

On Religion and Politics

• Ravi Sinha

This note is inspired by Subhash Gatade and Aditya Nigam. Subhash wrote a piece, “AK versus NaMo” that appeared on Kafila a few days ago and Aditya made a fairly detailed comment on it underlining the need to have “a proper debate on this issue”. It is foolhardy for me to rush where angels fear to tread. There have been celebrated debates on this in the scholarly circles and, just as phenomena “debate” theories about themselves in their own ways, Indian polity debates this issue all the time. How to make sense of such a tangled issue that fills libraries and unleashes periodic havocs in real life, and that too in a short note? Why even try?

My excuse comes, perhaps, from my ignorance. Many of the axioms of such a debate – e.g. church-state separation was specific to the west and even there it hasn’t worked; religion can never be separated from politics; such a separation, if it were to happen, would exclude the believers from the polity; in a multi-religious society only the maxim of “*Sarva Dharma Samabhav*” can be the desirable policy of the state; etc – do not appear obvious or acceptable to me. I hope to dispel the notion that my incredulity towards such maxims, and towards the Gandhian-communitarian-postcolonialist-postmodern attitudes in general, originate in my being a run-of-the-mill leftist belonging to the “now defunct Left” who refuses to see that the “communist model” to deal with such issues “has virtually no takers”. I do not share with Aditya an approach towards the Left, but that does not mean that I do not have issues with the latter. It seems to me that it manages an awkward feat of limping on both the legs – one leg is afflicted with dogma and the other with populism. But the other side – the Gandhian-communitarian-postcolonialist-postmodern side – appears even more challenged. Despite its erudition on the one hand and a practical-realist approach on the other, when it comes to actual walking in the political arena, it chooses to walk on one leg only – that of populism.

Instead of adding fuel to the polemical fire I should, perhaps, get on with what I actually have to say. I would argue primarily by making a few simple and largely unelaborated assertions. Take it as a way to save time and space and not as an arrogant proclamation of *the truth* to the masses. This mode also follows from a view that broad and distinct positions should not be dispersed into the fine weave of theory. The poet complained about those who use a sword where a needle should be used (*Jahan Kaam Aave Suyee Kaha Kare Talwar*), but that does not mean there is never an occasion for the reverse complaint.

The fact that religion gets inextricably mixed up with politics arises primarily from two obvious sources – religiosity of the people and competitive electoral politics. Both are a given in the contemporary moment of history. In varying degrees and in different forms this is true of all societies on the planet; India is no exception. And yet, the chemistry of religion and politics does not obey one single formula in all cases. There are examples of relatively secular polities carved out of very religious people, and there are examples, perhaps more numerous, of polities that are dictated by religion even when people, while being religious, do not take their religion too seriously in their daily life.

The point is not whether something is to be done about ubiquitous religiosity. I would not go as far as Gandhi to say that I have faith in the faith of others. I recognize fully the right of others to have their faith and I would be very happy if they recognize my right to be an atheist. It is not disallowed nor can it be monitored that I have my private views about the faith of others and others have their private views about my not subscribing to any faith. Problem arises only when a public wrath is conjured out of the private views.

The real point, in my opinion, is as follows. Does life differentiate into separable, even if interconnected, realms, so that in one realm I am a scientist believing in objective reality and respecting the rigor of reason, in another I am a democrat going by the decision of the majority, in another I participate in the cultural practices of a community I choose to live in, and in yet another I have private feelings and desires untrammelled by reason, democracy or custom where I evaluate for myself what is good life? I believe that life does separate into such more or less distinct realms, although it is also true that they do influence each other. More than that, I believe that it is a good thing that life differentiates in such a way. It makes our societies more evolved, emancipated and flexible; our civilization more humane and advanced; our life more fulfilling and free.

Of course, there are other views about such matters. For example, at one end of the spectrum, a view is held wherein life is taken to be such an organic whole that it is a violence to separate it into alienated realms. Modernity is often blamed for inflicting such violence. Otherwise, men and women are supposed to live in communities each one of which is a universe in itself; they are constructed by the community in a way that their values, practices and desires come together to feed into the make-up of that community. Everything fits together; everything feeds into everything else; everything determines everything else. Such views have existed from the ancient times, but in more recent times – perhaps one can say in the postmodern times – enormous intellectual labour and ingenuity have been invested into reclaiming this ancient wisdom.

At the other end of the spectrum is a view that has surprising similarities. Informed by excessively Hegelian versions of Marxism and driven by the theory and practice of twentieth century socialism, such a view also subscribes to a strongly organic social whole in which base and superstructure move, always and everywhere, in dialectical interaction with each other. From a correct diagnosis of the capitalist mode containing the deepest of the social contradictions, it rushes to locate the source of all cultural-civilizational pathologies in the genetic code of the capitalist mode. Here too everything is determined by everything else in a pulsating organism. Changing the heart of the system – the state – would change the system part of the whole, but it would also transform simultaneously the cultural and psychological-social parts. It is not surprising, then, that often there have been prescriptions about what will be part of a proletarian culture and what will be not.

