

## Secular Hindu, secular Muslim

Though 'secular' and 'religious' are conceptually related, people differ on the nature of this relationship. For some, 'secular' means 'anti-religious'. If so, nothing can be both secular and religious. To be secular, a state must be anti-religious. Likewise, a secular person must oppose religion. Strictly speaking, a secular Muslim or a secular Hindu is a contradiction in terms. How can one be anti-religious if one holds religious beliefs? At best, a secular Muslim, say, is a person who has given up his Islamic faith but remains Muslim culturally. This view runs into problems because it presupposes that religion is unambiguously bad in a world where a large part of humanity continues to be religious. A secular perspective so conceived is largely irrelevant in societies such as India.

Therefore, some Indians propose another conception: 'secular' means 'multi-religious'. A secular state respects all religions by impartially facilitating them, funding their schools, valuing their respective traditions. But this view too runs aground. It presupposes that religion is an unambiguous good despite much evidence that it generates conflict and oppression. Why then should states support religion? Besides, how can a person not be partial to his own religion? How can we ask Jains to show equal respect to, say, Islam? Now, there are healthy traditions in India that happily allow people to have multiple attachments and to respect virtually every faith. We know that Hindus go to gurudwaras with much reverence and that Hindus and Muslims visit dargahs with equal devotion. But such multi-faith loving individuals apart, it is unfair to expect people to be deeply religious as well as (impartial) secular.

I therefore wish to challenge these views and offer an entirely different conception of the secular: neither anti-religious nor naively multi-religious, it means 'against institutionalised religious domination'. Let me explain.

No one likes to be forced, controlled or dominated by another. None of us really likes to do things we do not want, particularly when they are blatantly against our own interest or good. Yet the exercise of power is rampant: not only are people forced to do things they would not otherwise do, they almost appear to do them willingly. Why? Fear plays an important role here. We submit because we know that refusal, defiance or disobedience begets the wrath of the powerful. Often, this lesson is learnt the hard way. Someone from amongst us is terrorised, even killed. Images of past brutality leave us with no choice but to do as we are told.

Though economic, political and status-related motives are usually behind such acts of domination, frequently the motive is religious or religion-related. Consider the following: a woman is burnt at the stake on allegations of witchcraft; a man is stoned to death for heresy, for holding beliefs or opinions contrary to religious orthodoxy; a woman is not allowed to enter a temple because she is menstruating and hence considered 'polluted'; a man believed to be an 'untouchable' is humiliated and killed for riding a horse, a privilege available only to the upper castes.

Common to these outrageous real life instances is that (a) persons are prevented from doing what they want. He/she is excluded, marginalised, oppressed or humiliated on religious or religion-related grounds. And that (b) both the victim and the perpetrator are from the same religious community. Call this intra-religious domination.

Take another set of examples. A Muslim father kills Ankit, a Hindu, for loving his daughter; churches are attacked by intolerant Hindus or militant Muslims; Hussain is unable to rent a house in a Hindu-dominated building; Akhlaq is killed because he is alleged to have eaten beef/ killed a cow. Here we have (a) discrimination, oppression or sheer violence on grounds of religion, but (b) victims and perpetrators come from different religious communities. Call this inter-religious

domination.

I wish to argue that 'secular' should mean not against religion or a simple-minded acceptance of all religions but 'opposition to institutionalised religious domination'. I say this because in Europe it connoted opposition to the church, a classic instance of intra-religious domination — and in India, rejection of caste or gender hierarchies, repudiation of religious extremism (intra-religious domination) and, in addition, protection of a religious community from the power of another (inter-religious domination). A secular perspective then demands that, in a multi-religious society, a state be designed to impartially reduce inter- and intra-religious domination. Furthermore, it may help people develop a form of respect proper for their own religion and that of others. For this to happen, states should be impartial, rather than be partial to a particular religious community (Hindus or Muslims) or a section thereof (male, upper castes).

But, more importantly, this view does not make a similar, virtually unrealisable demand of impartiality from religious persons. It allows persons to be partial to their own religion and yet be opposed to any aspect of it that perpetuates intra-religious or inter-religious domination. A practising Hindu or Muslim can oppose any attempt by co-religionists to dominate people of other faiths. Likewise, a Hindu is not any less Hindu if he opposes extremism within or religiously grounded caste or gender oppression. A Muslim can, without contradiction, fight violence in the name of Islam or women's oppression. Indeed, the more attached one is to a religious community, the more sensitive he is to its infirmities, and greater his resolve to stem the rot within it. Such a person is partial to his own religion but precisely for that reason wants to expunge all that is oppressive or degrading within it. This is how a person can be deeply Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian and yet be staunchly secular.

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With limited resources and time, it is crucial for States to assess which skills policies will make the biggest impact

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