



Teaching Pluralism and Tolerance

Building on Our Own Traditions

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“*Aap Hindu ho ya Muslim?*” (Are you a Hindu or a Muslim?)

It was an innocent question asked by Salma,* a pretty ten-year-old girl studying in a village school in the outskirts of Jaipur. She addressed it to Naren, a young college student and aspiring journalist, who accompanied me to Jaipur as part of our survey of village schools. We talked with the students in this two-room school for a little while and were delighted to have seen fresh, young faces with their enthusiastic questions.

Naren was surprised that he was asked this question. The issue of religion had not come up even though it appeared from the names that many of the children in the school were Muslim.

“*Aap hi bataao, aapko kyaa lagtaa hai?*” (You tell me what you think?), parried Naren.

Pat came the answer. “*Aap zaroor Muslim hoge, kyonki aap achhe ho.*” (You are good; you must be a Muslim.)

This was such an unusual experience for Naren and me that we later raised this incident with Sandeep,* an avowed leftist, who was running the school. I expected Sandeep to be as appalled as we were at the child’s comment and interested in talking to the children about it. His answer proved to be even more

* *All names have been changed to protect the identity of those quoted.*

surprising to us. He suggested that it would not be secular to teach children about respect for the religious beliefs of others and the fact that good people are found among practitioners of all religions, because it would go against their beliefs.

Pluralism, a Hindu Belief ?

Unfortunately, Sandeep does not appear to be unique in having these ideas of secularism. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, criticises a Supreme Court judgment on teaching mutual respect for religions in schools in the following words:

‘There is a misplaced sense that toleration requires that citizens respect each other’s religions. This stems from confusion... There is something dangerous about thinking that a tolerant society requires respect for people’s faiths. Toleration requires a respect for their rights. The test of whether you respect other’s rights comes only when you think that they might be

up to something fundamentally different or strange.’ (“Living with Difference”, *The Hindu*, September 14, 2002)

He finally dismisses the idea of pluralism, that multiple paths exist, as a “partisan description of the religious experience, and should not be seen as neutral amongst religions.” Some “liberal” Indian intellectuals label presumably teaching about religious pluralism as partisan because it is considered as a “Hindu” belief. Ironically this stance would find good company among right-wing evangelical Christians in America who routinely criticise religious pluralism as a liberal flaw.

The question for us must remain whether we will build a more harmonious, tolerant, and just society by teaching all Indian children to respect different religious traditions and the fact that good people are found among adherents of different religions, or is that as Mehta claims instead, “in the long run such beliefs are as damaging as saffronisation.”

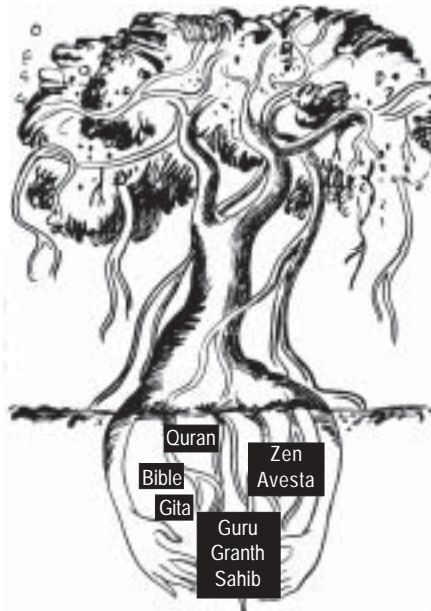
In this essay, I use “pluralism” and “plural society” as one that accommodates people with different beliefs, and the secular state as one particular system to maintain a plural society. The ideas of a secular state arose in European thought as a result of their experience with religious exclusivism and the close control that the centralised Church maintained on religious and non-religious thought.

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Religious wars dominated the history of mediaeval Europe. The Roman Catholic Church enshrined the principle of religious exclusivism to the extreme, not only the belief (still held by most Christian denominations) that Jesus was the Only Way, but “*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla*” (“There is no salvation outside the Church”). Anyone promulgating a doctrine other than that approved by the Church could be tried for heresy and executed. As the power of influence of the Roman Catholic Church spread, native pagan traditions, as well as earlier versions of Christianity, such as Celtic Christianity and Arianism, were wiped out.

