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PROJECT

Forms of Secularity Before Modern Secularism

For over a decade now, I have tried to argue that a distinctive conception of political secularism that offered a real alternative to mainstream (idealized American or French) conceptions of secularism has been worked out in the subcontinent. This conception is not available as a doctrine or a theory but is present loosely in the best moments of inter-communal practice, in the Constitution of India appropriately interpreted, and in the scattered writings of some of their best political actors. I have identified the conceptual and normative structure of this model. A somewhat forced, formulaic articulation of Indian secularism could go something like this: The state must keep a principled distance from all public or private, individual-oriented or community-oriented religious institutions for the sake of the equally significant (and sometimes conflicting) values of peace, this-worldly prosperity, dignity, liberty, and equality (in all their complicated individualistic and communitarian versions). Surprisingly, this claim is not properly accepted even in India, where a virtual consensus exists among both opponents and defenders of secularism that it is alien to Indian culture and civilization. I have now begun work to challenge this consensus and to explore the conceptual spaces that were opened up in the past that formed part of the background conditions that made possible the emergence of this distinctive conception.

During my fellowship year, I shall try to offer a non-teleological conceptual history of the secular ideal in India. This examination of forms of secularity before modern Indian secularism will hopefully throw new light on its conceptual and normative structure and help further refine or modify its understanding.

Recommended Reading

Bhargava, Rajeev. *Individualism in Social Science: Forms and Limits of a Methodology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. (Paperback edition in 2008.)

___. "What is Secularism for." In *Secularism and Its Critics*, edited by Rajeev Bhargava. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. (Paperback edition in 1999.)

___. "Political Secularism: Why It Is Needed and What Can Be Learnt from Its Indian Version" In *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, edited by Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood, 82-109. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Religion, State and Secularism: How should states deal with deep religious diversity?

Over the last three decades, secular states (states from which religion is separated), have come under severe strain. It is hardly surprising then that political secularism, the doctrine that defends them, has also been subjected to severe criticism. Some scholars have concluded that this critique is ethically and morally so profound and justified that it is time to abandon political secularism. I reject this conclusion. I argue that the criticism of secularism looks indefeasible only because critics have focused on mainstream conceptions developed in largely religiously homogenous societies. I claim that it is time we shifted focus away from doctrines underpinning some western secular states towards the normative practices of a wide variety of states, including the best practices of non-western states such as India.

In short, I hope to demonstrate that there are at least two broad conceptions of secularisms, one mainstream western (the American and the French) and the other which provides an alternative to it and embodied in the Indian model. Of these, the Indian conception has better ethical and moral potential to deal with deep religious diversity. I do not wish to suggest that this alternative model is found only in India. The Indian case is meant to show that such an alternative exists. It is not meant to resurrect a dichotomy between the West and the East. I am quite certain that this alternative version is embedded in the best practices of many states, including those Western states that are deeply enamored by mainstream conceptions of political secularism. My objective in this essay is to draw attention to the frequent inability of ethical and political theorists to see the normative potential in the secular practices of these different states because they are obsessed with the normativity of mainstream conceptions. Western states need to improve the understanding of their own secular practices just as western secularism needs a better theoretical self-understanding. Rather than get stuck on models they developed at a particular time in their history, they would do well to more carefully examine the normative potential in their own political practices or to learn from the original Indian variant.

Once we do this we will begin to see secularism differently, as a critical ethical and moral perspective not against religion but against religious homogenization and institutionalized (inter- and intra-religious) domination. Of all available alternatives, secularism remains our best bet to help us deal with ever deepening religious diversity and the problems endemic to it. Once these alternative conceptions implicit in the normative practices of states are dredged up, we shall see that we still do not possess a reasonable, morally and ethically sensitive alternative to secularism.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Bhargava, Rajeev (Oxford [u.a.],2011)

The promise of India's secular democracy

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=617660638>

Bhargava, Rajeev (Oxford [u.a.],2010)

What is political theory and why do we need it?

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=588701939>

Collected essays

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=588701939>

Bhargava, Rajeev (Oxford [u.a.],2009)

Politics and ethics of the Indian constitution

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1624326544>

Oxford India paperbacks

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1624326544>

Bhargava, Rajeev (Delhi [u.a.],2009)

Secularism and its critics

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=669199796>

Bhargava, Rajeev (New Delhi [u.a.],2008)

Multiculturalism, liberalism, and democracy

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1623150183>

Oxford India paperbacks

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1623150183>

Bhargava, Rajeev (2008)

Introducing Multiculturalism

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=670713856>

Bhargava, Rajeev (New Delhi,2008)

Individualism in social science : forms and limits of a methodology

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=66919980X>