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A Critique of the Anti-Modernist Critique of Secularism

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Abstract: *In the vast literature on secularism in India, Ashis Nandy's "anti-modernist critique of secularism" is well known. Nandy, a prominent Indian social scientist, found himself in debate with many other scholars and this exchange occupies a central place in the Indian academic discourse on secularism. I am not pretending to be impartial here. My opinion is that, despite Nandy's otherwise great contribution to research on contemporary India, his "anti-modernist" approach to secularism, albeit shared by a number of other authors, is at times too idealistic and generalised. I shall therefore recreate both the main points of the debate on part of Nandy as well as those that in my opinion counter his claims.*

Keywords: *secularism; Indian politics; modernism, Ashis Nandy*

1. Introduction

In the vast literature on secularism in India, Ashis Nandy's "anti-modernist critique of secularism" is well known. Nandy, a prominent Indian social scientist, found himself in debate with many other scholars and this exchange occupies a central place in the Indian academic discourse on secularism. I am not pretending to be impartial here. My opinion is that, despite Nandy's otherwise great contribution to research on contemporary India, his "anti-modernist" approach to secularism, albeit shared by a number of other authors, is at times too idealistic and generalised. I shall therefore recreate both the main points of the debate on part of Nandy as well as those that in my opinion counter his claims.

A few main points I shall try to counter here are: (1) that there is an Indian tradition of secularism worked out by religious communities, in conformity with their ideas and more tolerant than Western, modern secularism, while (2) the latter is not tolerant, causes more violence and is (3) less appreciative of religious traditions. In a more radical way, Nandy

also claims that (4) modern secular ideologies are responsible for most of conflicts in the 20th century and, if religion appears in those conflicts, it is not the reason of them, but a tool of cynical politics.

2. Was there an Indian, precolonial form of secularism?

According to Ashis Nandy, both European and Indian versions of secularism function next to each other in India. The first one is adhered to by Westernised elites of India and it "chalks out an area in public life where religion is not admitted" (Nandy 2005, 333). The second one, in which most of common Indians believe "implies that while the public life may or may not be kept free of religion, it must have a space for a continuous dialogue among religious traditions and between the religious and secular" (Nandy 2005, 333). That second type of secularism is, according to Nandy, a part of a legacy of India's precolonial society in which the religious communities were able to peacefully communicate but from the standpoint of their respective religious values and not by retaining them outside public space.

Among authors that voiced similar opinion, Madan (2014, 307) pointed out that as secularism was a modern, Western idea and a "gift of Christianity" it had no application to Indian reality. The similarity led some to bind Madan and Nandy together and speak of a 'Madan-Nandy thesis' on secularism. This, however, is a misnomer at least in the sense that Madan and Nandy are not known to cooperate in jointly forming any uniform thesis and in a later debate Madan rather clearly shows how he differs from Nandy in this regard. My primary interlocutor, therefore, remains Nandy. As for the main point, however, Madan's claim is that Western secularism is a "gift of Christianity: as it was born from a torturous experience of church-state relations in Europe that eventually led to their separation. This position was rejected, among others, by Bhargava (2014, 497) who observed that the idea of secularism comes not only from the experience of church-state relations but also the experience of religious strife. While the first is not applicable to Indian reality, the second one is. Therefore, as many authors point out, Indian secularism seeks to separate religion and the state (rather than church and the state) to avoid future conflicts in which religion would play a part. Many would also rather claim that "[s]ecularism was defined in the Indian context as neutrality of the state to, rather than separation from, religion and as freedom of conscience for all citizens" (Baixas 2011, 86, Chandhoke 2015, 25-26).

For Nandy, however, the "religious strife", as Bhargava put it, is a contemporary result of the processes of secularization and modernization that did not fit in Indian reality. Elsewhere Nandy (2014, 103) is even more outspoken, pointing out that the "[d]ata on mass violence show that secular states, backed by secular ideologies, account for at least two-third of all the deaths in organized mass violence during the 20th century". Balagangadhara and de Roover (2007, 84) are of a similar opinion regarding the link between secularism and the rise of religious violence although they have not used such strong words. In my view, however, what Nandy refers to as secularism in the precolonial context was in fact a worked out form of community coexistence and it may be historically misleading to call it "secularism". While disagreeing with Nandy's position M. Hasan points out that if "secularism tends to be dismissed as an import from West grafted on a traditional society" than "should India repudiate nationalism, parliamentary democracy, and free speech?" (Hasan 1996, 202). Hasan might me missing Nandy's point, however, since Nandy spoke only about secularism being ill-fitted for Indian reality as India had its own tradition of it. He did not, at least at this point, make reference to other solutions as parliamentary democracy. Nandy (2014, 92) does, however, repudiate nationalism elsewhere from a similar standpoint. More importantly however, Hasan does partially agree with Nandy regarding the existence of a precolonial idea of communal harmony but at the same time points out that such claims ignore the system of social exclusion practiced by Hindi communities:

