



Partha Chatterjee's account of secularism and religion as faith

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Partha Chatterjee in his work "secularism and tolerance", located in the context of the rise of Hindu right in India, argues that majoritarianism of this kind is perfectly compatible with the institutions and processes of the modern secular state, with respect to the administrative logics and the homogenizing impulse of the modern state. Chatterjee argues that secularism is just a mask for communalism. There is an anti-statism in Chatterjee, similar to that of Ashis Nandy, who's argument, that the modern state uses religion as an instrument/an ideology, Chatterjee has acknowledged in his work. That the politics of secularism has been a part of the procedure of making the modern state that has as its goal, nation building, national security, development and scientific growth, which serve as justifications for state intervention and domination. Chatterjee's motive, therefore, is to point out that the liberal secular doctrine, that Indian politics is premised on, cannot serve as a viable basis for responding to the issue of minority rights and pluralism, especially with respect to the importance of religion in peoples life, as history shows that in India it was religion that determined the way of life, the principles of the functioning of the society and state.

Contradictions in the Indian secularism

Chatterjee begins substantiating his claims by arguing that the project of nation building in India was premised in a counteractive movement in relation to the modernist mission of secularization. While one part of this nationalist modernist project has been the secularization of the public political sphere by the separation of politics from it, the other part comprises the reformist intervention of the state in the socio-religious spheres(p.351) Chatterjee admits the charges made against the Indian secularism, that it's flawed, firstly, with regard to its anomalies from the standard western model premised basically on three principles (a) liberty (b)equality and (c)

neutrality (which Chatterjee draws from Donald Eugene smith's work, p.358) and secondly, with regard to the so called appeasement of minorities. Chatterjee points out how the impulse, during the nationalist struggle and after independence, for rational reform and the absence of any single authority to adjudicate on religious matters landed, by default, the state in an authoritarian position of interpreting the religious doctrines and practices, deciding over the necessary elements of religion. For which state's intervention to throw open the Hindu religious places of worship to all sections of Hindus and the Satsangi sect's challenge to it in the court (another institution of the state) has been cited as example. This positioning of the state constituted the anomaly from the secular principle of liberty. For example, while article 25 of the Indian constitution ensures *freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion*, article 25(2) simultaneously provides for the *right of the state to regulate any economic, financial, political or other secular activity associated with any religious practice*. At the same time state's reformist intervention mostly in the practices of Hindu community only, that led to charges that the Indian state then acted in a pseudo secular or communalist manner, constituted the anomaly from the equality and neutrality principle. Chatterjee points out that while in some cases the reason for reform could be secular, as in the case of the legal abolition of the Devadasi system, in which the reasoning could be that it was a form of enforced prostitution, there also were cases where a nonreligious reasoning could simply not work, for example the "Madras Animal and Bird Sacrifices Abolition Act 1950", in which the reasoning that animal sacrifices were unacceptable and constituted a primitive form of worship was, as Chatterjee argues, the out come of a specifically religious understanding of the rite.

Secularism or toleration

Chatterjee argues that instead of secularism the state should ensure certain degree of toleration and respect for persons. As he feels that



secularism doesn't necessarily ensure toleration. He points out that the liberal doctrine of toleration is ridden with many problems and therefore, it should be replaced with a non-liberal conception of toleration on part of the democratic state. Chatterjee argues that the very basis, (a) contractualist,

(b) consequentialist and the (c) respect for persons argument, that liberal notion of toleration is premised on, are problematic (p.372). Chatterjee points out that, although the contractualist argument does recognize the various collective rights of cultural groups, on the basis of the justice as fairness argument, invoked by will Kymlicka, for the recognition of the rights of minority groups who's very survival as a distinct group is in question(p.368) but, Chatterjee, points out that with the condition that reasons have to be given for the same by the group, going by liberalism's commitment to procedural equality and universal citizenship, this recognition becomes quite impractical substantively. He argues that liberalism not only forces people into a homogenous cultural mould but also the universal principles that it upholds are in themselves the culture of a majority. He finds the consequentialist argument, premised on the maintenance of peace, to be less pragmatic and more tactical and therefore subject to moral criticism. Chatterjee argues that, in place of social recognition of the fundamental disputes all it provides is fake neutrality. While He finds the principle of respect for people, premised on the moral obligation on part of the majority and an entitlement on part of the minority, to be an adequate premise for toleration, he finds it to be limited by, the argument that the respect for pluralism cannot mean that we renounce all our commitment to liberal universalist principles, kind of says that if the group itself doesn't respect its members (as per the majority) the majority is not obliged to tolerate it, which Chatterjee argues is a serious limitation of the liberal toleration.

