1 Introduction

*Humeira Iqtidar and Tanika Sarkar**

Religious differences and violent hatred against vulnerable religious minorities have come to problematize South Asian democracies in a particularly severe way. Concerns and anxieties about the fraught relationship between secularization, tolerance and democracy unify this collection of essays that ranges across very diverse times and spaces in South Asia. The present collection began as the result of our interest in the relationship between secularism and secularization in South Asia, and versions of some of the papers included here were published as part of a special issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* in December 2013. Even though there has been extensive and significant research on secularism – beyond, as well as within, South Asia – there is, as yet, little clarity about how secularism – as an ideological framework and as state policy – is linked to secularization, the social process. Indeed, South Asian scholarly and popular usages often equate secularism with secularization[1] and, more often, make both interchangeable with state and social tolerance towards religious minorities. In other words, we tend to conflate secularism, secularization, and political and social tolerance, all into one neat package. Consequently, we have neither a clear theoretical conception nor a sound historical context to understand whether secularism necessarily involves a progressive diminution of religion when the state steps in to regulate interactions among different faiths, even if on the basis of neutrality, or if a tradition of co-existence and mutual

* We gratefully acknowledge the support of the European Research Council for the project titled 'Tolerance in Contemporary Muslim Polities: Political Theory Beyond the West', which funded the workshop bringing contributors together at King's College London in June 2014. We would also like to thank Sunil Khilnani and the India Institute at KCL supporting for the workshop. Two anonymous reviewers raised excellent questions for us to think through and we are grateful to them. Walid Jumblatt and Arij Eishelmani provided invaluable help in editing and formatting the papers. A big thank you to Lucy Rhymer for her patient encouragement from the very start of this project. We would also like to thank Liz Kelly for her careful editing, and Ishwarya Mathavan for her thorough project management. Finally, we would like to thank Aniket Alam for the suggestion that started it all!

[1] As editors, one interesting aspect of our conversations with contributing authors has been the difficulty some faced in separating the two terms.

tolerance can, by itself, overcome the increasing violence that besets much of South Asia today. In other words, we are still puzzled by the question of the desirable relative weight of, and relationship between, secularism, secularization and tolerance in a democratic polity.

These are extremely contentious matters. Some scholars see no rationale for secularism or for secularization, and consider that toleration arising from within a true understanding of 'authentic' faith would suffice to maintain peace. They castigate both secularism and secularization as Western concepts and imported social processes that are irrelevant to South Asian cultures. Others want to preserve secularism as a governing political and ideological framework but seek its roots in specifically South Asian histories and traditions.[2] Mid-twentieth-century scholarship and political leadership had assumed a somewhat linear relationship: secularism as state policy would lead to secularization at a societal level, and that, in turn, would foster tolerance. Fundamental to this position was a certainty about the definition of religion: that political leaders and the electorate will easily recognize it when they see it. It is the possibility of easily defining, and thus containing, religion within a 'proper sphere' that has, in fact, proved chimerical. Popular debates over the last few decades are premised on competing ideas about defining religion: what is religious, and what is not? What is essential to a religious tradition, and what is peripheral to it? If the canonical texts of a dominant faith prescribe contempt for certain groups of people – women, outcastes, outsiders – then how far should we still recognize their authority, and who is to adjudicate that thorny question? When is a particular manifestation to be regarded as *true* Hinduism/Islam/Christianity/Buddhism?

The definition of religion, as a category of analysis, is beginning to receive academic attention, especially following the influential work of Talal Asad (1993). In recent years, scholars from across the disciplines of intellectual history, anthropology and political theory have paid increasing attention to the role of European Enlightenment thought in the articulation of a universal definition of religion[3], and to the impact of capitalism and colonialism in providing the institutional framework for making religion a distinct and politically salient sphere of human life.[4]

[2] A good introduction to both these positions is provided by various contributions in Bhargava (1998).

[3] Asad (1993, 2003) and Masozawa (2005) alert us to the specific history of the definition of religion as a universal construct. Asad (1993: 29) argues that, 'there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes'.

