Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 63

Secularism in the Western and Indian Context

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. This is our very last lecture. So after concluding all our modules, this is kind of an overview lecture or an overarching discussion on what is secularism in India and did we have a concept of secularism before secularism was formalized through constitution in the post-independence era, right, after we became a nation-state? So this is a lecture on secularism in the western sense and secularism in the Indian context. So Victor Turner studies that 'secular' is a French word whose etymological root traces back to the Latin word "secularis", which is opposed to ecclesiastical. Secularization results in the decline of scope of authority structures, and it aids the corrosion of the power of the priestly class.

So previously in the western part of the world we would see that the papacy, the pope and members associated with the pope would assume a lot of power in the society and it would lead to a lot of corruption, deep rooted corruption. So secularism was a way of uprooting that kind of corruption centering church activities, right, a declination of power of the priestly class. Its accompanying factors are rationalization, individualism, democratic politics and liberal values; all these things come as concomitant or as offshoots of secular values. Ernst Winter observes that when a society is unified in terms of functional interdependence rather than traditional integration through common cultural elements, religious creeds and religious beliefs become increasingly less significant and less relevant.

So in a secular society people function in terms of interdependence rather than traditional integration. Further, one of the founders of French enlightenment, a German philosopher called Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz suggests that the cosmopolitan virtue of exchanging ideas through dialogical and critical understanding can be seen as an expression of secularism. It's a symptom of a secular society. This is what Leibniz observed. In the

western society secularism uncoupled or decoupled the mundane lives of the people from the church activities.

  Gradually it eradicated the omnipresent character of the church, the omnipresent, omniscient figure of the church. And post-Reformation we see that a policy of tolerance was formulated. So the Protestant revolution in early 16th century plays a very important role in this regard. With the Protestant revolution we see that the orthodoxy associated with the Roman Catholics is being questioned, being challenged and revisited. German England was initially a protest movement against the political selfishness of the wealthy and authoritarian theologists that later took an aesthetic turn under the auspices of leaders like Charles Bradlaugh and Georges Holyoake.

  In France secularism is marked by the French revolution and following Napoleon's civil code it finally made an impression after Waldeck Rousseau's passing the education bill under the Third Republic. So in the case of Germany Ludwig Feuerbach proposed that rather than have a state which is neutral to religions, God and his traits need to be secularized and the conventional notion or the conventional idea of God has to be declared as redundant. In America James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington were the leaders that proposed the secular state, they were the proponents of a secular state. So the western notion of secularism is essentially informed by convinced scientism, dogmatism and communism, which are all based on secularist values. Secularism extends its concepts through decoupling the church from the state and this happens mainly and majorly/ in a major way through the and during the Protestant revolution, the protest against the Catholics.

  Now when we come to the Indian scenario from here, we see that the Indian case of Sarvadharma Samanyay or Sarvadharma Sambhavana, that is possibility of coexistence of different religions can be observed during the Bhakti movement itself or also under the reigns of rulers such as Akbar and Dara Shikoh later on. Wendy Doniger says, I quote,"Rather than characterizing the ritual world of the Ṛg Veda as worldly, one might do better to characterize the non-ritual Vedic world as sacred." Regardless of the western values of objective reasoning, scientific reasoning and positing humans as cognitive animal and unlike the institution of church whose cosmic theories had been disproved by inventors such as Galileo; the eastern religions, the Indic religions were not at odds with science. So Indic religions never had a tiff with science and scientific assumptions, scientific premises, and so they would not be seen as a hurdle or an obstacle to the path of secularization by way of scientific advancement. This is what V.Indira Devi observes.

Even prior to the formation of a scientific self-image of the Indian-nation state, the idea of human community here in India was shaped around religious lords and traditions. Victor Turner notes that India has at least partially succeeded in what he calls as "avoiding the dismemberment of important ritual types, and have incorporated into ritual performances many of the issues and problems of modern urban living and succeeded in giving them religious meaning". So many of the Indian religious institutions till date thrive in the form of a bureaucratized and multipurpose complex around the sanctum sanctorum. So sanctorum actually sustains so many lives and livelihood. So it is a kind of bureaucratized and multipurpose complex.

