

# Sufism and the secular state: the South Asian experience

Over the last two decades, since the appearance of a special issue of *The Economic and Political Weekly* (Mumbai) on secularism (1994), Indian intellectuals have intensely debated the question as to whether one can speak of a South Asian or Indian variant of secularism. Proponents of such a view (e.g., Rajeev Barghava<sup>1</sup>) take it for granted both that the concept of secularism historically emerged in a European context, and that the experience of European nation states with secularism has frequently been fraught with contradictions, since a sharp demarcation between state and religion(s) could not be maintained in practice. The South Asian variant of secularism abandons the need for strict demarcation.

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IT IS VARIABLY ARGUED that the secular state should occupy a position of *neutrality* between the faiths practiced by the Indian population, or should hold a position of *principled distance*. The Indian Constitution, as adopted after Partition, clearly indicates that the founding fathers of the post-colonial state did take cognizance of the fact that a 'hands-off' policy in itself does not suffice, since there is a need to balance freedom of religion with other democratic rights guaranteed under India's constitution. If the state is to play an emancipatory role in relation to society, it can't afford to acquiesce in religious views that are oppressive. Hence it is the obligation of the secular state to intervene in civil society where religions operate, and play a *reformist* role. And while one wonders whether any modern state – Indian or otherwise – has been effective in preventing the (re)emergence of 'revivalist' or 'fundamentalist' currents, it is clear that no secular state can survive without an activist defence of religious tolerance.

## Tolerance and divisions

Now the concrete task I have set myself is to highlight the contemporary significance of South Asian Sufi *tariqahs* [fraternities] and shrines for the maintenance of peace and harmony between the subcontinent's diverse religious communities. Firstly, as to definitions: in its broadest sense the Sufi tradition refers to a whole range of mystics, of groups and people searching to reach an individual, direct spiritual union with Islam's God, Allah. Via their fraternities, these mystics devised a discipline aimed at reaching a spiritual state. It is important to note though that the definition of Sufism put forward by some strands of Islamic mysticism is more 'radical' yet, since they insist that all attachments to personal wealth be given up.

Further, it is crucial to point out that Sufism cannot *per se* be equated with a liberal attitude towards Islam's scriptures. Nor would it be appropriate to restrict oneself to the divide between those who do [*bashar*] and those who do not [*beshar*] adhere to Islam's legal system, the *Sharia*. For in the course of the steep rise of Sufism's social influence in South Asia (13th-18th centuries), there have been at least six other significant issues over which Sufi liberal representatives have clashed with (other) Islamic scholars [*ulema*], and with competing Sufi representatives. These divides between Sufi currents may be briefly summarized:

- between the advocates of Ibn Arabi's philosophy of *wahdat-ul-wujud*, i.e., the Unity of Being, on the one hand – and 'internal' opponents of this philosophy, such as Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, on the other;
- between the practitioners of the *samā*, group musical sessions aimed at reaching spiritual ecstasy – and Sufis who oppose(d) the *samā*;

- between those advocating reconciliation with the majority population of Hindus, such as the renowned prince Dara Shikoh – and those advocating the humiliation of Hindus;
- between those who saw the veneration at tombs and intercession on behalf of visitors of shrines as positive – and those who considered it a violation of Islam's doctrines;
- between those who stress the need for instruction in the rational sciences – and those who accord primacy or even exclusive importance to instruction in the revealed sciences;
- lastly between those who were/are eager to develop a syncretic discourse and to learn from South Asia's Hindu ascetics – and those less inclined to do so.

## Saint worship as heterodox feature

So far I have focused on the broad divide within South Asia's Sufi tradition between tolerance and intolerance. It is now time to highlight one of the issues in particular, namely the issue of saint worship. In Christianity, a cult of saint veneration reportedly grew up originally (3rd-7th centuries) at cemeteries lying outside the city centres of the Roman world. But, whereas this indicates that in Catholic Christianity saint worship has popular origins, the recognition of sainthood was subsequently sanctified by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The Papacy in Rome instituted strict rules and criteria as to who is eligible for sainthood, and brought saint veneration under its authority, thereby (partly) undermining its popular character. The latter cannot be said about saint veneration within Islam. As in early Christianity, the burial places of the Sufi holy men and preachers came to attract huge numbers of pilgrims venerating the saint and seeking intercession so as to solve life's problems. Furthermore, in South Asian Islam saint worship has remained a key component, with pilgrimages to numerous shrines continuing throughout the centuries, and with new *dargahs* [shrines] rising up, even in modern times. Unlike in Catholicism, in Islam there persists an uneasy co-existence between the religion's official scholars and legal experts on the one hand, and Sufi masters and disciples operating independently on the other. Intercession is either condemned as un-Islamic, since it is said to contradict with the religion's monolithic character, or it is grudgingly tolerated. In either case, sainthood in Islam is not conveyed from above. Hence, the mass visits to shrines where Sufi holy persons lie buried are an important and autonomous feature of South Asian civil society, and largely free from patronage by Islam's legal scholars, the *ulemas*, it seems.