[4] This is an area where South Asian scholars have contributed in remarkably influential and significant ways. A sustained questioning of politicized religiosity was undertaken by South Asian scholars partly to understand the traumatic partition of India. The

It is this notion of religion as a separate sphere of life that was an innovation and imposition. It remained so despite the fact that in India the British were careful not to impose conversion to Christianity on Indians, unlike the Spanish colonialists in the Americas, or, indeed, the British themselves in settler colonies such as America or Australia. The British Empire, which had ruled over almost all of South Asia, presided over multireligious polities where the white colonial officials constituted a minuscule demographic element. The dominant faiths of the colonized, moreover, were opaque to rulers, and calculations of political expediency dictated that interference or forced change from above could be politically explosive – as was especially dramatized in the massive rebellion of 1857 after Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army turned against their masters who were insensitive to their ritual habits. Given these constraints, the British were, by and large, careful not to require mass conversion of the colonized even though Britain was not a secular state at that time[5] and despite some pressure from European missionaries. Instead, the British supported- compelled at least in part by the imperative to 'divide and rule'- competing religious communities to found and run their own sects, trusts, places of worship and their own educational bodies.

The most critical impact of colonialism was, however, was at an ontological and epistemological level, in the very understanding of religion as a distinct sphere of human life. There have been important debates within and outside post-colonial studies about the academic and popular tendency to view non-Western societies through the prism of Western categories and classificatory orders, sometimes called an *imperialism of categories*. One of its effects has been to create neatly signposted and clearly demarcated divisions between the social, the political and the religious as quite distinct spheres in life. This approach unravels very quickly as soon as a granular view of historical or contemporary life in the region is undertaken: both the *political* and the *religious* become very difficult to define without reference to each other. In her bibliographical essay for a collection that we edited in *Economic and*

partition of India was premised on a religious nationalism that developed a somewhat unexpected depth in a relatively short period of time, between the late 1930s and critical-1940s. The development of this religiously infused politics has thus received detailed attention (Alavi, 1988; Chatterjee, 1993; Gilmartin 1991, 1998; Mufti, 1995; Pandey, 2001 to name just a few).

[5] Van der Veer (2001) has detailed how Britain was an overtly and explicitly religious state when a colonial policy of neutrality towards different religious groups was articulated in India. That this policy was inconsistently and opportunistically implemented was not surprising.

Political Weekly, Mohita Bhattia (2013) provides a useful overview of the ways in which the place of religion in public and private life in South Asia has been approached in the last few decades. Taken together, these studies across disciplines suggest an emerging, new conceptualization of religion as a more fluid, plural and internally contested category. This re-evaluation of the definition of religion alongside a reconceptualization of politics significantly undermines a basic tenet of mainstream secularization theory: that it is possible to easily define and distinguish religion from politics and society. Many of the studies that Bhattia mentions recognize that fuzzy boundaries and chaotic slippages operate between one religion and the other, as well as between the religious and the secular and/or political.

Academic discussions about the segregation of human life into separate compartments – religious, economic, political, social and so on – seen as a defining feature of modernity (Casanova, 1994; Eisenstadt, 1999), often seem to forget that these are conceptual and analytical frames primarily. The actual division of lived human life into these compartments has been, of course, a fundamentally fragmented and unfinished project. Even in Europe, the putative home of modernity, segregation and differentiation of human life is not complete; social, political and economic life continues to slip across the borders academics have tried to set up. Secularization in Europe, too, has been a hesitant and non-linear process since the Enlightenment, as nation-building projects, as well as empire building in the name of civilizational superiority, led to heightened religious fervour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Crepell, 2010). Similarly, modernity in South Asia has never been bereft of deep religiosity (Sarkar, 2000). The compartmentalizing of human experiences, or what sociologists call differentiation, that did happen was, above all, linked to institutional mechanisms imbricated in the development of capitalism. From South Africa (Comaroff, 1985) to Nigeria (Marshall, 2007) to Lebanon (Nada Moumtaz, 2018), India to England (Brown, 2010) or the Netherlands (Klausen, 2010), the attempt to carve religion as a distinct sphere that can be conceptualized in separation from other aspects of life emerged along with the legal and political structures that deepened the reach of capitalism by commoditizing land, labour, relationships and communities. The conceptual separation of the religious from the political was, among other things, important for opening up ecclesiastical lands and resources for market circulation and deepening the reach of capitalist institutions.