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century challenged papal authority. This led to a century of religious strife in Europe between Catholics and Protestant denominations when hundreds of thousands of people were killed. The smouldering tip of this conflict can still be seen in the ethnic-religious Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland, and the separation of Catholic Ireland from the United Kingdom in 1922. The other end of the conflict of religious exclusivism can be seen vividly in contemporary events across the world where mutually exclusive ideologies are battling for supremacy in what is being described as the “Clash of Civilisations.”

The birth of ideas pertaining to religious tolerance in Europe, religious pluralism and ultimately the separation of religion and state arose out of their experience with religious intolerance. This religious intolerance was a natural outgrowth of religious exclusivism – the idea that there is only One Way, and that One Way is controlled or determined by a particular church, tribe or book. Thus,



the liberal struggle in the Age of Reason was precisely against the ideas of religious exclusivism and authority, and the resultant foreclosure of free thought and speech in the name of curbing apostasy and heresy.

The European Experience

In the Islamic world, the Shia-Sunni conflicts and the persecution of Sufis, Bahais and Ahmediyas arise from doctrinal exclusivism. The Indic view, by contrast, developed differently. The pluralism of paths and viewpoints is an essential Indic viewpoint, found as far back as the *Rig Veda*, that states: “*Ekam Sat, Vipra Bahuda Vadanti*” (Truth is One, the Wise describe it variously) — a principle that was broadly accepted among followers of religions of Indian origin like Hindu, Buddhist, Jains and Sikhs and some others such as the Bahais. This is slowly being

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understood throughout the world in the Unitarian Church, among some liberal Christians and Muslims, and among humanistic groups such as the United Nations where Kofi Annan used a *Rig Veda* quote to point to a great and ancient teaching of religious pluralism that can offer succour in the world of religious conflict based on exclusivist doctrines.

A clear exposition of these ideas of pluralism in ancient India is also found in Emperor Ashoka’s rock edicts from the third century BC.

‘Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, honours both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honours them with gifts and honours of various kinds. But Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this — that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root *restraint in speech*, that is, not praising one’s own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one’s own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one’s own religion and the religions of others...

Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.’[emphasis added]

What a wonderful statement of religious pluralism!

Respect for Diversity

The idea of mutual respect of *panths*, or paths, became part of Indian philosophical traditions, encapsulated as “*Sarva Dharma Sambhava, Sarva Pantha Samadar.*” (Each one’s duty is of equal value, each path worthy of equal respect). This idea did not result in the homogeneity that Mehta dreads. On the contrary, it allowed for tremendous diversity and dialogue, far more than that which existed in Christian Europe or exists in America even today. This diversity confounds us even now when we try a simple exercise like defining what Hinduism is.

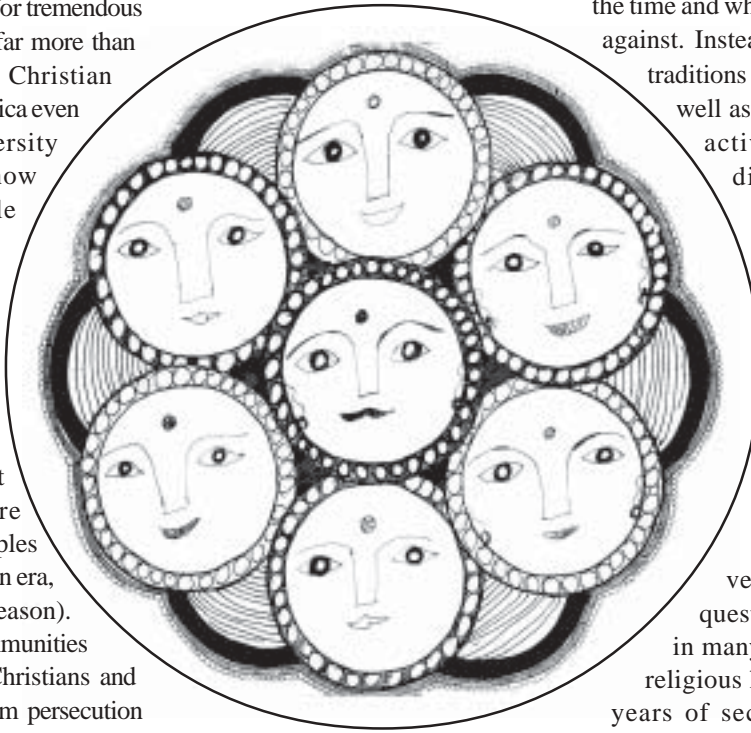
This allowance for diversity is what permitted even atheistic schools of philosophy to exist in India without persecution (there are hardly any such examples in Europe in the Christian era, till after the Age of Reason). India also sheltered communities like the Jews, Syrian Christians and Zoroastrians, fleeing from persecution in Christian and Islamic societies, even while they preserved their faiths. This is the same tolerance and quest for Truth that allowed new gurus, teachers and paths to arise in Indian society - such as Buddha, Mahavira and Guru Nanak—without being condemned as heretics and crucified.

