RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN SOUTH ASIA: SOME REFLECTIONS ON NEPAL

Mohan Kumar Mishra

Research Scholar
Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, U.P.
E-mail: *mohan@bhu.ac.in*

Abstract

In the case of secularism, the South Asian experience differs from that of the West. Here, religion has been a source of peace for millennia. South Asia is the birthplace of four significant religions of the world – Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. A large number of Muslims also live here. South Asia has witnessed bloodshed, migration, and the changing of borders on religious lines. So, in South Asia, the notion of secularism is multifaceted, and it has multiple missions such as maintaining peace among all communities in a diverse society, not allowing dominance of any one religion in the public sphere, ceasing communal violence, maintaining social harmony in the society, and protecting religious and cultural rights of minorities. Unlike the Western model of strict neutrality or separation, South Asian secularism responds to religions by accommodating cultural and religious diversity. Indic traditions, unlike Abrahamic faiths, lack a centralized church and permit multiple identities, enabling people to practise overlapping affiliations such as Hindu-Buddhist or Hindu-Sikh. This plural and inclusive ethos shapes the evolution of secularism in South Asia. This paper is an attempt to analyse the historical background of religious and cultural traditions of South Asia in general and Nepal in particular, and further, it analyses what kind of model of secularism is emerging from Nepal.

Keywords: *Culture, Religion, South Asia, Secularism, Soteriology, Nepal*

Introduction

Secularism in its general conception, signifies the mutual exclusion and separation of the domains of the state and religion. Both are regarded as autonomous spheres, each operating independently without interference from the other. This relationship is often symbolized through the metaphor of an "imaginary wall of separation" that neither side is expected to transgress. The term secular as used by Holyoake, underscores a focus on worldly and empirical reality rather than transcendental or metaphysical concerns, privileging scientific and factual reasoning over religious reality. Secularism is a historically contingent product of Western European history. The idea of Western secularism is a byproduct of the European Renaissance and modernity. The concept of secularism emerged from the distinct relationship between state and church in Europe; that kind of secularism has been explained well by Asad and Taylor. Further, more the motives behind secularism were "to check absolutism, religious bigotry and fanaticism and to ensure that the value enshrined in particular religions did not trump other values to manage religious conflict reasonably" (Bhargava, 2009). According to Talal Asad, "The terms secular and secularism are different in meaning. The Secular is an epistemic category, and Secularism is a political doctrine and also, at times, a socio-political movement. Secular as an epistemic category brings together certain behaviours, knowledge, and sensibilities in modern life." (Asad, 2003). A secular discourse is that aspect of modernity that enables people to deal with many areas of life without reference to any religious definitions of reality. A secular society can be described and managed without any notions of transcendence. Charles Taylor calls it "the immanent frame (Taylor, 2018). Casanova makes a distinction between two related concepts of secularism: (a) secularism & (b) secularization. Secularism is a "central

modern epistemic category," and secularization means "an analytical conceptualization of modern world historical process". He also describes secularism as having three components. (1) Separation of religion from politics, economy, science, and so forth (2) Privatization of religion to its sphere (3) The declining social significance of religious belief, commitment, and institution (Casanova, 2009). And secularism also refers to "different normative ideological state projects, as well as to different legal constitutional framework of the separation of the state and religion, and different models of differentiation of religion, ethics, morality, and law (Casanova, Jose, 2011). He also differentiates between secularism as a statecraft doctrine and secularism as an ideology. The former deals with the separation between religion and political authority, while the latter conceives religion as "non-rational" and supports its relegation from the public sphere. A secular state, as defined scientifically, means a state that recognizes every citizen as equal and does not recognize any social or religious stratification for any political benefit. But what is generally projected as secularism is tolerance of all religions, with special emphasis on the protection of minorities and preservation of communal harmony.

Although secularism is a byproduct of Western modernity, and even within Europe, it has taken different and competing forms. And also, in non-European societies, it has adapted itself to the historical context. It is multifaceted, and it has multiple varieties and models across the globe (Letizia, 2016). So sometimes, the word secular is used as a contrast with the word religious, which leads people to believe that secularism is opposed to religion (Western view). But in reality, rather than remaining opposed to religion, secularism takes a dispassionate view in running the affairs of the state. In the context of India, it basically connotes the treatment of all religions on a footing of equality and ruling out any discrimination. Rajeev Bhargava describes it as a "principled distance" (Bhargava, 2009). So, when India is said to be a secular state, it only means that the state will not identify itself with any particular religious faith and that no person shall suffer any disability or discrimination based on religion.