This compartmentalization has, however, had an uneven life in political imagination around the world, with more acceptance in some parts than in others. Iqtidar (2011) has argued that rather than privatization of,

or a decrease in, religiosity, secularization is best understood as a conceptual shift in mass political imagination where religion is increasingly seen as a distinct and internally coherent sphere of human life, and as a homogenized entity that has to be free of contradictory practices/ideas. This requirement for coherence within religion was necessary for imagining it as a separate entity, a stand-alone feature of human life. Secularization, thus, entails a much more conscious engagement at the mass scale with what the role of this distinct entity 'religion' is to be in a person's life, rather than an unconscious following of norms. It may lead to less religiosity or more; it may lead to more public expression or none. There is no clear theoretical and historical reason for either development. Secularization is, then, best understood as a qualitative shift in how religious thought and practice are imagined within society rather than as the quantitative change (less religion, less public religiosity, etc.) that influential social and political theory had posited.[6] Such a definition of secularization allows us to move past the less defensible aspects of secularization theory: thinking of secularization as a decline in religion or as privatization of religiosity. Both of these have been, empirically, the most easily refuted, given the contemporary rise of public religions, from the USA to India (Casanova, 1994).

Yet, there is no denying that something has changed about religious thought and practice in modern times. Understanding secularization as a shift in political imagination allows us to move beyond the limitation of sociological theories that have taken differentiation in social life as an empirical fact. Differentiation, as we have discussed above, has a more concrete existence in academic analysis, and to some extent in legal structures, than in lived experience; social, political, economic and religious life seem to continuously bleed into each other. Recognizing the force of differentiation as a conceptual apparatus opens up the possibility that the attempt to carve religion out of social life and to cleanse it of internal contradictions is ongoing, and one that is likely to produce much more passionate engagement, less flexible religiosity and an equal likelihood of politicization as of privatization. We know less about the implications of this secularization, and it is to this we hope future researchers will attend.

Shifting the focus from secularism to secularization seems to us particularly pertinent at today's historical juncture, which is marked by close to three decades of heated debates about secularism and a sense of fatigue with the religious rhetoric of the war on terror. At a time when

[6] Bruce (1996) provides a good overview of the more quantitative understanding of secularization.

many religious nationalist parties in South Asia are reaping electoral benefits of long-standing social engagement, whereas Leftist politics approaches a phase of exhaustion in many places, it is important for progressive activists to pause and reconsider the value of privileging state-focused activism alone, often for legal changes, which has been the mainstay of their engagement, particularly in India and Pakistan. It is, indeed, time to think of grass-roots social and cultural movements that try to expand equality for all. At the same time, as states become increasingly complicit with majoritarian ambitions and violence against vulnerable religious communities, it is equally necessary to reimagine a new order of engagement with the state.

It is within this fraught landscape that the idea of tolerance has now gained currency to combat a host of political and social problems, while its relationship with secularization and democracy remains unexamined. This is a dangerous move, we propose, because it valorizes tolerance without understanding its limitations, if it remains divorced from notions of democratic equality and relies primarily on civilizational claims. Such a move encourages an understanding of conflict- and its remedy tolerance- as divorced from actually existing situations of inequality and injustice enforced by state or non-state actors. Civilizational imperatives become even more prominent because of the framing of the war on terror within such terms. This has brought about, in reaction, a quest to locate resources for tolerance solely from within religious practice and thought.[7] In this volume, contributions by Kaviraj, Kumar, Spencer and Huq (Chapters 2, 6, 7 and 8) tackle some of these issues directly across Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic traditions.

Historicizing Tolerance

Notwithstanding long-term mutual borrowing, fusion and cohabitation across religious traditions in South Asia, we want to distance our discussion here from a romanticized notion of innate peacefulness in traditional religion. The rich cultural cross-fertilization also has a long tradition of conflicts along religious lines, though their contours have changed over time. Scholars need to address both past theological contestations and competition between communities for material resources in the name of faith, *and* they need to track how modern conflicts draw upon and depart from them. We can acknowledge the specific ways in which modernity politicizes religious thought and practice – the emphasis on the 'quantity'

[7] See Iqtidar (2016) and Mojahedi (2016) for a critique of the civilizational framing of political tolerance in Islamic thought.

of believers, a relative shift from doctrine to community interests and from community to state, legalization and homogenization of religious traditions and so on – without falling into the trap of ascribing a golden halo to the pre-modern. Rather than attributing harmony and serenity to traditional faith and ascribing modern violence to their distortion by an irreligious world, we reiterate that the binary between good/old and bad/modern religion essentializes both, and ignores uncomfortable historical processes.