Getting back to the differentiation of life into distinct realms, such a differentiation does not negate the concept of a social whole. Human body is the archetype of an organic whole, but it is internally differentiated into a complex structure of distinct organs with very different functions, processes and mechanisms. The social whole differentiates into the system (mainly

economy and politics) and the rest of life – what some have called the lifeworld. Religion has an overlapping presence in both the realms, but this configuration is not stable. It keeps changing with evolving differentiation. The question is – is there a desirable direction for such a change?

System part can be made transparent, and it must be made transparent. It must be based on a well-defined and non-arbitrary constitutional framework and it must operate through clearly laid out laws, rules and institutions. All modern systems, including socialism, must measure up to this benchmark. The lifeworld, on the other hand, cannot be made transparent and it does not need to be made transparent. It can have unlimited variation and diversity and it is neither necessary nor desirable that all of it must conform to some rational, normative or aesthetic prescription. Religion and other matters of faith are intrinsically non-transparent. Some of them can be codified such as in religious-moral laws, but that does not make the realm of faith an entirely transparent arena.

It is not surprising that in less differentiated societies religion mixes vigorously with politics making the operation of the system muddled and opaque. It is for this reason that the desirable direction would be towards diluting the role of religion in the system part and confine it to the realm of the lifeworld. It is not going to happen tomorrow and for a society or a civilization tomorrow takes a hundred years in coming.

Of course, the long run general direction does not ensure that all societies follow a definite trajectory. Different societies have taken different paths. I have already mentioned that strongly religious societies can have relatively secular politics and weakly religious societies can have their politics dominated by religion. The point is that it is desirable for all to move, in the long run, towards a separation of religion and politics.

I find Aditya's poser – when he asks, is there any way to engage with a believer in the language of secular polity – rather surprising. One could turn the question around – will there be any way to engage with a non-believer in a religious-communitarian polity? If we look at the example of Islamic Iran or even the more moderate example of Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood, we might find the second question more menacing. In either case the poser is a non sequitur. Politics should be the arena to engage with the political being of a person, group or class. It is not the arena to engage with the believer or non-believer. I know that the real world is not like that and religion is horribly mixed up with politics. But that does not mean we should make a virtue out of the scourge, the much-worshipped Mahatma notwithstanding.

One could shift the argument from the level of principles to the level of tactics and argue that it is better for the secularists to mix a bit of religion in politics. This will offer an opportunity to engage with the believers in the political arena and wean them away from the religious-communal forces. There is no harm, then, if one takes a dip in the *Ganga* and smothers one's forehead with *roli* and *chandan* as a part of a political campaign that is finally aimed at organizing the ninety percent against the ten percent that steal and plunder the social wealth. I would say – nice thought, but easier said than done. That is the arena where one cannot beat the adversary by imitating him. People are likely to find it natural for Modi but unnatural for

Kejriwal to indulge in such theatrics. (Modi's Hindu credentials are so well-established that he did not actually need to do that.) As Subhash has argued, it would have been far more effective if Kejriwal were to say that he is not a Hindu when it comes to politics although he is a practicing Hindu in private life (media would have listened and spread the word). And unlike Subhash, I do not think he would have lost any votes on this count.

Let me conclude with a few other matters that go beyond the mixing of religion with politics. Many of my comrades are favorably disposed to the Kejriwal phenomenon and some are positively excited about it. A close friend of mine who has been my comrade and political colleague for the last thirty years may even become an AAP member of parliament – one has to wait just one more day to find out. I am often made to feel like a naïve bookworm who does not understand the ways of the real world. In the view of such comrades, leftists must abandon their comfortable but shaky posts on the cliffs of ossified dogmas and plunge into the torrent of history. People have awakened; leaders have sprung from the *common man*; system is going to be shaken to its roots. This is not the time to ask too many questions and indulge in fine-grained theoretical discourses. This is not the time to hesitate because the movement appears to be shallow and at times retrograde. This is not the time to be dismissive because the leaders appear puny, ignorant and delusional. The anger and despair, and the hope, of the people will make colossuses out of them.

I do not find the rhetoric of my comrades very different from the rhetoric of Kejriwal. I cannot accept that rank populism and unrestrained demagoguery can be turned into a virtue even by the most earthy and skillful revolutionary.

How much can one put up with for the sake of realpolitik? Reducing the fundamental malady of the system to the phenomenon of corruption; claiming the Indian Constitution as the most sacred book while giving the clarion call to uproot the system designed and protected by the same Constitution; uninformed infatuation with ancient Vaishali and contemporary Switzerland; grassroots democracy for bijli, pani and sadak while reassuring the corporates at the CII meeting through the Thatcherite maxim “it is not the business of the government to run businesses”; competing with the likes of Modi in putting nationalism on display and dismissing out of hand reasonably principled positions such as Prashant Bhushan's on Kashmir and on use of Indian army against sections of Indian people – the list is endless.

One often hears the argument – real movements are not born out of Immaculate Conception. The birth of a revolutionary movement is messy and unclean. It will shape up with time. However, I see no prospects of such a future. In fact there is a fundamental contradiction at the core of this movement. It has succeeded where traditional leftists have failed precisely because of the populism, demagoguery and mercurial character of a messianic leader and it can grow further only on this strength. If the more thoughtful and scrupulous leaders or the radical starry-eyed leftists come to the fore, the movement will disintegrate. That is the dilemma of this phenomenon.

It may be foolhardy to stick one's neck out like this. But then, one can, perhaps, afford some follies when not burdened by immediacy.