

Comments on “Is Secularism Alien to Indian Civilization?” by Romila Thapar

Shyam Sunder, Yale University
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Unfortunately, I did not get Professor Thapar’s paper until yesterday, and have not had the chance to read it carefully as I would have liked to. Usually, that presents no problem. After all, I can always fall back on discussants’ standard formula—10 percent praise, 10 percent critique, and 80 percent of the time spent on talking about my own work. Praising Professor Thapar’s work would make me just as radio-active as criticizing it, albeit in the eyes of different audiences. I have written nothing about either the history of India or on secularism anywhere. But I do have a few doubts, questions and conjectures.

First, I am personally inclined to agree with the main thesis of the paper that the idea of secularism is not alien to Indian civilization. However, this inclination rests on reasons different from the historical evidence adduced by Professor Thapar on *vihar* democracy and Asokan tolerance. I believe the receptivity of Indian population to secularism arises from the dominance of realization over revelation, in Indian religious thought. Religions of realization, being insistently personal at their roots, do not build elaborate social structures—the “church” if you will—to support them. Absent competing structures, they do not need to come into conflict with the state as often as the religions which rest on larger social structures.

Second, I would find Professor Thapar’s argument more convincing if it could be supported by some linguistic evidence. Professor Seema Khurana helped me identify three Hindi and Urdu words which seem to come close to secularism: *dharma-nirpeksha*, *a-sampradayika*, and *gair-majhabi*. All three appear to be modern constructions in negative form. I wonder if there exist in Sanskrit or Pali literature some words or expressions that capture secularism, either in the sense Professor Thapar discusses them in her paper, or perhaps in some more modern sense. The existence and use of such language will significantly add to Professor Thapar’s argument on receptivity of Indian civilization to secularism.

Third, in the sense Professor Thapar defines proto-secularism—space for non-religious elements in social ethics—secularism would appear to be an essential element of every state, even the most theocratic states. I understand her to mean that India might have been more receptive than some other places. To make this argument stick, it is not sufficient to point to the existence of some space in the social ethics which was not filled by religion. It would be more convincing to compare this space in other societies where it might have been filled by religion in varying degrees.

Fourth, I would raise a minor quibble to Professor Thapar’s argument. A state that arises from democracy, from wishes of its people, and without attribution of a divine role to the ruler, need not be secular. Democracies are perfectly capable of giving rise to demand for an important role for religion in the state.

I think of secularism as a problem of aggregation. As individuals, we are multi-dimensional. Most individuals choose, simultaneously, to become members of many aggregates. Social, political, religious, economic, or multi-functional institutions are examples of such aggregates.

As much as we might like to, it is impossible, except in trivially simple situations, to avoid functional overlaps among such institutions. This overlap pulls at the strings of the loyalties of the individual members, and competition, even conflict, among the institutions.

In one sense, elimination of such conflicts is easy: either permit only a single institution, or render people into a single dimension. It is also trivial in the sense that there this will be the end of humanity as well as the society. Fortunately, we know of no way of accomplishing such a goal. This means that the conflict is going to stay. The day no one objects to secularism, it would already have ceased to be worth the pursuit and argument.

Given the impossibility of achieving perfection, secularism is best seen not as a state of affairs, but as a value in human societies; something to cherish, to strive for, perhaps even promoted on occasion, but only to a degree. Even if secularism could be attained in its most pristine form, whatever that may be, it is not clear that it would be desirable in a world where citizens hold dear many different values, and promotion of secularism must necessarily sacrifice some other values.

At various points in time and space, societies choose to make adjustment in one direction or another. Holding secularism as an absolute value, independent of all other values is, itself, a form of fundamentalism. The slogans of “secularism in danger,” may belong in the same class as “Hindutva in danger” or “Islam in danger” and should be recognized as such. The difficult choices in human societies are made through adjustments on the margin, and not in attainment of absolutes.

Liberal democracies are not especially hospitable to absolute values of any kind, whether it is religious freedom, civil liberties, or secularism. All of these values are contained within boundaries—not necessarily frozen boundaries, but boundaries nonetheless. The attempts to push secularism to its absolute limits are identifiable, at least in my mind, with Stalin and Pol Pot. Perhaps it is not a mere accident that the liberal democracies of Western Europe, the presumed cradle of the post-reformation movement toward separation of Christian Church and the state, have not tried to push secularism to the limits that the followers of Marx tried to achieve but failed. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Professor Thapar’s example, and Nehru’s symbolic choice of Indian secularism, are both embedded in Buddhism, one of the atheistic religions of India.

Whether the pluralistic societies of India, Sri Lanka and Bangla Desh make appropriate compromises and accommodation across their overlapping institutions is less a matter of top down government policy, and more a matter of individual sensibilities. The extent of secularism in South Asia will ultimately result from a Hayekian aggregation of inherently private individual preferences. My impression is that the debate on secularism in South Asia will remain futile, ignored totally by the people and the politicians unless it engages the populace at large. Unfortunately, the electoral institutions of liberal democracy are not supportive of the top down approach to secularism. For those of us who hope that the South Asian societies will make further adjustment towards secularism, elections do not bode well. I hope I prove to be wrong here.

To the extent the social institutions of the religions of realization are less well-defined than the institutions of the religions of revelation, secularism may be allowed

greater leeway under the former. To the extent the Hindutva movement seeks to transform Hindu religions into a religion of revelation, it is indeed bad news for those who wish to expand the secular domain. They say: you must choose your enemies carefully because you would become like them. Revelationization of Hinduism may well turn out to be the greatest cost of the half-a-century of conflict between India and Pakistan.

The theorists of South Asian secularism will have to devise an answer to the problem of intolerant religions. If one or more religions in a pluralistic society preach their unwillingness to coexist with the others, how do we define a secular regime for such societies? I am not sure what the answer is.

To the extent the fundamentalist movements in South Asia can be seen as a process of consolidation of diverse religious communities into two large aggregates under the label of Hindu and Muslim, what would be the effect of this consolidation on the receptivity of the region to secular governance? If increasing religious diversity is fertile ground for secular governance, such consolidation may also be bad news.

Promotion of secularism means a transfer of power from religious and social to state institutions. No such transfer takes place without struggle. Herbert Simon introduced the idea of authority relation in society to be bottoms up, instead of top down. Secularism, too, can advance only with mass support. Does such support exist, and what can be done in South Asia to recruit mass support for such a transfer?

I would imagine that for secular humanism to take roots in South Asia, we would need humanist education. Even those of us who had the good fortune to attend some of the highly regarded institutions in India feel that our liberal arts education remains very unsatisfactory. And that was many years before the NDA government came into office. We don't learn much history in the school. What we do learn is so incomplete, in spite of great work done by many distinguished historians in the recent decades.

Finally, history in India is a good news-bad news story. The bad news is that many in India are trying to manipulate its history. The good news is that if they are trying so hard, and arguing, even fighting, about it, they must have finally come to realize that it is important. While the debate on secularism may appear to be bad news, even to those who would like to write about the real or imagined golden age of the history *of* India. When scholarly writings and archeological finds become matters of passionate debate and political campaigns, I see the dawning of the golden age of history *in* India. Are we ready to seize the moment?