As always, there is a longer history that needs to be considered. The colonial state's management of religious thought and practice was singularly suited to increasing the role of religious identity in politics even while by and large, the state practised a certain amount of neutrality dictated by its self-interest. Democratic politics under colonial rule was structured around the notion of selected representation of a community rather than of individuals. Much has been written about how the colonial state's legal, political, economic and discursive strategies created the conditions for a heightened awareness of religious identity among subjects who may not have previously foregrounded it.[8] Scholars have also pointed out that new communicational resources of print, press and associations helped to foster imagined nations, as well as imagined religious communities (Robinson, 1993; Sarkar, 2002: 10–38). While colonial administrators may have been enthused by utilitarian or ethnocentric ideas as much as they were riddled with anxiety about ruling over a society very different from their own, they built largely upon existing ideas of authority in South Asia. One implication of these contradictions was that they did not allow for homogenized structures of religious practice and erasure of diversity to the same degree as was the case in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rather, secularization in late nineteenth-century South Asia became associated with liberal elite efforts to reform what they saw as problematic aspects of their religious ideas and practices – partly so that they could come closer to the ideal of religion established in Europe (even if this was a reified image of the fairly uneven dynamics within Europe), but also out of dissatisfactions with established religious practices. The disavowal, in these efforts, of politics as premised on unequal power, even if not disingenuous, was bound to be in tension with questions of democratic representation.

However, the colonial state's strategic turn to inciting communal politics to divide and weaken anti-colonial movements from the early

[8] A quick insight is provided by Kaviraj (2010). See Gilmartin (1998) for a detailed treatment.

twentieth century and its lack of reflexivity about the use of a Protestant definition of religion in its legal framework led to a situation where colonial practices of secularism could never quite lead to secularization of identities if we define it as decrease in public religiosity (Iqtidar, 2011: 38–55). Moreover, handing over the realms of caste, marriage and property relations to religious texts and customs – often privileging their most orthodox interpretations – similarly reduced the prospects of secularization as decline in religiosity and allotted very large and important slices of social life to the control of clerical hierarchy (Sarkar, 2009). In a compelling monograph, Adcock (2014) has traced the link between colonial political structures, political parties and the discourse of tolerance in India. She argues that Congress – the main anti-colonial platform – mobilized a particular vision of tolerance that placed the burden of conflict on anti-caste religious mobilizations and conversions, while keeping intact its own undemocratic power structure, and later, in post-colonial India, allowed it to remain embedded in existing hierarchies of caste and religious identities. Moreover, the Congress version of secular nationalism in India required untouchables to be Hindu and Muslims, thus, to be a minority (Tejani, 2008). While caste Hindus had long treated Dalits, or untouchables, as outside the Varna – and thus the *Dharmic* or religious – order, modern electoral compulsions coupled with new imaginaries of quantifiable communities, led to a push to count them as Hindu to create a political majority. The very framing of tolerance, then, in terms of the rights of minorities, became entangled in a politics of enumeration that, despite its liberatory potential, comes with a dark underside. This sinister aspect is the built-in political imperative to classify and contain people into fixed categories so as to retain stable majorities and minorities. There are other implications too: it limits hybridity and appreciation of difference by shutting down avenues of interaction and synthesis in social life. The discourse of tolerance can then produce strikingly intolerant effects.[9]

In post-colonial times, as newly independent South Asian states turned to electoral democracy, the emancipatory promise of equal citizenship rights to all individuals irrespective of creed, caste or gender was compromised by the simultaneous classification of persons as members of majority or minority communities. To say this is not to ignore the latter's special vulnerabilities and argue, instead, in favour of an already-there

[9] In similar vein, Wendy Brown (2008) has argued for an interrogation of the discourse of tolerance in the USA arguing that by shifting the political conversation away from questions of equality or justice, this discourse had allowed continued existence, and sometimes intensification, to inequality particularly across racial lines.

equality. Such a move, especially in times of inflamed communal violence of a majoritarian kind, will only make constitutional equality an empty rhetoric. It is not accidental that the Hindu Right in India clamours for an eradication of the special rights of religious minorities. Rendering visible the tensions within democracy is, of course, not an argument against democracy. We are arguing here for better understanding of the processes through which particular visions of tolerance might actually limit the egalitarian promise of democracy.

