Sufism and the secular state
The South Asian experience

DR. PETER CUSTERS

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) 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.

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 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 sociological 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*. In short, the ultimate task of this project is to put forward a Gramscian conceptualisation on Sufism and the secular state.

The two strategy dilemma

SARWAR JAHAN CHOWDHURY

IT seems that the dust of the last round of political struggle in Bangladesh is settling down slowly; although it never takes much time here to flare up. Yet it appears that the Awami League (AL) led government has been able to wear down the opposition to a certain extent and baffle them as well with multidimensional communication and PR strategy.

Before another spell of agitation and repression in reaction steal the headlines it's time for some political strategic introspection. This is crucially important for us to understand certain socio-political grand strategies which are already at play in mapping the political future of this land. The most talked about topic of political and social commentators are the way government is handling the main opposition BNP and it chief ally Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). The core questions are, "Is such handling of the AL government right? Will it make things worse or better in the immediate and long run?

There has always been a debate among liberals and progressives from left to center right about how to manage the radical forces in a Muslim majority state. There are two broad grand strategies which have been debated. One suggests that the radical forces should be confronted head on by the state. The other subscribes to a more moderate approach that allows and even encourages the radicals to participate democratic politics.

Both the approaches would reveal advantages and flaws when put in to certain socio-political context. Therefore it should be the other way round i.e. social and political setting in each case should dictate the precise variant of any of the strategies.

Direct clash with the radical forces could be a perilous affair. It may result in increased hostility and accompanying human and material cost. A direct confrontation may bring about extreme result – a crude win or elimination. The Iranian case demonstrated that when the Shah fought the radicals head on, half-heartedly and foolishly though, he faced Islamic counter revolution and was wiped out form the political landscape of Iran along with all other liberals, even those who opposed him. Again, bringing them to constitutional politics may have two outcomes depending on a host of diverse factors. The radicals may get softened and have a metamorphosis towards some sort of liberalism or they use democracy to destroy democracy. The latter possibility brings up another core question; whether the political entities, which don't genuinely embrace democratic values, should be allowed at all to participate in democratic process.

In Bangladesh a group of centrist and center-right politicians and commentator always maintains that the Islamist here should be allowed access to the democratic polity and they advocate maintaining such status of the Islamists already granted by the erstwhile military rulers. Interestingly, this admission of the Islamist in the political space by Ziaur Rahman and H.M Ershad was more for political convenience and less for any deeper socio-political understanding. It's true that the Islamists in Bangladesh are not modern Islamist like AK Party of Turkey; rather they have certain ideologies in their doctrine which grossly contradict democratic tenets and fundamentals of freedom and equality. They never managed to expand their share of vote substantially to turn themselves into a genuinely aspiring party or group to win a general election in Bangladesh. But this fact essentially corroborate the center-right argument to keep them in the political process so that they remain marginalized by default as the generally moderate Bangladeshi electorate are unlikely to vote the Islamist into power. The other point which people tend to articulate with caution is that the ouster of the Islamists from constitutional politics would push them underground. Their political expression then may involve gun, hostility and insurgency.

On the other hand, the hardcore progressives, who circularize the secular 1971 values and call for their full reinstatement, demand direct action against Islamist on the plea that most variants of political Islam that these groups propagate contradicts progression, secular modern values and the spirit of 1971. They simply want banning of religion based politics in Bangladesh. But although an ideological ally, the AL don't entirely subscribe to their views. The seasoned AL strategists prefer prudence and pragmatism rather than emotion. The AL at the moment is not talking about elimination of Islamist politics altogether. They have wittily narrowed down their target to JI which has serious blemish on its face with their anti-liberation stand in 1971 and involvement in atrocities committed at that time.

The mainstream AL leadership tacitly holds the view that it is impracticable to completely de-Islamize the polity as there are a plethora of Islamist entities in this populous land with their corresponding social bases. Rather, politically eliminating JI from Bangladesh is the right thing to do given their shameful and criminal past, and as such their policy received approval in 2008 election. Such narrowing down has actually negated the possibility of a wider unrest despite already evoking considerable reactionary retaliation from JI and its student wing. Some AL grassroots leaders, supporters and the poor minorities are already the victims of JI reprisals.

A proper value judgment of the two broad strategies from the larger liberal premise is not easy. Both the approaches have pros and cons. The liberals want a modern rational state structure that would take the nation forward. A segment prefers robust action. But conventional wisdom is against it. A steady and gradual advancement towards reformation of polity and society is more advisable. Perhaps that's the reason why the AL is sticking to limited objective, even that is no less costly.