So these religious institutions are self-sufficient structures comprising a kitchen for cooking, a tank for bathing and a specific allotted places for the development of education through lectures, discourses and publication of souvenirs and additionally providing accommodation to the youth, the young scholars at a waived fee. So they are also attached to social service, the concept of social service. They have not lost their social dimension in order to serve religion. So these religious institutions are responsible for the production of knowledge, employment of skilled labors and financing of the needy. Sometimes it could be the poor orphans as well as the aged population that are supported, that are sponsored by the temple funds or the Dargah funds.

So secularism is not an indigenous concept and the pre-colonial Indian government systems were based either on Vedic or on Islamic treatises. Secularism is relatively a very new term attached or associated with the Indian society. Secularism is not perfectly translatable to Indian languages. There is no word that can perfectly carry the sense of secularism the way it is used in the western part of the world because it does not have an organic association or attachment with the Indian society. So it could lead to an array of misplaced meanings which range between agnosticism and religious neutrality.

In this regard, Satchidananda Dhar states that the Dharmashastras and Arthashastras which offer practical methods towards education, trade, commerce, economic progress and justice have always formed the edifice or the basis of the Indian governments, be it monarchic or otherwise. In the same way the Jātakas discuss the qualities of members who can constitute an assembly of justice and in the Puranic tales and myths, Nārada, the figure of Nārada is described as having emphasized the importance of the elderly population, the elderly people and dharma and truth in the court of law. Louis Dumont

notes that secularism in ancient India faced a setback when religion was uncoupled from administration, which resulted in the priestly Brahmin elites deciding the legitimacy and limits of that which fell into the realm of the secular for the warrior Kshatriya elites. So basically it is not a great idea to decouple religion from administration. It can have a very counterproductive effect.

S.L. Verma notes that secularism in India has not been amply probed in line with the support of the elites and therefore it has frozen into a kind of stereotype without any precise definition. It can make an individual in fact skeptic of all religions instead of cultivating a sense of pride and respect for another's religion or for the religion of the other. So India experienced British secularism during the colonial contact under the rule of Queen Victoria whose government purported or whose government proposed to be neutral in religious matters, and through the system of English education. However, we see that Divide and Rule is a part and parcel of the colonial apparatus. The British rule, the British administration expands itself in India through divide and rule policy playing a very important role in preventing adaptation of secularism in India in the western sense of the term.

So the legacy, the history of Divide and Rule policy tells us why it is difficult to adapt secularism in India in the western sense of the term. While postcolonial Indian constitution chose secularism as a way of keeping together, bracing together the various faiths within one multilingual, multiethnic nation-state, one also notes that the precolonial Indian subcontinent had always in fact celebrated a peaceable harmonious climate where an individual would participate in religious activities and pray to different Gods, Gods from different communities regardless of his or her own communal identity. This had always been there regardless of the presence of the colonizers. So, Mushirul Hasan Hasan says, I quote, "…Western concept of state and civil society is intrinsically out of place in India where…religion is not just recognized as a mediating force in political and social affairs but legitimized through private and state intervention". Further, arguing that there is inequality and constitutive violence to the statist projects of secularism, Ashish Nandy points out that secularism inferiorizes other schools of thought.

So secularism has a tendency to render inferiority to other schools of thought and it insists that only it can practice pluralism. So only through secularism apparently plurality can be celebrated and that secularism can even justify the colonial apparatus. Nandy points out that the ideology and politics of secularism, quote, "…have more or less exhausted their possibilities and…we may now have to work a different conceptual frame which is already

visible at the borders of Indian political culture" , unquote. Jawaharlal Nehru suggests that during Akbar's reign Tulsidas was more popular than the Mughal Emperor himself. That is the kind of secularism that India has always celebrated in the pre-colonial era.

