RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN SOUTH ASIA: SOME REFLECTIONS ON NEPAL

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Abstract

In the South Asian context, secularism differs from the Western experience, as religion here has historically been a source of peace for millennia. South Asia is the birthplace of four major religions– 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. Thus, in South Asia, secularism is multifaceted, with multiple objectives: maintaining peace among diverse communities, preventing dominance of any single religion in the public sphere, curbing communal violence, maintaining social harmony, 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 centralised 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. It further analyses what kind of model of secularism is emerging from Nepal. Methodologically, this paper draws on the work of Jan Assmann and Richard Gombrich on the cultural and soteriological history of South Asia, along with some ethnographic studies on Nepal and a textual-legal interpretation of the Constitution of Nepal. The paper is organised as follows. The first section outlines the definition of secularism. It then throws light on the way in which the case of South Asia differs from the West by analysing its cultural and soteriological background. The third section analyses the concepts of secularism in the Nepali context. Finally, it offers concluding remarks.

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

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

In its general understanding, secularism denotes the mutual separation of the state and religion, viewing both as autonomous domains that function on their own without encroachment upon the other. This relationship is often symbolised through the metaphor of an "imaginary wall of separation" implying that neither side should encroach upon the other. 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. Furthermore, 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, while 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).

Two related ideas of secularism is distinguished by Casanova (a) secularism, and (b) secularisation. Secularisation is defined as "an analytical conceptualization of modern world historical process," and secularism as "central modern epistemic category." He also emphasizes three components of secularism, first, separation should be maintained between religion and the political sphere, economy and science. Second, religion should be privatized. And third, and gradual decline of religious beliefs, adherence, and the role of churches (Casanova, 2009). Secularism also refers to different normative ideological state projects, distinct constitutional framework for the separation of state and religion, and divers models for differentiating 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, expis one that acknowledges the equality of all its citizens and rejects social or religious stratification for political purposes. However, tolerance of all religions, with a focus on minority protection and maintaining communal harmony, is what is typically projected as secularism.

While secularism is considered 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 creates the impression that secularism is hostile or opposed to religion – an understanding largely shaped by the Western perspective. But in reality, rather than remaining opposed to religion, secularism takes a dispassionate view in running the affairs of state. In Indian context, 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). Thus, when India is described as a secular state, it simply means that the state does not align itself with any specific religion and that no individual will face discrimination or disadvantage on the grounds of religion.

The Case of South Asia

The South Asian experience of secularism differs significantly 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. Simultaneously, an individual may adhere to more than one philosophy and can also move with relative ease from one *Marga* to other (Gallner, 2001). Even today, one can find individuals in India who identify as Hindu-Sikh simultaneously, and in Nepal, individuals 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, India and Nepal do not have a sharp division between there true and false philosophies. This is why they have never seen any religious wars comparable to those in Europe. The philosophical freedom allows rulers to adhere more than one religion (Bhargava, Rajeev, 2016). In South Asian societies, the link between soteriology and communal rituals has been much looser, while in many other parts of the world, these two have tightly been connected together. Over time, however communal rituals and so norms became more stricter. This is why the flexibility visible in

philosophical matters is rarely seen in social rules. Caste system gradually become rigid: individual may follow multiple soteriological path simultaneously, but always within their own caste identity. While a person may change their religion but caste remains unchanged. 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. Although the Indic religions do not have universally accepted laws, the existing laws been discriminatory. This discrimination has particularly affected particularly women and lower sections of society. Unlike the Western secular approach, in such a situation, the state in South Asia is required to intervene to curb intra-religious dominance and inequality. A close readings of fundamental rights provisions in India and Nepal, demonstrates that special safeguards are provided for the marginalized groups, especially women, Dalits, and tribal communities, and the state is empowered to intervene in religious matters wherever customs and practices violate the principles of liberty, equality and justice in relation to these groups. 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 concerns the nature of divine realm (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 sharing similar characteristics but known by 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 with a religion in the name of reform, then it will have to take this reformism to other religions. Perhaps due to this communal similarity, India has placed all Indic religions within 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 began to bind themselves to fixed identities making numerical categorisation possible. Religions are now divided into categories of majority and minority. If the majority religion gets state support based on numerical strength, it is likely to be detrimental to 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 and inter-religious dominance will be fatal for democracy, the development of society, and justice.

