



SECULAR HEAVEN
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Imagining heaven is not easy. Living in it is, I discovered. I once wondered if heaven was where fullness is achieved. I now know that secular heavens are sites of abundance – of generosity, civility, mutuality, friendship, trust, conversations, romance, books, food, wine, dark and deep woods, water, serenity and elective solitude. Alas, there is no right to permanent residence in secular heavens. The hour of arrival is also the hour of departure!

Days before I took up the fellowship in Berlin, I had submitted to OUP the manuscript of a two-volume collection of my essays. But much work remained to be done and the introduction still had to be written. Queries that began arriving by mid-October had to be addressed. Proofs arrived by November eager to be scrutinized. The index was wait-

ing in the wings. The initial months at Wiko were spent attending and giving finishing touches to the two books. Any other work could really begin only after the release of the books – which happened in January in Delhi.

On my return, I gave my Wiko colloquium. After this, I had two options before me. First, to complete a manuscript on “Contemporary Secularisms”. Much of my work on this topic was finished, with several articles already published. I had only to give this material the form of a monograph. I needed a minimum of 3–4 months for this and another book would have been ready by the end of May, perhaps June. This was a safe bet. Unfortunately, it would have meant spending the entire year at Wiko on a theme with which my thought and imagination were virtually exhausted. The second option, to begin serious work on a ten-year project on “Forms of Secularity before Indian Secularism”, was far more exciting. Wiko provided a glorious opportunity to begin this work but it also meant taking huge risks.

Before this, my research life can be divided into two phases. The first focused on interpretative, explanatory social theory and resulted in a book on “Methodological Individualism”. The second began in the late 80’s when I was compelled to deal with contemporary political issues in India, such as political secularism, minority rights and Truth Commissions. These I approached normatively, very much in the spirit of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy.

The new project was different from anything I had done in the past. It required me to delve into the ancient past with a pronounced examination of texts in their specific social surroundings. It meant reconstructing the background social imaginaries of specific political conjunctures in the history of the subcontinent. Herein were conceived and imagined new ways of co-existence of multiple religious communities. It meant evolving a social history of ancient and medieval India, an evocation of the radically differing worlds not only of Ashoka and Akbar, but also of the ordinary people they governed. I had to attempt to retrieve beliefs and feelings of persons long dead and who left little evidence of what they thought or felt, to accomplish a phenomenology of Indian secularity. This was more “Indian” than anything I have ever done before. It meant relearning languages learnt in school and quickly forgotten. It also meant I had to hone different scholarly skills. More than anything else it meant a deliberate, foolhardy journey into a wholly unknown rainforest, one that few have dared to visit, perhaps a deep, very deep abyss. Was this a worthwhile voyage or reckless adventure? It is still difficult to say what will come of this uncertain gamble.

There is another way of approaching my prospective research project. As I see it, at certain crucial junctures in Indian history, certain conceptual spaces emerged that had the potential to contribute, under certain conditions, to the growth of modern secularism. These spaces enabled multiple historical agents over a period of time to imagine new concepts, provided they had the motivation to do so. Soon enough, over a period of time, different concepts belonging retrospectively to one family, or resembling one another, were generated. At crucial junctures, all these elements drawn from different periods and therefore from different conceptual spaces were forged into a broad conception. Such a conception may or may not have crystallized around a single word, but it exists. To trace these different trajectories and offer a narrative of the different sources of “secular” and “secularities” is crucial. So, what I wish to eventually write is a non-teleological conceptual history of what we today call secularism. Is this possible? I do not know, but what I do know is that it can only be accomplished by an effort involving many people over several generations. I also know that only an institutional setting such as Wiko can give a 55-year-old academic the confidence to climb this Everest. At any rate, even if not a single word gets written and nothing is achieved, the sheer pleasure of reading and learning about distant worlds will have been rewarding in itself, I thought. I was not wrong. I am glad I chose the second wild option. This has been a transformative experience for me.