Let's understand the South Asian case. The South Asian case is different from the West. Rajeev Bhargava, in his book "Between Hope and Despair," explains the very making of a modern religion in eight steps in an imaginative way (Bhargav, 2023). It's a history of the religion from a loose community to an institutionalized bureaucratic structure, and also from a pre-faith to modern religion. Richard Gombrich distinguishes pre-religion faiths into two categories- Soteriology and ritualistic aspect or communal religion (Gombrich, 1988). Soteriology means the philosophy of salvation, and communal religion includes the rules and rituals of day-to-day life. In South Asia, people have always enjoyed philosophical freedom and have also had the freedom to choose or embrace whatever philosophy they like. Therefore, different Margas/Panthas came into being. At the same time, an individual could follow more than one philosophy and can also move quite easily from one Margato another (Gallner, 2001). Even today in India, one can find an individual who identifies himself as Hindu-Sikh simultaneously, and in Nepal, who claims to be Hindu-Buddhist at the same time. Due to this philosophical freedom, the kings of ancient India and Nepal respected all religions and provided everyone an opportunity to flourish together. Such philosophical freedom has been missing in Europe. Wars were fought to establish the supremacy of a particular philosophy in Europe. Unlike Europe, there is no dichotomy of true-false philosophies in India/Nepal, hence there has been a lack of religious wars like in Europe. Here, the philosophical freedom allows the king to follow more than one religion (Bhargava, Rajeev, 2016). In South Asian societies, the connection between soteriology and communal rituals has been much looser, whereas in other parts of the world, soteriology and communal practices have been tightly connected with each other. Indeed, over a period of time, communal rituals and rules of society became stricter. That is the reason why the flexibility we see in matters of philosophy is rarely seen in social rules. Now, caste has become a rigid system. People can follow multiple soteriologies simultaneously, but only with their own caste identity. A person can change religion, but not their caste. Terms like Dalit-Muslim and Dalit-Christian are examples of the rigidity of caste. Now, caste has become a common feature of all South Asian religions. There is also a feeling of high and low among the castes, which gives rise to intra-religious domination. After a period of time, social traditions get converted into laws. Though the Indic religions do not have any universally accepted laws, the laws that exist are discriminatory, especially against women and the lower strata of society. Unlike the Western secular approach, in such a situation, the state in South Asia will have to intervene to eliminate intra-religious dominance from the society. If one looks at the provisions regarding

fundamental rights, one will find out that special provisions are made for the marginalized sections of society, especially for women, Dalits, and tribals, and also the state has the right to intervene in the matters of religions wherever some customs and rituals of a religion are against liberty, equality and justice with reference to these communities. Unlike the West, here in South Asian societies, structural inequalities are a common feature of all religions. The state has to be reformative to eradicate these structural inequalities, such as caste-based discrimination, and untouchability.

The second important feature of South Asian religions is the nature of the world of the Gods (Assmann, 2008). The world of ancient gods of Egypt and the nature-based pre-faith Asian religions are quite similar because the societies of both Nepal and India are considered so-called polytheistic ones. The first common feature of these societies is the translation of gods. These societies are full of different cosmic gods- the god of love, war, fire, earth, time, sun, moon, sea (can be seen in the ancient Vedic period in India), and the god of creation, destroyer, and preserver (in modern Hindu tradition too). Even Buddhism is not a god-based religion, yet there are many gods (Bodhisatvas) who are associated with many cosmic qualities (Gallner, 2001). In some other pre-religion soteriologies, gods with similar attributes but with different names have existed. So, in a similar situation, when a person who believes in a different soteriology from us worships a god with a different name and whom we also worship with a different name, then instead of rejecting one god, why should we not also have faith in both those gods? In such a situation, a person who believes in different soterologies can worship several cosmic gods simultaneously. Therefore, here a person with one identity is not found; rather, his identity becomes fluid, dynamic, composite, and hybrid. Identities are not believed to be fixed and well demarcated. The second significant pre-faith characteristic of South Asian religions is the ontological subordination of one God to another. There is the concept of avatars. In the incarnation tradition, if you have faith in the first deity of the series, then you will have to have faith in all the subsequent forms of it. Some gods are considered subordinate to others, due to which, after worshiping one God, one has to worship other Gods associated with it. Therefore, a person who believes in South Asian religions expands their faith to other gods accordingly.

