Rajeev Bhargava

Co-Investigator

rbhargav@vsnl.com

Director and Senior Fellow
Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
Advanced Program on Social and Political
Theory
University of Delhi
29 Rajpur Road
Delhi 110054 India

For left-wing social scientists, political theory of the 1980s was excessively normative and too closely tied to liberalism — an anathema for them. Social theory, on the other hand, they believed, tried to dispassionately understand and explain reality and was more conducive to political action and social change. Like other left-oriented 'theorists', I too, was more interested in Social theory rather than in Anglo-Saxon Political theory which I believed was unduly abstract and reflected painfully, endlessly and quite unnecessarily on values such as freedom or justice. Within social theory, I was both attracted to and felt somewhat discomfited by analytical Marxism. I was attracted by the clarity of its argument and its analytical rigour but dismayed by its ties with positivism and methodological individualism. For my D.Phil, therefore, I chose to deploy the skills of Oxford analytical philosophy to defend a crucial Marxist-Hegelian-Durkheimian insight that social facts are irreducible to facts about individuals, for example the social practice of gardening, playing chess, or speaking Hindi can not be wholly understood as an aggregate of individual actions that appear to make up these practices. In short, I challenged methodological individualism, a key component of analytical Marxism, a view which claims precisely that. I defended my claim by unmasking the key ontological assumption of individualists that the intentional ingredient in action is a mental state existing in the individual and that it can be known without reference to anything outside his or her mind. I argued that beliefs, desires and intentions also lie embedded in social practices, external to the individual mind (a Hindu worshiping the many gods in his temple is hardly aware that in doing so he is challenging the monotheism of several world-religions!) and that without an understanding of such practices, even those intentions that lie in the heads of the individuals remain obscure or unknown. By arguing that individual action has an inescapable social component, I tried to rehabilitate a non-individualist strategy that I called Contextualism. By defending a contextual study of individual actions, I also questioned the alleged invariability and universality of human experience (the nomological assumption of positivism). This study was published as a book entitled, 'Individualism in Social Science' by Clarendon Press, Oxford. On my return to India in the late 80s, it became difficult, however, to continue with abstract social theory.

As a resurgent Hindu nationalist movement began to question the liberal and secular credentials of India's constitutional democracy, three things became more and more evident. First, the left was bereft of the array of intellectual resources required to defend the Indian republic. Though a precondition for its own politics, it had continuously taken a predominantly instrumentalist view on liberal and democratic institutions (it had suited them to be free to propagate their views, acquire power etc. but they may have denied this freedom to others if they, themselves, were in power). Not having understood the intrinsic value of these institutions, the left now stood silent or confused with no inkling of how to answer the growing criticism by Hindu nationalists. Second, that a defence of India's liberal-looking constitutional democracy necessitated nuanced normative reasoning. Finally, that it simply had to rely on the rich, complex and evolving resources of liberalism. In short, to intellectually defend the political project of rescuing Indian constitutional democracy from an aggressively ethno-nationalist movement, it was imperative that we turn away from the big emancipatory vision of Marxism, (The deeper systematic changes sought by Marxists, by violence, if necessary, to create a new, more free and egalitarian social order, possibly even a new kind of human being) towards the smaller but extremely significant freedoms of Liberalism, and for me, personally, from philosophical issues of explanatory social theory to a normatively oriented political theory — precisely what I had so hastily and foolishly dismissed at Oxford. In the late 80s, the academic environment in India was still not favourable to even begin to initiate this task. (I still remember the pandemonium that followed when I used the term left-liberal in an Indian conference!). Against the grain of this intellectual climate, I urgently felt the need to lean on contemporary western liberalism but (and this was easier said than done) without hastily assuming that some of its core values will play themselves out in the Indian context in the same way as they do in western societies. For example, two salient features of Indian

life have been religion and community, neither of which was easily accommodated by western liberalism. Indian liberalism simply had to recognise the reality of religious communities and perhaps up to a point, even to defend them. My own earlier work on the importance of a contextual study of social practices helped me to recognize that Indian liberal democracy might have a family resemblance, but will not be identical to western liberal democracies. All my papers (about 30 in all) written in the last 15 years have wrestled with these issues (individual and community rights, Muslim personal laws, Indian federalism, alternative modernities, the philosophical underpinnings of Indian Constitution, Hindu-Muslim relations, the nature of polities in the aftermath of barbarism). In one of my papers (The Democratic vision of a New Republic: India, 1950 in Frankel ed. Transforming India, OUP, 2000), for instance, I argue against the view, dominant among historians and political scientists, that India has focused exclusively on communities, sidelining individual rights. I argue instead, that well before the radical politicization of Indian National Congress, a distinct liberal stream existed in India which merged with and inherited a diffuse but persistent strain of something akin to a liberal view within local Indian traditions; that western modernity could make a considerable impact on an aspiring middle stratum of Indian society because it genuinely articulated and responded to their needs; that there is more to utilitarianism than its strong collectivist trappings and, therefore, that even if liberalism came to India through utilitarianism, it washed ashore ideas that were neutral to say the least between the individual and the collective; that British Imperialism, by installing the machinery of a modern state simultaneously opened up opportunities for resistance to it. Therefore, a classical political libertarianism with its emphasis on individual rights came to India as a structural feature of modern political life.