Secularism in the Nepali Context

Nepal has a long history of being dominated by a single religion. Many scholars argue that Hinduism, in particular, played a significant role in the unification of the country. Religion supported by the state has also been important in shaping 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 constituent assembly regarding its definition and model. That is why, when secularism was defined by a clarification in the article 4 (1) of the Constitution of 2015 as "religious, cultural freedom, including protection of religion and culture handed down from time immemorial" many Nepali and foreign scholars were shocked (Lal, 2015) (Jha, 2015). This kind of definition of secularism opened the way for everyone to explain the new identity of Nepal in their own way.

It may seem contradictory that a state itself calling secular also seeks to protect certain cultural ideas at same time. On this ambiguity of definition of secularism, 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 could be made. Yet there is no denying that secularism has become a very polarizing and contested issue in Nepal.

Despite being ambiguous on definition, secularism has also played a significant political role in Nepal. In the Nepali context, the aim of secularism is not to resolve a struggle for supremacy between the state and religion. Its emergence is closely linked to the historical functioning of Nepal's Hindu monarchy. The 240-year-old Hindu monarchy provided state approval to discriminatory religious laws (*Mulki Ains*) . Due to these national legal codes, people from the lowest rung of society and women were deprived of their fundamental rights. Some castes such *Bahun and Chhetry* within the state religion of Hinduism established dominance over other backward castes. The Hinduism provided legitimacy to the actions and rule of Nepali kings, contributing to the formation of a feudal society. Rituals such as *Dasain* and the tradition of *Living Kumari* became central instruments for legitimising 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 customary **practices** that were associated with the king from government business, ultimately reducing the king to the status of an ordinary citizen.

This section examines the key provisions related to secularism in the Nepali constitution. Without paying much attention to the explanation of secularism given in the Constitution, we would focus on how this Constitution is different from other constitutions in the nature of religious freedom. The constitutions of 1962 and 1990 allowed the freedom to practice religion, but only the religions handed down from ancestors. But the Constitution of 2015, however, guarantees individual the freedom to follow a religion of their choice or not to follow any religion at all. Outlined as in Part III, the fundamental rights have the potential to shape and redefine the nature and extent of state interventions in religious matters in the future. Article 18 (1), (2) & (3) prohibits all forms of religious discrimination, while Article 24 declares untouchability illegal. Article 29 forbids any religious practice that is against human dignity and or is discriminatory. The state has been empowered to manage religious trusts under Article 26, and any custom, tradition, or religious activity that violates the dignity of women, can be declared null and void. Additionally, reservations have been guaranteed for various communities, along with 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 should 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 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 by the state and the court of the land. Before that, and despite the vague definition of secularism, it is useful to discuss the changes brought about by secularism. Even at the theoretical level, secularism has ended the dominance of a single religion and has opened up space for other religions to claim space 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. All religions have the right to claim in the Nepalese government institutions that their religion is equal to Hinduism. Secularism is suppressing 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 were 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 claiming to be separate religions; it could be called the ethnic building (Bhargava, Rajeev, 2016).

Conclusion

The central question of this paper concerns the model of secularism that is emerging in Nepal. At present, it is too early to offer a definitive answer, and any conclusion can only be tentative. It may be assumed that the emerging model of secularism, to some extent, resembles the Indian model. However, given Nepal's cultural, political, and historical context, the form of secularism that emerges is likely to be inherently anti-monarchal and to endorse a reformist role of the state aimed at eradicating structural and feudal inequalities in order to build a new, inclusive, and democratic Nepal.

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