"It is possible to trace the roots of the 'secular' idea to the ancient Hindu and Buddhists texts, the Bhakti movement, and the religious-cultural syncretism evolved by Akbar, the sixteenth century ruler, and Dara Shikoh, the Mughal prince. Still, it is perhaps inappropriate to equate those undifferentiated and undefined ideas and trends with the modern concept of secularism. *Sarva dharma samabhava* [equal respect to all religions] is a laudable notion, as it probably encapsulates the trajectory plotted by the state and society in precolonial India. At the same time, while *sarva dharma samabhava* forcefully conveys the spirit of religious tolerance, it does not imply a disjunction between the state and religion. Rooted in religion and spirituality, and sustained by the ecumenical traditions of Hinduism, *sarva dharma samabhava* excluded the 'low-born', the *mlecchas* or those who were outside the varna system.'' (Hasan 1996, 203)

Moreover, the comparison to earlier, contemporary to colonial and precolonial polities hardly vindicates the view of the existence of an "Indian tradition of secularism" that would be both based on some religious tradition and yet just in dealing with inter-community relations. The precolonial political traditions were not based on the idea of neutrality and equidistance of the state towards the religious communities, as the state, if it did interfere, did so usually on behalf of one the communities, not uncommonly with an adverse effect for some other communities. I must admit, however, that there are many authors that claim otherwise. Madan (2014, 304) claims that "the king was the protector of everybody's *dharma*: being *that* was *his dharma*. Only in very exceptional circumstances, apprehending disorder, might the king have used his authority to abrogate certain customs or usages". A.A. Engineer (1995, 268-269) is of opinion that in the precolonial India the question of separating religion and state did not arise, as the state was looked upon in a holistic manner and even in Muslim states the ulama (the experts on Muslim religion) would not dominate the rulers or the rulers the ulama. Similarly Galanter (2014, 37) assumes that the "king was expected to be the supporter of religion, but his duty was not to enforce some universal Hindu standards upon all, but to lend his support to the self-regulation of a multiplicity of groups with diverse standards". Certainly a debate about whether this was true should be set in a more specific historical context. As for 18th century northern India the observation of Bayly (1985, 187) would counter Madan's claim since, as Bayly pointed out, it was typical to 18th-century Sikh and Hindu rulers to forbid cow slaughter in their dominions. Smith (1963, 298-299) similarly found many Hindu-ruled princely states in 19th century colonial India engaged in various religious affairs and taking decisions that affected life of various religious communities, including their reforms (cf. also Clémentin-Ojha 1999, 30, for a consideration whether a case of such interference in the state of Jaipur had colonial or precolonial roots). Possibly the involvement of rulers is such affairs is to be found at various times and places and of Indian history. While the earlier rulers interfered with religious affairs (when they did) usually in the name of religion and tradition, the modern Indian state interfered in them formally in the name of other ideas, such as equality (following what Bilgrami 2014, 13-14, calls a "lexicographical ordering"). These conclusions may not make either the modern state's or the earlier states' interferences in religious traditions more justified, but it would rather prove that if any of these are to be defined as secular, it is the modern state's interferences that should be called this way.

Nandy (1995, 51) also claims that "modern India" – in the sense of India's modern, secularised, Westernised elites "talks of Ashoka and Akbar without admitting that they did not build a tolerant state in the sense in which a Lenin or a Jawaharlal Nehru would have wanted them to; they built their tolerance on the tenets of Buddhism and Islam". A more careful study of Ashoka's policies (if one considers, for example, Romila Thapar's research) reveals that his edicts were not as pacifist in their spirit as many believe them to be. It would seem that Ashoka used Buddhist notions such as *dhamma* when he deemed them useful but otherwise clearly considered using violence, as in the case of threatening the forest tribes with retribution. If the edicts are to be believed, it may true that that Ashoka had built a form of state tolerance and that he had built it on the tenets of Buddhism, but it is the scope of this tolerance that remains in question. His policy also remains one of the more original ones (among those of which we know more) in Indian history. Nor I see any evidence that the representatives of "modern India" were denying the importance of Buddhism in Ashoka's policy. As for Akbar, I fail to see how his tolerance was built on the tenets of Islam in a way comparable to that of Ashoka.

