious cults with them and these had then to be recognised as part of the established religion. The entry of Shaktism into upper caste practice was in part due to this process. Where such kings could eventually claim to be the *avatara* of Vishnu, the centrality of a God as a focus of power begins to pale.

Alternatively, an existing state sometimes had to extend its patronage not only to the established religious institutions, but even to a cult of the marginalised groups, in order to strengthen its authority. Although such cults are sometimes brought on par with upper caste religion, their local roots and specific meaning remain, and distinguish them from other such cults. Thus the worship of the hero-stone among pastoralists in Maharashtra was mutated into the cult of Vithoba, the Yadava dynasty encouraging its identity with Vishnu. This resulted in Yadava control over large tracts of the less fertile parts of Maharashtra. The same process has been sketched for many other areas especially at the turn of the first millennium A.D.

If one takes a long view of the past, human societies have moved from the palaeolithic to the neolithic to the chalcolithic to urban civilisations and much more. Each change brought its own anxieties and bewilderments where power and authority were conceded by some and contested by others. As far back as B.C., emerging kingdoms in the Ganga plain began to supersede the clans and the beginnings of urbanisation brought further change. There was at this time a strong endorsement of social ethics. Buddhist thought maintained that ethical behaviour was socially determined and did not derive from a deity, a clear separation of ethics from religion. The centrality of social ethics is a significant part of our cultural inheritance.

The history of religion in India has generally been viewed from the perspective of both the Hindu and the Muslim upper castes. Such religion was directed to a specific deity or deities and had institutions for chanelling worship. Sacred place was demarcated by the temple and the mosque. Sometimes this was extended to the *matha* and *khanqah*. Temples and *mathas* were closed to some lower castes and to untouchable; mosques and *khanqahs* were open, but nevertheless the clientele was discrete. There were orders of priests and monks, there were *ulema*, there were texts held sacred, and there was a competition for wealthy patrons, particularly royalty. These were all characteristics of Christian Europe as well. But there, at the lower levels of society, there was an enforcing of support for these institutions, whereas in India such support was garnered but did not prevent the existence of alternative religious identities by the same people. The lower castes, viewed as servants of the temple, would have performed the requisite services but would not invariably have been included among the worshippers. Their religious practice lay outside these institutions and was bounded by social codes of behaviour. Since these castes, whom we now arbitrarily label Hindu and Muslim, formed the majority of the population, their religion has to be recognised as distinctive.

The religion of this majority was a mixing and merging of belief and ritual drawn from a variety of religious experiences, in which the formal differentiations of upper caste religions did not generally prevail. Frequently the religious practices of these groups were unacceptable to those who defined Islam and Hinduism. Thus, *brahmanas* shrank from libations of alcohol and offerings of flesh and *mullahs* could not prevent converts to Islam continuing to worship idols. The recognition of these religions as central to the assessment of religion in India, is a recent interest, having been substantially ignored in the Orientalist construction of Indian religion.

The claim that there was religious tolerance in Indian society is defended by recourse to texts. In fact it was the juxtaposition of various kinds of religious practices and beliefs tied closely to social organisation which was the basis of both a relative religious tolerance and a heightened intolerance based on social out-casting. Religious practices and beliefs could overlap among adjoining castes, but social distinctions were firmly demarcated. Religious tolerance was possible because of the enforcement of social boundaries, but when these were transgressed or seen as competitive, as for example, between the Shaivas and the Jainas in Karnataka, the tolerance disappeared and the conflict took a religious form. Violent forms of religious intolerance were local and did not develop into *jehads* and crusades. The co-existence of religions is again described as secularism but this is not a sufficient description of secularism.

The religious reality in the past for the majority of Indians has been the recognition of a multiplicity of religions drawing marginally perhaps from the established ones, but far more rooted in local cults, beliefs and rituals and identified less by religion and more by *jati* or by *zat*. This gave them a certain freedom to worship a stone, an icon or a deity with which they alone had a dialogue. These were groups entwined by social regulations but of a local kind. They maintained a distance from the *brahmanas* and the *ulema* for they were seeentially unconcerned with norms of the sastras or with *fatwas*, governed as they were by their own customary observances. This distance was not an idyllic or archaic freedom but resulted from the segmentation of *jati* which kept them apart. The distancing in religious belief and practice, however, did not prevent an oppressive proximity in areas of civic concern, in the control exercised by those in authority over such groups. Within the *jati/zat* there was a degree of egalitarianism. In the absence of democracy the ranking was held together by the coercion of those at the top and the acquiecsing of those at the lower end. More often than not, within each broad category there was a certain consensus and some manouevrability. With the coming of democracy the coercive aspect should ideally fade away but this will not happen easily and quickly, given force of historical conditioning.

Caste as *jati* combined in itself kinship systems, occupation and access to resources. and rituals and beliefs. Further removed socially were the untouchable and the tribals whose religious practices were yet more different. There was ther fore an immense diversity even in religions believed to be uniform such as Islam and Christianity. Worship at temples and mosques was formal but the perfect worshipper was the *bhakta* who chose his own deity, his form of worship. Religious belief was bound by individual inclination but religious practice conformed to that of the *jati*. The pressures to conform were pressures of society and did not emanate from a Church.