Religious Exclusivism

While free enquiry and debate were encouraged, the idea found in the Ashoka rock edict as well as repeatedly in Indian scriptures is that “speech matters” and it is by no means free. To speak sweetly and to encourage mutual respect will foster harmony. By contrast, speech, education and propaganda that

fosters the spread of religious exclusivism will inevitably cause conflict in society – and this is vouchsafed by even a rudimentary study of the history of the world.

The European struggle for freedom of thought and speech was born in an environment of religious control by a centralised authority. Anyone outside church authority



who challenged existing doctrines could be guilty of heresy that could cost them their life. In many ways Indian society evolved beyond this to discover that any sincere quest for Truth needs to be respected and at the same time anyone can be challenged to a debate. This can happen because there is a shared goal — to discover what is true. When

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there is religious exclusivity and belief that there is only One Way and all others are condemned to hell, there can be no debate – the only option is to convert or kill.

Eroding our Social Contract

Contemporary Indian secular thought, in simply regurgitating Voltaire and other European thinkers, forgets the conditions they faced at the time and which they were fighting against. Instead of building on the traditions of Indian pluralism, as well as our own traditions of active debate and discourse between different paths, they instead decry teaching religious pluralism and mutual respect. This in turn directly or indirectly, supports the growth of religious exclusivism and intolerance. At the very least we have to question why we appear, in many ways, *nostalgic* for religious harmony and why 50 years of secularism appears to have only widened the cleavage between communities—a cleavage which is considered to be ‘spreading’ to rural areas.

This must tell us that there was an existing principle and idea, separate from elitist secularism, that allowed for harmony even in rural communities not exposed to secular doctrines. We see this when we understand that *Sarva Pantha Samadar* – mutual respect for other ways – is not only a statement but also a civil contract that has deep resonance in our society. It is easier for Pat Robertson to get away with calling Prophet Mohammad a terrorist on prime-time television in

America than it would be for Togadia to do so here in India. To break this civil contract is to further polarise the society along religious lines. Thus, every time a *madrassa* teaches that only Muslims are good people and the rest need to be converted; every time a right-wing Christian evangelist in India proclaims their need to “save” the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Sikhs who are living in darkness; and every time a Hindutva proponent points fingers at an allegedly homogenous Indian Muslim community as a Pakistani Trojan horse, we erode our social contract. Similarly, organisations like Sabrang Communications and SAHMAT, that could play a positive role in teaching pluralism, do very little to produce material that would teach the Salma’s of India about respect for other paths to help build communal harmony. Instead, they follow narrow partisan agendas geared more to serve or oppose particular political interests and groupings rather than building a harmonious society. In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi’s approach was to sing *Ishwar, Allah tere naam*—an approach that would no doubt be reviled as assimilative by many of the Indian intelligentsia of today.

Assimilation through Violence

Western societies have evolved to a civil understanding of their own kind of secularism, something that was a result of their particular history. In this history, people had become conditioned to accept the ideas of centralised laws (determined by the controlling church) handed down from above. Furthermore, as a result of their Christian histories, Western societies had already been homogenised in beliefs to a far greater extent than India ever was. Their history of

religious conflict had also brought the idea of tolerating (in the beginning) Christian dissent, and (later) other minorities, *as long as doing so did not threaten the foundations of the State*. In actual practice, despite the spread of liberal ideas starting from the 18th century, countries in Europe and America underwent a couple of centuries of nationalistic consolidation all the way into the 20th century around the idea of a nation-state – a period in which religious and ethnic minorities were either persecuted or forcefully assimilated till they were no longer perceived as a threat.

Universalism and Pluralism

Ironically, Indian pluralistic and universalistic thought, in the form of translations of the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Upanishads* (first in Persian and then into European languages by the late 18th century), played a positive role in the development of European liberalism. It also influenced a wide range of Western intellectuals in the process of questioning the dominant influence of the religious exclusivism promulgated by organised Christianity. These people ranged from Arthur Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to Tolstoy and Emerson and from Voltaire to T.S. Eliot and Thoreau.