3. Is modern secularism less tolerant?

Nandy continues his attack on modern Westernised secularised by giving the example of "north Indian classical music'' which is neither entirely Hindu nor Muslim, but "[m]odern secularism fails to see the religious sources of such creativity and acceptance, in fact celebration, of other faiths." (Nandy 1995, 53). Again, he does not provide any evidence of "modern secularism" acting in such a why. Moreover, music and cuisine are of very different nature than religion and politics and therefore can often the mixture of various traditions more freely. Nandy (1995, 54) goes even further by asserting that the "[t]he modern secularist and the modern Hindu try to preserve the Taj as a monument for tourists and build an oil refinery next to it" because "[t]he traditional concept of ethnic tolerance, concerned, powerless and at bay, can only pray at the mosque hoping that the modern world will pass it by." What evidence is there to prove that all modern secularists and modern(ised) Hindus think in such a way? I we allow ourselves to use such highly selective rhetoric than I could as well point out that the fact that Taj Mahal, an Indian monument bringing the biggest income from tickets, was left to Muslims to pray in for Fridays, is omitted here while it could be pondered upon as a part of the nature of India's modern secularism. Similarly, I could have pointed out that the fact that in 18th century, before the advent of secular

modernity, the Hindu Jats plundered the areas around Taj Mahal (including partially the monument itself) is omitted both by Nandy and Hindu nationalists, as, one may presume, it would not suit the image of precolonial Indian tolerance.

Also, I would add, both Nandy's, Balagangadhara's and de Roover's, as well as Hindu nationalists opinion glosses over the examples of precolonial religious conflicts. Even if Nandy's (2014, 336) claim that in earlier centuries "according to available records, interreligious riots were rare and localized" could he historically corroborated (but indeed there were riots, cf. Bayly 1985, 186-203), a riot is but one form of violence. Similarly, Balagangadhara's and de Roover's (2007, 88) claim about the Indian "phenomenon of pluralism" is that in the pre-modern period "[t]here were violent clashes, but these never developed into the systematic persecution of some particular tradition or the other". While I do not negate the importance of the existence of Indian pre-modern pluralist societies and their achievements in establishing some forms of community coexistence, certain instances of a systematic persecution of a particular tradition can certainly be found in earlier Indian history. While some of the most systematic cases of religious persecution did indeed happen under Muslim rule in India and there is no point of denying this, I feel that Nandy tends to idealise the tolerance of the historic Hindu-ruled states. The above-quoted M. Hasan pointed out that there existed forms of intolerance and exclusion in Indian society (and indeed some of them exist until today), such us untouchability, that were justified exactly by the tenets of a particular religious tradition.

I also find Nandy's point about the secular states and ideologies being responsible for most of the 20th centuries somewhat unfair. Nandy (2014, 103) uses this point to show that V.D. Savarkar, the main ideologue of Hindu nationalism, was a product of this brutal, 20th century and its violent secular ideologies. However, while Nandy is of opinion that Savarkar was secular at heart he goes on to observe that he had only used Hinduism for his political aims. I agree with both points. I think, however, that Nandy ignores the final result of this process. There is no denying that Savarkar was successful in his use of Hinduism for producing Hindu nationalism. In another words, religion remained crucial to this project. Neither is Nandy denying that this ideology produced some violent results. Why should we, then, shift the focus to supposedly violence-causing secular ideologies while dealing with a violence-causing religion-based ideology? The term "secular communal violence", used by Nandy elsewhere (1995, 62) is equally misleading. Elsewhere, referring to people

like Savarkar as a "zealot" type (semi-modernised but following a radical form of religion) Nandy (1995, 48) observes that "[s]trangely enough, the zealot only uses the traditional religious or ethnic boundaries as units of mobilisation, means of coalition building and settling scores". I find it difficult to understand why would this be "strange" for a religious nationalism to use religious traditions (for a similar point against Nandy, see Tambiah, 2014, 443). A question which Nandy does not put forward is why the half-secularised "zealots" chose exactly religion, not anything else, as the best foundation of mobilisation? A good example is that of two public festivals that B.G.Tilak (who had inspired later generations of Hindu nationalists) and others sought to introduce in the Bombay province in 1890s. While elevating the Ganpati festival to the level of a large-scale public religious celebration and using it as the means to unite Hindus against Muslims, the new public secular festival commemorating the coronation of Shivaji failed to gain popularity (Tejani 2011, 82). Out of many other types of community mobilisation in India that turned out to be highly successful in their goals and based on certain religious issues, one may point out, amongst those based on Hindu traditions, to cow protection movements and the Ramjanmabhumi movement, all of which often produced violent results. I think it is not just to ignore this and suddenly shift attention to the "secular ideologies" (such as Communism and Nazism) that caused the biggest number of casualties worldwide in 20th century, also because most of these happened outside India.