Lastly, due to philosophical freedom, if a person coming from a different communal ritualistic background accepts a different soteriology, his communal rituals will still be associated with him. Hence, a person with a different cultural background is not pressured to completely abandon their previous background. Therefore, if a social tradition is present in a religion, it will go to other religions as well. Let us take an example of caste. Caste has become a common feature of almost all South Asian religions. Now, if the state interferes in a religion in the name of reform, then it will have to take this reformism to other religions. Perhaps it is because of this communal similarity that India has kept all the Indic religions in the same 'Hindu' fold or category in its Constitution so that a single reformist stance can be adopted for all the religions having similar communal backgrounds.

But the process of modernism and globalization has changed the very nature of these pre-faith religious societies in South Asia (Bhargava, Rajeev, 2016).In India, this process started in the 19th century, and in Nepal in 1952-54 (Gallner, David; Letizia, Chiara, 2016). Modernity gave impetus to the process of religionization, and now religions started trying to bring uniformity extensively, and people started binding themselves into an identity so that the heads could be counted. Religions are now divided into categories of majority and minority. If the majority religion gets state support based on numerical strength, it will definitely be fatal for other minority religions. Minorities will become second-class citizens in such a situation. Due to the dominant faction within the majority religion, not only the minority religion but also other people of the same religion will be at a loss. This intra-religious and inter-religious dominance will be fatal for democracy, the development of society, and justice.

Nepal has a long history of dominance by a single religion. Many scholars claim that religion (Hinduism) has played an important role in the unification of Nepal. State-sponsored religion has played an important role in building Nepal's national identity. Until 2006, Nepal was considered the only Hindu state in the world. Religion not only provided legitimacy to the state power but also received the protection of the state itself. The rulers used the religious faith of the people to remain in power. But after a long insurgency and people's war, the Hindu religion ultimately had to lose state protection in 2006, and Nepal stepped

into a new history. In the interim constitution of 2007, Nepal declared itself a secular and democratic state. After a long struggle, this commitment was reiterated in 2015.

Letizia claims in her significant work on secularism in Nepal that secularism was accepted without any proper discussion or adequate consensus. It was accepted in a hurry (Letizia, 2016). There was no debate in the Parliament regarding its definition and nature. That is why, when secularism was defined in the Constitution as "religious, cultural freedom, including protection of religion and culture handed down from time immemorial[1]", many Nepali and foreign scholars were shocked (Lal, 2015) (Jha, 2015). The proviso that was added to the definition of secularism opened the way for everyone to explain the new identity of Nepal in their own way. It would be a strange thing that on one hand a state which calls itself secular and on the other hand is talking about the protection of a particular kind of cultural ideas. The argument of Rajeev Bhargava is that it might be that Nepal wants to maintain its pre-faith religious nature and hence is talking about its preservation. Whatever may be the truth in this matter, until a unanimous explanation comes from the court of the land, only speculation can be made. But no one can deny the fact that secularism has become a very polarizing and contested issue in Nepal.

The goal of secularism in Nepal is not to end the war for supremacy between any state and religion. It has its own missions. The background of its arrival is associated with the very nature of the functioning of the Hindu monarchy of Nepal. The 240-year-old Hindu monarchy provided state approval to discriminatory religious laws. Due to these laws, people from the lowest rung of society and women were deprived of their fundamental rights. Some classes within the state religion of Hinduism established dominance over other classes. The Hindu religion provided legitimacy to the actions and rule of Nepali kings, which led to the creation of feudal Nepali society. Rituals of the Hindu religion became the main means of legitimization of the monarchy. Anne T Mocko (Mocko, 2016), in her book 'Demoting Vishnu', tells us how Nepal's first secular government slowly removed the rituals and state practices associated with the king from government business, ultimately reducing the king to the status of an ordinary citizen.