I have begun raising a number of questions, of which I list only a few here. First, what could “secularity” mean in a context still suffused with “polytheistic” beliefs and practices? How do we make sense of the monotheistic/polytheistic distinction in Hindu and Buddhist thought, given that these terms and the distinction between them emerge in the 17th- and 18th-century debates in Europe?

Second, assuming once again that “polytheism” and “monotheism” have some relevance in the Indian context, would it be fair to say that the suppleness, flexibility and inclusiveness of Hinduism, the fact that it has no creed, is due largely to its polytheistic features? Surely, the presence of several Gods does not entail suppleness, flexibility and open-endedness. There could be fierce competition between rival gods and their followers, fierce pride in one’s own chosen god. Monotheism may in fact be a resolution of this conflict. So, why does polytheism lead to open-endedness – and under what conditions does it do so? What sense can one make of this in the period 500 BCE–500 CE in India?

Third, there is massive evidence that the “pagan” masses hated and eventually persecuted Christians (in the early CE). So “polytheistic” people are not obviously immune from inflicting violence. What evidence is there of violence by “Hindus” towards those

who were different from them? Say, the Syrian Christians? Or the Jews? How did they behave towards Arab traders when they first came into close contact with them?

Fourth, we know that in several parts of the world, monotheism emerged out of and in opposition to polytheism. In so far as these terms make sense in India, what is the historical pattern of relationships between the two? Was there ever a context in which God was believed to exist without the existence of several gods? How were gods and God conceived? How did the meaning of equivalent terms change?

Fifth, to say that there was an axial revolution in India, too, is not saying very much. We have to ask what this means in the Indian context. What is the quality and degree of axiality? What were the precise conditions in which people “stepped backward and looked beyond”? What social conditions underwent this axial change? What happened after this change? To what extent was there rupture between the pre-axial and the post-axial?

Sixth, what does heresy mean in the Indian context? If “true” or “false” religion made no sense here, then what were the relevant contrasts? Pure/impure? Auspicious/inauspicious? Malechha? How were the impure and the inauspicious treated? What was the quality of relations between the pure and the impure and between the impure among themselves?

Seventh, several scholars appear to use the misleading term “toleration” to designate the quality of social relations between different groups or the type of political secularity extant in the Asokan period. What is the correct term in Prakrit or Sanskrit and what is the complex concept underlying it? The attempt to answer questions such as these will occupy me for many years. But the journey is already invigorating.

Inevitably, there were also moments of frustration and regret. At Wiko, liberated from “admin” and administrative worries, I became an ordinary reader and writer once more. This was a great relief. But alas, habits die hard. For reasons I cannot fully explain, I successively succumbed to a few rather unscholarly, time-consuming temptations. I had no prior experience of international academic NGOs and felt it was important to learn about them, so I agreed to chair the External Review Committee of a South-South academic exchange program, SEFIS, run by the Dutch. Second, I consented to be on the selection committee for a professorship at the University of Göttingen. Both of these were rewarding in their own ways but came with a heavy opportunity cost. I could have done so much more for my new project in the time eaten up by these. Wiko Fellows must ruth-

lessly decline offers, no matter how significant, that detract from their primary work. Every minute at Wiko is too precious to not service one's own passion and interest.

Tani and I regret missing out on something else. We spent nearly 10 months at Wiko. Spending 11 would have been better. Had we arrived on 1st September, like some others did, we would have enjoyed a whole month of good weather, learnt German and made even better friends.

Certain unexpected bonuses at Wiko were exhilarating – late night table tennis games after wine and dinner on Thursdays, cooking for friends – always a pleasure, the splendid piano recitals. Because Wiko extends the same facilities to the spouses of Fellows, Tani was able to rework her novel in her own office, and more importantly I was always at hand whenever she needed. Fellowship at Wiko also enabled us to remain close by Vanya and Aranyani, our daughters who were reading at Oxford. We spent memorable time together in the sylvan environs of Villa Walther whenever we were insulated from the rest of the world by snow or the ash cloud! Because of these visits and Aranyani's dance performance at the start of the year, both the girls were so much at home at Wiko that they were virtually Fellows themselves!