Certainly concerns about equality may, at times, clash with norms of liberal tolerance. In the Indian case, the one major modern proponent of outright atheism has been E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker or Periyar, who was an outspoken and determined opponent of Brahmanical power and values. That raises a new problem. Do we read his attacks on caste-led religious practice as an instance of intolerance? B. R. Ambedkar, the Dalit leader whose work addressed the experiences of exploitation, humiliation and subjugation of Dalit castes in the name of sacred injunctions and prescriptions of Hindus, was filled with a visceral anger against a culture that can so dehumanize both the oppressor and the oppressed. He also denied any radical efficacy to otherworldly devotional resources that might recognize social inequality and yet make no efforts to address them in this world; in fact, by offering a spiritual transcendence of these divisions, they serve to reconcile Dalits to their actual lives in the world. His burning of *Manusmriti* or Periyar's indictment of Hindu *Itihasam-Puranam* could be read as violent and intolerant acts. How do we come to terms with their passionate intolerance against the inhumanity that sacred texts endorse? Without that intolerance, is there hope for social transformation or social justice? We need to engage with these difficult – indeed, disturbing – questions more and more as the crisis in South Asian social and political institutions increasingly rule out easy platitudes and bland assertions of hope in an essentially tolerant and non-violent South Asian civilization. Times are far too dangerous for false comforts.

Secularization and Democratic Politics

A source of some limited comfort is the fact that debates within South Asia are particularly rich due to their simultaneous engagement with a range of religious traditions, non-Abrahamic religions as well as the Abrahamic ones. For instance, South Asian Islamic thought has been enriched by its engagement with Hindu, Sikh and Jain traditions, as much as it has benefitted from the coming together of Arabic and Persianate influences. Even though much of scholarly work focuses on one tradition rather than analyzing the dynamic across several religions at

the same time, in everyday life there is, even if perforce, an engagement with the rich diversity of religious thought and practice in this region. Several contributions to this volume (Chapters 5, 6 and 8) attempt to move beyond the somewhat ghettoized mode of focusing on a singular tradition.

This volume asks some fundamental questions about the relationship between secularization, tolerance and democratic politics by taking a close look at different South Asian countries and, sometimes, simultaneously across two countries. The contributions do not all challenge the positive normative associations with tolerance but complicate its relationship to secularization and democracy in important ways. Our purpose is neither to discount nor to valorize religiously inspired tolerance as the binary opposite of secular tolerance. Moving beyond a simplistic association between tolerance and secularism, it remains important to understand how religious thought and practice are changing in contemporary South Asia. We need to build a thicker and more granular understanding of such changes to ascertain whether these are taking us towards a more equal society or not.

Sudipta Kaviraj's reading (Chapter 2), in this volume, of Rajeev Bhargava's distinction between ethical and political secularism renders ethical secularism closer to secularization in as much as it is about an *attitude* towards beliefs rather than a political arrangement. Bhargava does not draw this out explicitly, but Kaviraj goes some way in exploring the implications of an attitude towards belief – not just the belief itself. In a nuanced elaboration of the differences as well as the similarities in their understanding of the relationship between secularism and secularization, Kaviraj implies that both T. N. Madan and Ashis Nandy were right – though they were harsher than was necessary – in claiming that secularism and secularization were out of step with India. Madan's proposition that, given the lack of secularization in India, secularism was an imposition by a small elite doomed to stay out of touch with religiosity of the masses was matched by Nandy's implicit claim that secularization is neither inevitable nor inherent in modernity. While Kaviraj discusses some important limitations in Madan's understanding of secularization in Europe, the most critical shortcoming of both Madan and Nandy's analyses is that they underestimate polyvalence in tradition and modernity. However gently delivered, Kaviraj's critique of existing criticisms of secularization in India is scathing at two important levels. By pointing to a fundamental misreading of tradition in Nandy's and Madan's analyses of both Indian and European societies, Kaviraj undercuts the force of their arguments by showing that within tradition may lie many a possibility for totally different futures. This goes some way towards opening