Above all, democracy grew in India, as it did in many other places, under the guise of nationalism, and its commitment to political equality fitted in neatly with the egalitarian strands of liberalism as well as of utilitarianism. In the last instance, this meant that even outside the polity, liberal demands of equality of opportunity and the treatment of persons as equal individuals were considerably strengthened. In another paper I have argued that liberal-democracy is part of the standing discursive conditions in Indian society (being part of the normative vocabulary of the Indian Constitution) and that, therefore, even Hindu nationalists frequently possess a motive to legitimate their actions in terms of its normative vocabulary. Secondly, I have felt it as my calling to find points of reconciliation between believers and non-believers (the religious and the atheist), between those who believed they are modern and those who are 'pro-tradition' and between those who cherish a life outside thick social relations (community) and those who find life meaningless without it. For example, in Religious and Secular identities (published in Bhikhu Parekh and Upendra Baxi ed;Crisis and Change in Contemporary India, Sage, 1994) I argued that academic discourse needs to free itself from labels as much as wider public discourse. I claim that subtle but important internal differentiations, obscured by stereotypes, exist equally within religious and secular identities. Secular writing works with a conception of the religious that is traditionalist/ anti-modern/superstitious/ fanatical. Likewise, defenders of religion tend to caricature secularists as anti-religious, absolutists, ultra-rationalists, crass materialists or radical individualists). I argue that that there are multiple ways of being secular or religious, that it is as important to attend to the content of identity as it is to the way it is held, to its structure or form. An identity with a valuable content can be utterly dangerous and distorted if held aggressively. Finally, when attention is paid to the content of identities, we may discover that some secular and some religious people have more in common with one another than they have with their own respective co-believers. For example, despite difference in content, liberal and democratic Hindus may have more in common with liberal and democratic Muslims or Atheists simply because their identities share the same structural/formal features. Likewise for militant Muslims or Hindus, who may have more in common with each other than with liberal Muslims and Hindus. The implicit political point underlying this was that a political alliance may be possible between liberal Hindus, Muslims and atheists against all kinds of militants and fundamentalists. In India, this proposal seemed to provoke suspicion among many secularists who assumed that anyone who called himself Hindu was automatically communal i.e. fanatically favourable to his own religion and antagonist towards Muslims. Others felt that this conflation by secularists of communitarians and communalists was proof that secularism was inherently anti-religious. This further brought home to me the importance of re-conceiving secularism in a manner that makes it different from a doctrine that strictly separates state and religion and is justified exclusively in terms of secular humanism.

But my major interest over the last five years or so is focused on working out a model of political secularism that provides an alternative to mainstream conceptions of secularism, integral to the theoretical self-understanding of both western and Indian secularists. Contemporary discussions of

secularism in India have been constrained by the tradition-modern (western) dichotomy. For some, secularism is originally a Christian doctrine adapted to modern western conditions, and means the strict separation of church and state. It is also predominantly a single-value doctrine, motivated either by liberty (as in the United States) or equality of citizenship (as in Republican France). This secularism, it is argued, is more suited to single-religion societies than to the socio-cultural context of India where it is more appropriate to rely on resources of multiple and indigenous religious traditions for the sake of quite different values of peace and toleration. Others argue that India has the civilizational resources from which to retrieve its own conception of secularism captured best by the oft-touted phrase 'sarva dharma sambhava' (equal respect for all religions). In several papers, now shaping into a book I argue against these claims. The rejection of the tradition-modernity dichotomy forms the background of my own proposal that India has worked out a distinctive conception of the secular that was at once Indian and modern. This conception builds on traditional resources as well as on the legacy of the British colonial state but innovatively transforms them. It has many distinctive features of which I mention five. First, it deals simultaneously with inter-religious (inter-ethnic) and intra-religious (intra-ethnic) domination. Second, it has an explicit multi-value character. Third, it rejects strict-separation. Separation does not mean exclusion or strict neutrality but what I call principled distance. Fourth, it implies neither respectful indifference nor active hostility but respectful transformation of religion. In short, secularism inherits the tradition of religious reform that began in India both prior to the advent of colonial modernity and because of a critical engagement with it. Finally, Indian secularism is an ethically- sensitive practical settlement that everywhere it really is or ought to be and less a scientific, rationalist doctrine worked out by ideologues and simply implemented by political agents. To deepen this argument, I have begun to stray from abstract normative theory and turn to the examination of the socio-historical context of 19th and 20th century India. I have now better understood that to identify contextually relevant normative ideals, it is crucial that we grasp socio-historical practices within which they are or should be embedded. It appears then that my intellectual journey has turned full circle. It began with abstract social theory, then moved to abstract normative theory and now to arrive at concrete normative ideals, it is taking an important third step towards concrete socio-historical studies.