Another conundrum- Governmentality

Chatterjee argues that another conundrum within the liberal doctrine arises when a group asserts itself against the homogenizing governmentalization, by refusing to give reasons for its practices. Pointing out to the role of governmentality in the politics of identity and difference, He invokes Foucault to argue how, the modern state, in disseminating itself throughout the social body, through the "technologies of governmental power", no more retains a definitive

aspect of sovereignty of the society. Chatterjee argues that the liberal government works through a large network of surveillance with a complex kind of "braiding of coercion and consent" (p. 370) to ultimately ensure compliance to its perceived universalist framework of reason. Chatterjee argues therefore, it would be wrong to think of secularization as a process free of coercion, nonintervention can also be used by the government to meet its own agendas and this can also result in a counter response.

The alternative- strategic politics

Chatterjee argues that to protect the rights of the minorities and pluralism, our approach should be democratic rather than secularist. He argues that the duty of the state should be to ensure religious tolerance and respect for persons and neither universalism nor neutrality should have any moral priority in the practices of the minority groups. He comes up with his own doctrine of "strategic politics" (p.376), that he argues is premised on a notion of toleration in which a group, for its autonomy to be respected, doesn't require to give reasons to any external entity, but only to the members within the group, that too in its own forum. Chatterjee argues that such a forum/institution must rest on consent that has been secured by its members publicly, that they should have that "same degree of publicity and representativeness that is demanded of all public institutions having regulatory powers over its members". Chatterjee cites as an example, the campaign for reform in the management of Sikh gurdwaras and the Akali demands of 1920 that the Sikh shrines and religious establishments be handed over to elected bodies. Here, toleration would be based on autonomy and respect for individuals but it would be susceptible to the varying political significance of the institutional context within which reasons are deliberated upon. Chatterjee argues that if a religious group seeks autonomy and respect it must carry out its own affairs through representative public institutions.

Position of the defenders of Indian secularism

Chatterjee's complete abandonment of secularism has been criticized by Rajeev Bhargava, he argues that Chatterjee has a restricted view of secularism, that his parameters are based on the western secularism that developed in the specific western context of the religious wars. Bhargava argues that just like Donald Smith (on whose



definition of secularism Chatterjee's arguments are premised) Chatterjee too believes that secularism is not hospitable to community rights, that Chatterjee fails to grasp that India has charted out, under its different conditions of modernity, its own different, contextual secularism, premised on intervention or nonintervention as per the demand of the different contexts, simultaneously maintaining principled distance and we can argue that this is what has contributed to successful functioning of secular democratic state in India till date unlike the other postcolonial nations who tried to adopt/impose the western practices and institution, as it is, on their populations. Even Thomas Pantham, who endorsed Chatterjee's alternative formation, argues that the Indian history of the inherently legitimized social inequalities and other evils of the premodern time like untouchability, child marriage etc. require the state to sometimes treat religious communities differently to carry out ethico-political reform of the religious sphere, to protect equal citizenship and individual rights.

Feminist position

It feels like Chatterjee is too quick in his dismissal of secularism and the other liberal principles, from the point of view of feminists like Ayelet Shachar, who argues that there should be joint governance based on a sharing of jurisdiction between the group and state, Chatterjee's arguments can be detrimental to women's rights, as in most societies women's oppression is internalized and legitimized. The kind of group autonomy advocated by Chatterjee, that's pitched against statist intervention, can serve to foster/provide shield to such practices. The problem with Chatterjee's alternative is the kind of hierarchical ordering, the priority of group rights to other principles such as civic rights and liberties. Sachar, argues that one might be concerned to hold on to her identity as the member of some group and simultaneously be willing to be entitled to her rights as a woman or a citizen, Chatterjee's strategic politics doesn't seem to have the scope for such an exercise.

Therefore, Chatterjee's conclusion that secularism cannot bring about religious, cultural and ethnic toleration that India needs according to him, cannot be admitted as it is. However, history shows us that Chatterjee is rightly skeptical of an interventionist state's promises of bringing about the reforms in the religious practices of communities. His work is insightful in pointing out

how such an authoritarian position combined with the resources of the modern state can serve as an ammunition to the government to further its own agendas, similar to the kind of instrumental use of religion as ideology that Ashis Nandy talks of (p.348), his idea, that the struggle for progressive change in the social practices sanctioned by religion should be launched in the internal space of the groups, that provides for procedures through which reasons can be exchanged and legitimized, can serve as an intriguing and useful alternative, though with certain improvisation.

References

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