As in most pre-modern societies, hierarchy bound the segments into a whole but it was not an immutable hierarchy. Osmosis between close castes did permit of some mobility although this was dependent on the historical situation. Recruitment to upper castes in the case of *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* took the form of incorporating new groups and assigning status. Inscriptions of the post-Gupta period from Bangladesh mention an increase of *brahmana gotras* which have been explained as resulting from the incorporation of people from local societies who were then given *brahmana* status. This becomes a feature in many areas where there was an expansion of the agrarian economy and state power. In the case of Ashrafs and Saiyyads who claimed higher status because of foreign origins, and frequently had high administrative positions, their ranks could also increase when after a few generations indigenous converts made the same claims. A change of status required a change in the way of life. There fore only those who could invest in this change were able to make it. Others sought to alter the ranking or express their dissent by initiating a new religious sect which, in negotiating with other social groups, either negated or ignored caste ranking, but more often than not was transmuted into a caste. Both these feature make a consistent pattern throughout the Indian past.

This does not make Indians more embedded in religion. But it requires that we investigate the relation between religion, politics and society in the pre-colonial period in terms different from the established ones. Monolithic, homogenous, religious communities claiming to represent either the majority or the minority provide little explanation of the antecedents to the present functioning of Indian society. They only foster the aspirations of some present day political parties. But at the same time, the contemporary ideology of religious majoritarianism not only moulds religion into a new homogenous and militant form to enable it to function as an agency of political mobilisation, but it also makes a mockery of democracy by giving to the majority a pre-determined identity. The fears of those labelled as minorities are also sought to be allayed by encouraging them to resort to uniformity and militancy.

This is not to suggest that there was an absence of communities in the past, but that the community identities were many and drew on caste, location language, religious practice and belief, some of which intersected. These were not communities identified across the sub-continent by a single, recognised, religious mould. Communities are in any case constructed, which is why there can be intersecting identities and these identities can disappear over time or survive in variant forms. The current recognition of monolithic religious communities is also a construction which grows out of the way Indian society was perceived in the colonial period. Social memory is also influenced by historical perceptions.

The induction of the secular into a society cannot be a partial experience, revolving around religion. It is a component of a bigger change involving primarily the introduction of democracy, but also of new technologies, and the emergence of a new social group, the middle-class, which breaks away from earlier social identities. There is inevitably a search for new identities and in the Indian situation of recent times, encouragement has been given to religious identities, on the basis of a particular interpretation of what is regarded as the Indian tradition and Indian history. Secularism is no more a western concept than is the middle-class or the nation-state, even if all these are changes introduced to the world as a result of capitalism or colonialism.

The recognition of the secular relates to specific historical change experienced by a variety of societies and may well in the next century result in varied manifestations. In Europe this change was associated with societies which had been confined to a single religion which evolved as a focus of power and therefore came into confrontation with the state. In India there has been a multiplicity of religions and the state did not need to confront these. This pre-colonial experience should make it easier for us to secularise our society provided we can cut our way through the impositions of the last two centuries. Religion in India, even if viewed in terms of Hindu and Muslim, has had a strong personal component and has not been dependent on a Church. It would therefore be regarded as natural that religion be a personal matter, a matter of faith, and neither the concern of the state nor of the self-appointed theologians of any majority or minority community. To draw on secular tradition from the Indian past would have less to do with religious identities and more to do with the questioning of social boundaries.

The problems of the monolithic religious communities, created end endorsed by colonial and, to some degree, nationalist opinion, remains with us. If the nation-state has accepted these identities, then the failure lies with civil society acquiescing in this acceptance. We are hesitant to recognise the elements of a different tradition which I would argue is the historical heritage and which although not secularism, would nevertheless legitimise a secular social ethic. This in turn would empower civil society to strengthen democracy and prevent authoritarianism by the state. Secularisation creates new categories of cohesive social relationships which can monitor the activities of the state. The monitoring is not necessarily a self-conscious act for it is written into the legislating of human rights. These are opposed to any identity used for constructing monolithic, homogenous, religious communities, or for that matter even communities identified by race and ethnicity. Such identities are only too present in various parts of the world and are by no means absent in the subcontinent where they have become the major source of opposition to the rights necessary to an enlightened society.

The secularisation of society is neither an easy nor a rapid change. The requirements of social justice and of social welfare, with precedence for subordinated groups and gender justice, have not been given priority in Indian development and are likely to be brushed aside by the demands of global capitalism. To try and hold back modernisation is now a fantasy. But we cannot be passive recipients of modernisation. In the absence of the practice of human rights and social justice, a modernised state can become merely another oppressive state; and where it appropriates the kind of nationalism which creates ghettos, it becomes a fascist state.

Ideologies of social welfare and social justice can be effectively put into practice by the state, but their continued existence if not enhancement should become the essential concern of civil society. This implies not just an expectation from the state, but more importantly, the ensuring of their presence in our institutions. It is only through empowering that which is secular in our society that we can to live with dignity. ■

Dr. Chanaka Amaratunga, leader of the Liberal Party , died in a motor accident on the 1st of August 1996. He has been a contributor to Pravada on many occasions. We mourn his untimely death

A liberal has left us

Chanaka Amaratunga lived life. He did everything and more. He was an actor, playwright, debater, philosopher, academic, activist, writer and critic. He was on every stage-literary, theatrical and political. And he was everywhere-lecturing on liberalism at the University, advocating federalism at a political rally, or chatting at the Arts Centre. And on every occassion, he was worth listening to.

He was a principled liberal advocate of a peaceful and plural Sri Lanka. He never wavered.

Chanaka represented sanity with intensity, rationality with passion, and calmness with urgency. In the midst of death and destruction, he refused to succumb to despair and defeat. He gave us hope and happiness. We miss him.