Asghar Ali Engineer studies several cases in India, the several syncretic communities in India or societies in India which bear out to the layered and syncretic spirit. The Shaivite poetess Laleshwari and the Sufi saint Rishi Nuruddin, for example, both of whom belong to a common Kashmiri ethnicity, they share a similar style of poetry writing. Despite the fact that Laleshwari is a Hindu, she is from the Shaivite tradition and Sufi saint Rishi Nuruddin is from the Islamic tradition, the Sufi tradition; their poetry writing styles are, you know, starkly similar and they share that kind of common Kashmiri ethnicity. And this could be extended to any region.

We see that in Bengal, the Bengaliness, the community of Bengali or the Bengali values would prevail over one's Hindu or Muslim identity. Similarly in Punjab, in the pre-colonial era, the people would be, the populace would be first Punjabi and then Hindu or Muslim or Sikh. The regional identity would matter more, the linguistic community would matter more than the religious community. Then we have so many of these very peculiar examples of cultural mishmash, cultural wedding we could say, where one culture is wedded to the other. So while a number of ulemas of the Firang Mahali order have been worshippers of Lord Krishna, Firang Mahali ulemas frequently worship Lord Krishna, the Meo Muslims of Rajasthan and Haryana celebrate Holi and Diwali and they solemnize marriages through, you know, going around the fire, circumambulation.

And they solemnize marriages through circumambulation or going around the fire. On the other hand, there are examples of Brahmin caretakers who have been in charge of a number of mausoleums. So, on the other hand, there are examples of Brahmin caretakers who have been in charge of several mausoleums in the past, which include Haji Malang Baba's Sufi mausoleum. So, in the immediate decades after independence, the Congress government tried to fortify the secularist framework through electing three presidents from among the minorities. One was Badruddin Tyebji from the Muslims, the other Dadabhai Naoroji from the Parsis and Woomesh Chandra Bonnerjea from the Christians.

However, these strategies, you know, official strategies and endeavors on the part of the government did not put the minority-majority debate to rest and these practices or these

endeavors cannot be equated on the same plane with the teachings and the, you know, practices of Kabir, Bulleh Shah, Guru Nanak, Vivekananda and Ram Krishna. And these figures, these leaders, religious leaders have appealed towards dissolving religious differences and bringing about religious synthesis. So, what I am trying to get at here is that what the religious leaders could do through their poetry, through their teachings cannot be necessarily accomplished, cannot be necessarily achieved by politicians. Even if they are trying to do the right thing, the political statement in itself may not be enough to dissolve the debates, to dissolve the boundaries and borderlines that separate the different communities. What Kabir, Bulleh Shah, Guru Nanak, Vivekananda and Ram Krishna could do as saints, as poets can hardly be achieved through governmental strategies that is wearing the tag of secularism, the western notion of secularism.

So, Indian secularism, the secularism at the heart and the spirit of India is much more than what the western secularism has to offer - the kind of secularism, the brand of secularism that India has adopted in the post-independence era. It is a kind of a legacy that India has inherited from the British. Shashi Joshi and Bhagwan Josh note that the reformationist approach appeared as nothing short of, I quote, "creation of a new ethic, a doctrine which would give the 'sanction of orthodoxy' to newly emerging feelings and moods", unquote. So, put very simply, the western notion or the western idea of secularism does not sit very well or does not organically merge with the Indian values.

It does not fit the Indian bill. Secularism in the present day India as a reflection of the western model, in fact as a reflection of the colonial model, then frequently becomes a pretext for floating ideas that are crafted towards benefiting personal interests, and they are forever foraying the phantasm called religion. So, foraying the effigy of religion, the phantasm of religion may not lead to a solution of all the problems. Removal of religion from the public order, from the public discourse may not give us the brand of secularism that we enjoyed through Sarva Dharma Samabhavana or Sarva Dharma Samanyaya in the pre-colonial era, which was weaved through values that were closer to the Indian culture, that were organically embedded in the Indian society, not foisted or not imposed artificially or synthetically from outside. With this we come to the end of today's lecture and we come to the end of this lecture series.

I thank you once again for your interest in my course, for taking up this course and I hope we had a great journey together. Thank you all once again. God bless!