4. Does "religious values-based" secularism lead to greater tolerance?

I do agree however, with Nandy's claim that the present political debate on secularism (and a part of the academic debate as well) verily tries to chalk out "an area in public life where religion is not admitted". Akeel Bilgrami (1994, 223) speaks in a somewhat similar tone when he concludes that Nehru's approach was "Archimedean" in the sense that he had tried to impose secularism from outside, without resting it on the discourse of the religious communities in India. In Indian politics, any contact with a religious community or tradition (although it is inevitable anyway) may be attacked by a rival party as a breach of the idea of secularism (Bhargava 2014, 493).This, however, is much more political rhetoric than anything else. We must, therefore, differentiate between the theoretical and practical aspects. In theory, many Indian politicians seem to follow the idea that the public political debate should not be influenced by religion but in practice all or most of them do engage in some forms of

dialogue with religious traditions. Also, the theoretical level is the one on which it is claimed (and believed by some) that the state can introduce and discuss changes based on general, secular ideas such as equality without referring to religious traditions and certainly without preferring any of them.

As Nandy (2005, 337) points out while Westernised intellectuals see no problem with rejecting one's faith in public "it is not an adequate consolation to the faithful, to whom religion is what it is precisely because it provides an overall theory of life, including public life Also, as Galanter (2014, 259) put it, " just as this universalistic Hinduism is unacceptable to adherents of religion that claim some exclusive patent on cosmic truth, so the notion of religion as essentially private and separate from public life is an equally indefensible dogma to those who hold religion to encompass more than doctrine, worship, and private conduct, but to provide obligatory principles for the ordering of public life." I lack empiric data to prove how popular this view is among the adherents of Hindu religion, but it is safe to assume that it has much followers.

The frequent and ubiquitous stigmatisation for being "communal" leads many politicians to blur their intentions by using terms other than "religion". This is a space in which the Hindu nationalists (such as the V.D. Savarkar, whom Nandy had so vehemently criticized) operate, trying their best (like all other parties) to evade the charge of not being secular even when they put forward religion-linked issues. Many supporters of this ideology, being religious, may or may not accept the evasive political strategy of their leaders, but in practice many certainly do not accept the idea that religion should not matter at all in public life. This is, I think, a point Nandy continuously ignores: that there is the level of movement leaders and the level of ordinary followers. I agree with Nandy that the main ideologue of Hindu nationalism, Savarkar, was an agnostic that treated religion instrumentally and that in view of available sources the first leader of the RSS, Hedgewar, did not seem to be particularly interested in spirituality, contrary to the second one, Golwalkar (Nandy 2014, 92). But even if it is possible to prove that most of the Hindu nationalist (RSS and BJS/BJP) leadership was not religious in its private life it does not mean that a large number of its rank and file followers is not religious? Doesn't it help to explain why religion-bases initiatives are best ways to mobilise them? Nandy (2014, 92) is also wrong in claiming that the 1992 Ramjanmabhumi movement was the first genuine religion-based movement of the RSS, as not only the movement started earlier but the RSS was also for instance involved in the anti-Hindu Code Bill

agitation of 1950s and the anti-cow slaughter protests of 1960s. I have made reference to these also before.