So, what are the missions of secularism in Nepal that it has to achieve? Let's talk about them one by one. Without paying much attention to the explanation of secularism given in the Constitution, we should focus on how this Constitution is different from other constitutions in the nature of religious freedom. The constitutions of 1962 and 1990 allowed freedom to practice religion, but only the religions handed down from ancestors. But this Constitution provides freedom to a person to follow the religion of his/her choice or not to follow any religion. The fundamental rights have the potential to shape and redefine the role of the state in religions in the near future. Article 18 (1), (2) &(3) prohibits any kind of religious discrimination. Article 24 declares untouchability illegal. Any practice of any religion that is against human dignity and which is discriminatory is prohibited (Article 29). The state has the right to manage religious trusts (Article 26). Any custom, tradition, or religious activities that are against the dignity of women, can be declared null and void. Reservations have been provided for various communities, as well as women in legislative bodies. These articles will make Nepal's society more inclusive and more equitable than ever before. In the future, secularism in Nepal will not be defined by the clarification of Article 4(1) but in the light of these articles. With time, the definition will become clearer, and in the future, the importance of the intervention of the Court of the land in this matter will increase.

Leticia argues that secularism in Nepal is in its infancy (Letizia, 2016). The model of Nepali secularism will emerge from the interventions of the state, and the court of the land. Before that, despite the vague definition of secularism, let's discuss here the changes that have occurred due to secularism. Though even in theory, secularism has ended the dominance of a single religion. It has also provided an opportunity for other religions to claim their presence in the public sphere. Now festivals of all religions, big and small, are getting a place in the national calendar. The President and Prime Minister also extend greetings on the festivals of minority religions. Now, all religions have the right to claim in the Nepalese government institutions that their religion is equal to Hinduism. Now, it has ended the supremacy of Hinduism in the Nepali political arena. After the advent of secularism, ethnic minorities are getting their due in Nepal and have also started claiming their space. Some identity-based groups are emerging. These groups are seen as struggling to find their rightful place in history. Secularism has brought modernity to Nepal. Due to modernity and secularism, the relationship between soteriology and communal religion is becoming

much tighter, and each soteriology is claiming to be a new religion. Some overlapping soteriologies are becoming separate religions; it could be called the ethnic building (Bhargava, Rajeev, 2016).

In conclusion, the answer to the basic question of this paper is what model of secularism is emerging from Nepal. It is too early to predict. One can only assume the answer to this question on one's own. But one can imagine that whatever model of secularism is emerging, to some extent, it might be similar to the Indian model of secularism. But still, given the cultural and historical background of Nepal, whatever model of secularism emerges, it will be anti-monarchal in nature, supporting the reformist role of the state to eradicate structural and feudal inequalities to create a new, inclusive, democratic Nepal.

References

1. Constitution of Nepal. (2015). Article 4(1) of the constitution of Nepal.

2. Asad, T. (2003). *Formation of secularism: Christianity, Islam, modernity.* Stanford University Press.

3. Assmann, J. (2008). *Of God and gods: Egypt, Israel, and the rise of monotheism.* Madison: University of Wisconsin.

4. Bhargav, R. (2023). *Between hope and despair.* New Delhi: Bloomsbury.

5. Bhargava, R. (2009). Introduction. In R. Bhargava (Ed.), *Secularism and its critics.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

6. Bhargava, R. (2016). Afterword: Nepalese secularism in contemporary perspective. In D. Gallner & C. Letizia (Eds.), *Religion, secularism, and ethnicity in contemporary Nepal* (pp. 42–46). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

7. Casanova, J. (2009). The secular and secularism. *Social Research.*

8. Casanova, J. (2011). The secular, secularization, and secularism. In C. Craig & M. Juergensmeyer (Eds.), *Rethinking secularism* (pp. 54–74). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

9. Gallner, D. (2001). *The anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian themes.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

10. Gallner, D., & Letizia, C. (2016). Introduction: Religion and identities in post-Panchayat Nepal. In D. Gallner & C. Letizia (Eds.), *Religion, secularism, and ethnicity in contemporary Nepal* (pp. 3–32). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

11. Gombrich, R. F. (1988). *Theravada Buddhism: A social history from ancient Benaras to modern Colombo.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

12. Jha, P. (2015). Nepali secularism has a pronounced Hindu tilt. *Hindustan Times.*

13. Lal, C. (2015). Nepal has become a Hindu state through the back door.

14. Letizia, C. (2016). Ideas of secularism in contemporary Nepal. In D. Gallner & C. Letizia (Eds.), *Religion, secularism, and ethnicity in contemporary Nepal* (pp. 35–76). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

15. Mocko, A. T. (2016). *Demoting Vishnu.* New York: Oxford University Press.

16. Taylor, C. (2018). *A secular age.* Harvard University Press.