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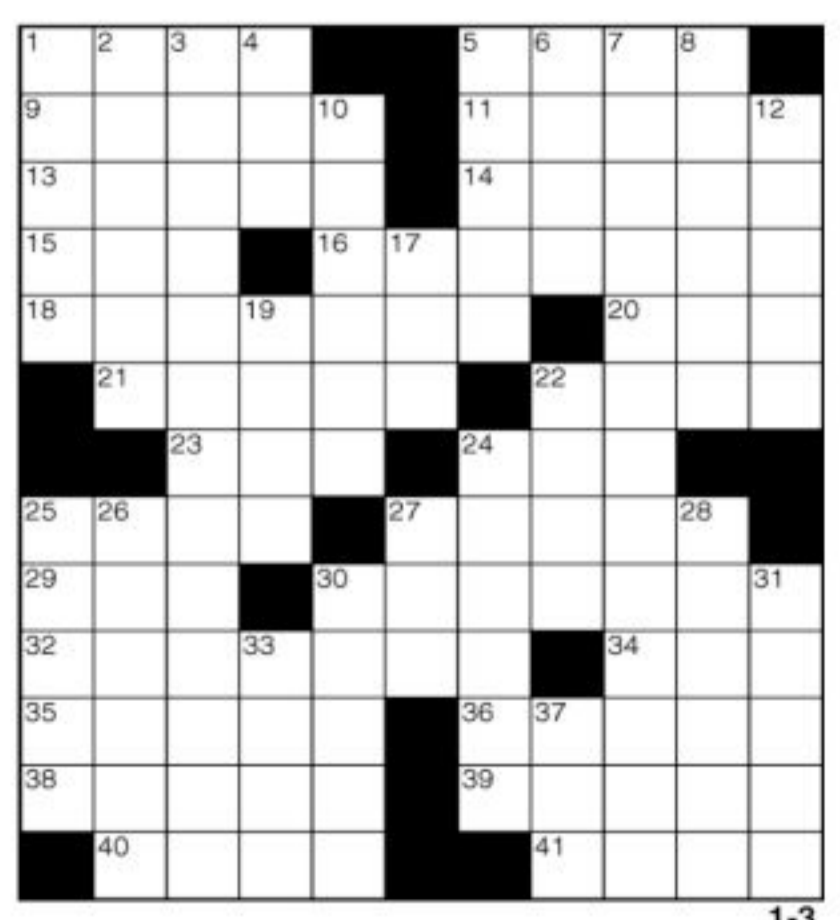

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS
1 TV's Lauer
5 Diamond Corner
9 Massage targets
11 Golf bag group
13 Chop-house order
14 Hint of color
15 Young one
16 Pet Shop Boys song
18 Operation
20 Solution: Abbr.
21 Mournful
22 Dandling site
23 Bro's kin
24 Scoundrel
25 Captivated
27 Facial treatments
29 Thurman of "Kill Bill"
30 Successful show
32 Restricted part of a street
34 Compete
35 School paper
36 Sugar source
38 Do a butler's job
39 Swagger
40 Bond foe
41 Spot

DOWN
1 Ship staffs
2 Misbehave
3 D H Lawrence novel
4 Hot brew
5 Teeny
6 Diva's piece
7 D H Lawrence novel
8 Car part
10 Stowe crowd
12 Good judgment
17 Take a stab at
19 Pace
22 Movie critic Pauline
24 Stars
25 Yokels
26 Tickled
27 Desk set item
28 Prepare to play
30 Antidrug advice
31 Peevish
33 Placed down
37 Seine summer

Yesterday's answer

A	V	I	D		S	L	U	M	S
P	I	N	U	P		C	O	N	I	C
A	C	T	E	D		A	K	I	T	A
R	A	W		J	A	N	I	T	O	R
T	R	O	J	A	N		A	S	A
	A	M	T	S		R	I	B
P	I	N	E		T	A	D	S
M	A	P		S	A	I	L
A	R	A		T	R	A	J	A	N
J	A	N	G	L	E	S		E	L	I
O	P	E	R	A		U	N	T	I	L
R	E	M	U	S		P	U	L	S	E
S	T	A	B	S		B	I	T	S

CRYPTOQUOTE   12-24

QJFRKWL, OUIL ARJQ SRCY CR ZQUXLI, ORS'I ARJ XJUFY NA CKYUXL IRSUXLI? -- CMSIM DKMJC ("QJFRKWL, ILY QYF-SRCYF QYUSFYYQ")

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

Yesterday's Cryptoquote:
It's the one night of the year when we all act a little nicer, we smile a little easier, we cheer a little more.
--Frank Cross ("Scrooged")

BEETLE BAILEY   by Mort Walker

HENRY   by Don Tranchte