## Sufi shrines and Gramscian thought

The above summary on dividing lines within the Sufi tradition and on saint worship in Islam is brief, but it suffices for the purpose of discussing why the thematic of Sufism and the secular state is relevant towards an emancipatory

conceptualisation of secularism. In the introduction I already referred to the South Asian conceptualisation of secularism – it disagrees with the European view that a strict line of demarcation should be drawn between religion(s) and the modern state. One way to visualise things differently, is by projecting the state as an agent of social change and reform. The argument can, however, be developed well beyond a discourse on clauses contained within India's post-independence Constitution. The Indian view on secularism can and should be integrated into a Gramscian political discourse; Antonio Gramsci differentiated between two spheres of society's superstructure: the state and civil society. The latter comprises all institutions and organisations that are non-economic in kind, and do not reside directly under the state's apparatus of coercion and legal dominance. From the points of differentiation between Sufi fraternities mentioned above, it is evident that the activities of these fraternities have a crucial bearing on the maintenance of religious tolerance or otherwise, since they have always been situated within civil society.

Take the case of a typical *dargah*, as described in the socio-logical literature on South Asian shrines. It would comprise, besides the burial places of the saint and some of his disciples, the living quarters of the shrine's spiritual head and his family and of Sufi visitors; a library and *madrasah*; and space for the performance of *qawwali* music during weekly sessions or the *urs*, the annual celebrations. Moreover, the number of shrines where pilgrims gather for the *urs* is known to be huge; figures for the numbers of Muslim and Hindu participants in some cases run into millions. And while it obviously cannot be taken for granted that the motives for people's participation in these festivities are exclusively spiritual or religious in nature – intercession frequently is sought for purely earthly reasons – many if not most *dargahs* continue to be points of attraction for people belonging to different faiths. Hence, *dargahs* are a critical feature of India's civil society in Gramsci's sense.

The above statement on shrines and Gramscian thought, however, does not fully suffice for emancipatory conceptualisation. Towards this purpose, two further steps need to be taken. First, Gramsci did not merely argue that civil society should be understood as a distinct social sphere; he also insisted that civil society is an arena of *contention*, of conflict between dominant and non-dominant classes. Hence we need to specify what meaning shrines have for society's most deprived sections, such as Muslim and Hindu landless labourers, informal sector workers, poor women who are widowed or childless, outcastes, *harijans*, etc. Moreover, the conceptual task involved is challenging, since Gramsci's political theory to my knowledge largely *bypassed* theoretical questions of secularism and tolerance.

## Emancipatory conceptualisation

This then in a nutshell summarizes the double task to be accomplished. On the one hand, more empirical data needs to be gathered so as to assess, how and to what extent Sufi shrines contribute towards the maintenance of tolerance, and towards social struggles in the interests of society's poor. On the other hand, we need to investigate how or to what extent the debate by Indian intellectuals on the question of secularism has resulted in a *Gramscian* conceptualisation of secularism. Fact is that South Asian Sufi fraternities have not suffered the same fate as that suffered by *tariqahs* in countries of the Middle East, such as Egypt under Nasser and Turkey under Ataturk. This seems to confirm the thesis put forward by Indian intellectuals, that India's secularism since 1947 has been distinct from the secularism practiced elsewhere. Hence my assessment that the vibrant experience of South Asian shrines and *tariqahs* bears much significance for the international debate on the nature of an *emancipatory state* espousing secularism. To achieve an emancipatory conceptualisation we need an approach that is both grounded in Gramscian theory, and which creates further conceptual clarity regarding the dynamic relation between state and civil society towards defending secularism; a topic that, as stated, did not figure much in Gramsci's published *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>2</sup> In short, the ultimate task of this project is to put forward a Gramscian conceptualisation on Sufism and the secular state.

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## Notes

- 1 Bhargava, R. (ed.) 2013. *Secularism and its Critics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press
- 2 Gramsci, A. 2001. *The Prison Notebooks*, Columbia University Press