In contrast to European history, India has a much better record of

pluralism. Indian pluralism has involved a civil contract of mutual respect and co-existence between communities, and relied on that principle to build a harmonious and heterogeneous whole. Of course, it had its own problems, such as casteism. However, there is broad intellectual consensus that casteism is a problem and there are laws to tackle it. Religious exclusivism is, however, a different problem that Indian intellectuals have been unwilling to tackle – one that inherently sets communities against other communities based on ideology. Indian pluralism on the other hand worked to harmonise different philosophies at the level of civil society even when intellectual debate continued. By contrast, the secularism proclaimed by many Indian intellectuals, and exemplified by Mehta’s article does nothing to directly and positively create a civil or ideological harmony and a common narrative. Instead, it encourages extreme viewpoints and thus relies on the military apparatus of the State and its monopoly of force (“rule of law”) to keep from violence the proponents of different ideologies that are, a priori, taken to be intellectually irreconcilable.

Immunity to Reason?

The idea that religious exclusivism must not be challenged is often justified by saying that as a “belief” it is immune from rational challenge. However, if liberals throughout history took the same stand on beliefs, then no one would have challenged Southern Baptists and other Christian sects on slavery and racism and there could be no law passed that made prohibitions on Dalit entry into Hindu temples illegal. The fact of the matter is that religious beliefs have always been subject to challenge and have also been subject

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to change as part of negotiation in society.

Just as the prohibition on temple entry (or racism) was challenged on the basis of a belief in the equality of people irrespective of caste boundaries, this is taking the same approach of teaching the equality of people across religious boundaries—and it challenges those that teach otherwise. Also, the realisation that religious exclusivism has been a key reason for religious conflict in the world- is borne out by a study of world history. To refuse to stand up for religious pluralism is to refuse



to cherish possibly one of the greatest teachings that India could give to the world—a teaching that may be our best hope for religious harmony.

By refusing to challenge religious exclusivism, the current Indian intellectual approach favours ideological extremists. Since civil compromise and conciliation are not favoured in protecting extreme ideological stances, the self-proclaimed leaders that emerge from this approach are those that hold that the interests of their community are different and unique. Thus representing a community's interests is defined as maintaining separateness and "non-assimilation" into the mainstream and the intellectual opinion provides cover for this. While teaching pluralism still allows considerable leeway in practising one's own way of relating to the divine, it challenges the religious tenets that teach children that relating to the divine is exclusively available only to the members of one community.

What are Our Choices?

In India we have a choice to base our secularism on the long traditions of Indian pluralism, articulated as far back as thousands of years ago in the *Rig Veda* and the rock edicts of

Ashoka or on the 19th century European intellectualism. Secular ideas of tolerance appealed to us and we remained a plural society because of our traditions of pluralism and despite the fact that European intellectual secularism was understood and put in place by only a small English-educated elite in

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India. Other former British colonies, with a similar elite, have not succeeded in remaining secular. Nonetheless, we are already seeing the cracks in the elitist secularism as we begin a search for our own expression of a pluralistic system. In doing so we have the choice to look at our own deep traditions of Indian pluralism or continue to apply theoretical eighteenth century European ideas, generally out of context. In the first case, we would actively teach pluralism and

mutual respect (the roots of which still exist deeply in us) to all our children and intellectually challenge the ideologies of doctrinal exclusivism that have brought so much grief and conflict to the world. In the latter case, we would continue to insist that the State protect religious exclusivism and we shall provide intellectual cover for it. We will in fact proclaim, as Mehta does, that teaching pluralism is, instead, what is dangerous.

The former approach, where we teach pluralism and challenge exclusivism, has ample room for heterogeneous viewpoints while moving our society towards harmonious co-existence. The latter approach, which aims to protect exclusivism, and denounce mutual respect for religions as insufficiently secular, will naturally and inevitably lead to greater religious exclusivism and polarisation in society. Our only hope will then be to, at some point in the future, develop a military state apparatus strong enough to keep the fighting dogs at bay, or replicate the cycle of European history. In Europe, one or the other creed of religious exclusivism triumphed. We should, if we tread that route, be prepared for the centuries of religious and sectarian warfare that followed it, until a new model for maintaining harmony in a plural society becomes internalised by the people at large. □

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