

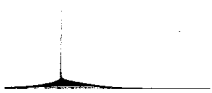
Comments on Romila Thapar's  
'Is Secularism Alien to Indian Civilization?'

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Unfortunately, I did not get Romila 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. One can always fall back on discussants' standard formula—10 per cent praise, 10 per cent criticism, and 80 per cent talking about the discussant's own work. Both praise and criticism draw fire, albeit from different audiences. More compelling is the fact of my inexperience, having written nothing about either the history of India or secularism. I offer this commentary since a reading of Romila Thapar's text inspires a number of affirmations, doubts, questions, and conjectures.

First, I am 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 other than the historical evidence adduced by Thapar on *vihar* democracy and Asokan tolerance. Instead, the receptivity of the 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—a 'Church' if you will—to support them. Absent competing structures, they do not need to come into conflict with the state as often as do religions which rest on larger social structures.

Second, I would find Thapar's argument more convincing if it could be supported by some linguistic evidence. Seema Khurana helped me identify three Hindi and Urdu words which seem to come close to secularism: *dharma-nirpeksha* (religiously neutral), *a-sampradayika* (non-sectarian), and *gair-majhabi* (exclusive of religion). 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 that Thapar discusses them in her paper, or perhaps in some more modern sense. The existence and use of such language will



significantly add to Thapar's argument on receptivity of Indian civilization to secularism.

Third, in the sense that Thapar defines protosecularism—allowing space for non-religious elements in social ethics—secularism would appear to be an essential element of all, 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 such a space with that of other societies, and to show the varying degrees to which they influence government and culture. Is protosecularism just the presence of some breathing spaces between dominant religious elements—*islands in a sea of doctrine*—or does it require religion to live in peaceful partnership with other significant countervailing forces in society?

Fourth, I would raise a minor quibble with Thapar's larger argument. A state that arises from democracy, (that is, from the wishes of its people, and without attribution of a divine role to the ruler), need not be strictly secular. Democracies are perfectly capable of giving an important role to religion in the affairs of state. I think of secularism as a problem of aggregation. As individuals, we are multidimensional. Most individuals choose, simultaneously, to become members of many aggregates. Social, political, religious, economic, or multifunctional institutions are examples of such aggregates. A democratic state, therefore, will tend to reflect in its own makeup the complexity of the individuals it represents. Except in trivially simple situations, national institutions must necessarily manifest a variety of functional overlaps. These overlaps pull at the loyalties of their individual members from a range of directions, generating competition, even conflict, among institutions. The outcome can mimic the behaviour of patently religious states, albeit at a finer, less granular, level. In other words, in a secular state, units in a conflict are likely to be small groups, individuals, even aspects of the same individual; in an autocratic religious state, units in a conflict are large masses and institutions.

We may say, then, that the secular-religious conflict is a false dichotomy, an *aporia* masked as an opposition, and leading to an opposed pair of equally misguided solutions: either to permit only a single institution or to view people as one-dimensional. Fortunately,

we know of no way of accomplishing such a goal. Success in such a venture would be the death-knell of both humanity and society. This conflict never will, and never should, be resolved. The day no one objects to secularism, it will already have ceased to have any content worth fighting for.

Given the impossibility of achieving a static perfection, secularism is best seen not as a state of affairs, but as a value, a structural dimension, in human societies. We could cherish, strive for, even promote it 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 this would be desirable in a world where citizens hold dear many different values. Secularism might be understood as a field in which the diverse values of a people are given room to mutually adapt and form heuristic compromises. Perhaps secularism is simply 'war by other means'.

At various points in time and space, societies choose to make adjustments 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,' belong in the same class as 'Hindutva in danger' or 'Islam in danger'. 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 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 church and the state, have not tried to push secularism to the limits that the followers of Marx tried, but failed to achieve. Perhaps it is no coincidence that both Thapar's example and Nehru's promotion of Indian secularism, are embedded in Buddhism, one of the atheistic religions of India.

Whether the pluralistic societies of India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh make appropriate compromises and accommodations across their overlapping institutions is less a matter of top-down governmental 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. The debate on secularism in South Asia will remain futile, ignored by people and politicians equally unless new circumstances establish a vital engagement. The subject is not amenable to self-consciously applied public policies. Neither are the electoral institutions of liberal democracy supportive of the top-down approach to secularism. For those of us who hope that the South Asian societies will make further adjustments towards a more tolerant secularism in the present world environment, elections do not bode well. I hope I will prove to be wrong here.

To the extent that 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. It therefore seems likely that as the Hindutva movement seeks to transform the Hindu religion into a religion of revelation, disappointment is in store for those who wish to expand the secular domain. As they say: '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 challenge facing the theorists of South Asian secularism is 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, and insist on religion as the unitary framework for individual, society, and state, how do we define a secular regime for such societies?

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 the necessary ground for secular governance, such consolidation is bad news indeed.

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 that the authority relation in society is bottom-up, not 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?

For secular humanism to take root in South Asia, a humanist education is essential. 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 was unsatisfactory. And that was many years before the negative effects of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government's policy came into play. For those who seek a more secular society, it would seem that the schools are a proper focus of their transformational energies, and never more crucially than in the field of history.

Finally, the writing and teaching of history in India is a good news-bad news story. The bad news is that there are many forces in India actively attempting to politicize and manipulate history. The good news is that the very intensity of these attempts to define and control narratives focuses attention on them. When scholarly writings and archaeological finds become matters of passionate debate and political campaigns, I see the dawning of a contemporary golden age of history in India. For those who are devoted to the rise of a secular spirit in India, this may well be our moment, if we are prepared to seize it.