If indeed there are two traditions of secularism in India functioning next to each other, then they function in an asymmetrical way, with the second tradition – the one supposedly based on religious values and not detachable from them – functioning largely outside formal political proclamations. Can we, however, imagine a situation in which the central place in the official political debate is instead taken by the values of various religious traditions instead of religiously neutral (a least formally) values such as neutrality or equality? Bilgrami (1994, 223) claims that instead of imposing a totalising state form of secularism on Indian society, there needs to be a better form of secularism which "can only *emerge* as a value by negotiation among the substantive commitments of particular religious communities". He is not proposing a return to any Indian, traditional secularism but striving towards the same, liberal secularism but in a different way. The state should seek "for a fully secular outcome via a signing up to a *common* secular outcome for *different (therefore non-neutral) reasons* from within their [the communities'] won very different substantive value economics" (Bilgrami 2014, 411). There is certainly a lot of evidence of reformist movements and reformist societies within the Hindu fold. Theoretically it may be possible for all communities in India to gradually arrive at one common civil code in such a way, although this would certainly take a lot of time. What to do, however, with cases such as the one of cow slaughter when the followers of one religion demand that the followers of another one should change their customs? The idea that secularism should be build on an inter-community dialogue puts in question the role of the state in the entire enterprise. It also remains to be seen whether such a dialogue would really become a basis of a better form of tolerance. The only provision in the constitution that was entirely based on a religious belief, despite the official explanations to introduce it, was the ban on cow slaughter. It was therefore not introduced from outside, in the sense of introducing an idea foreign to India. It was thus not "Archimedean" and it in practice it was certainly a fulfillment of a commitment of a particular religious community. However, it is not immediately clear to me whether an endavour to introduce this ban would fare better if at the beginning it would be left for the religious communities to negotiate it. I consider it likely that this would might have brought even more violent result (but that is a theoretical deliberation beyond the scope of this article). In such case, one turns back to Smith's conclusions that while the modern Indian state has tried to be neutral, one

of the reasons it was not completely able to do so was that it had to also serve as a judge in case of inter-community (and intra-community) disputes. Like Smith, Tejani (2007, 65) has shown that the state felt compelled to assume this role already in the colonial period. While one aspect of the debate is whether the secular ideology of the state led at times to the rise of religious tensions (as claimed by Nandy, Balagangadhara, de Rover, etc.), the other aspect is that at other times the state (both the colonial and postcolonial one) interfered in religious affairs precisely because it considered this interference to be a necessary check on the rising religious animosities (cf. also Sen 2014, 479 and Bhargava, 2014, 527, for a similar point), even if it sometimes produces adverse results and strengthened communal divides (cf. e.g. Prior 1993, 193, Tejani 2007, 59).

I find it difficult, however, to imagine the debate on the <u>uniform</u> civil code which would involve "substantive commitments of particular religious communities" and yet arrive at one code which would be satisfactory for all sides. In this case, the return to a form of community coexistence with the smallest possible degree of state interference would mean a lack of any uniform civil code but in that instance, logically and from a normative approach, this should also mean a lack of a uniform ban on cow slaughter. Such a return is of course highly unlikely or completely impossible, as now we are dealing with on Indian state, not many political structures, and a state in a modern sense, that is a one that is much more involved in various aspects of citizens' life than the earlier forms of state. It must be, however, added that while many may despise the fact that such a state may impose a secular policy on various religious communities, such a state may also impose a certain religious idea on various communities. While Gandhi, the Hindu conservatives in the Indian National Congress and the Hindu nationalists spoke with a degree of nostalgia about the old era of Hindu glory and tolerance, the same forces came together to introduce the ban on cow slaughter in the Directive Principles of the constitution, using precisely the mechanisms of the secular Indian republic about which they has some reservations. Such an observation leads many to doubting whether the modern Indian state is truly secular but that is a separate debate. Even if many would arrive at a conclusion that it is not truly secular, it does not immediately prove to any earlier state being more secular. Similarly, Nandy (2015) has pointed out that there is empirical evidence that secularism in India is in decline (when compared, one understands, with the situation in the early years of the republic) in the sense that both political engagement with religion and

religious strife are on the rise. Again, such point, at least considered separately from historical considerations, does not prove that "secularism" in India in, say, 16th century (if there was one), was "empirically" flourishing. If Nandy's attempt is to compare 1950s and 1990s (and beyond) India, one could try to prove that it was the decline of secularism since its position in 1950s that led to rising religious strife. In another words, in opinion of many authors such as Partha Chatterjee, the rising religious intolerance is for many not the effect of success of secularism in theory but of the failure to realise it in practice in India (Cobridge, Harris, 2006, 196). Nandy rather wants elsewhere to rather say the reverse: the rise of secular ideologies supposedly gives birth to the rise of religious tensions. Still, he ends up claiming that secularism is in decline in India while religious tensions are on the rise.

5. Summary

To sum, Nandy in my opinion does not prove that there existed an Indian tradition of secularism that would be both more benign and more tolerant and yet in accordance with religious belief. Similarly, his claim that secular ideologies are responsible for most of violence in the 20th century ignores the importance of religion in some (but of course not all) of those ideologies; my reference here is to Hindu nationalism. It, I must add, does not mean that there was no tolerance in precolonial India only that whatever form that tolerance took, it should not be confused with the idea of secularism, both historically as well as in the values on which it was based.

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