

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION THROUGH THE IDEA OF THE 'SACRED AND PROFANE' WITHIN THE PURVIEW OF ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDIES

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According to Berger and Luckmann, the universe consists of meanings and beliefs. This belief systems shapes two important institutions in our society-religion and science. The term 'religion' is linguistically derived from latin terms—*religio* and *religare*. Both of these terms mean 'to respect, oblige to what is sacred'. With the usage of this term, the distinction between sacred and sacrilege becomes easier to judge. Sacrilege simply means 'violation of what is sacred'. This becomes a benchmark to judge 'profane actions'. The most important element however, highlighted by Durkheim, is that not all beliefs can be designated as sacred, but only those which are collectively considered by people. These 'common' meanings have the power to shape communities, societies and even nations. The tribal communities, for example, Mundas and Bhils, are bound together with their own meanings of sacred and profanity in kinship, worships and rituals. Similarly, the Parsi society has its own ways to conduct their religious codes. Finally, religions can also shape nations like in the Middle East. The *Shia* dominant Iran conducts its relations with neighbours differently from the Wahhabism (*Sunni*) dominated Saudi Arabia.

The functionalist understanding of religion by Durkheim and Parsons, highlights the purpose of sacred symbols and religion at large. A clear demarcation between two sets— allowed and not allowed— produces collective consciousness, social order and even strengthens social solidarity. In any part of the world, a person, A who follows any religion, can derive his identity with relation to the surroundings. Using this identity, he can integrate easily with B if both have same norms (pray five times a day), shared rituals(*Eid* celebrations) and same values(Worship Islam). But in the times of plural faiths and religions, it is hard to imagine a world where only one community can exist with other. Today, we have civil religions and globalised faiths due to the processes of modernisation. But the basic element of profane and sacred has not vanished. It is so because along with disadvantages, it has advantages too. This dual ideology took a solid shape during the colonial times to study caste. Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* divided castes into 'pure' and 'polluted'. His study was one of the first efforts to study the huge institution of castes and numerous *jaatis*. The lens of sacred and profane made his task easier.

That, which is sacred in a religion is forbidden and set apart from the usual items. It generates, among people, strong emotions of awe and respect. That, which is sacred in one religion may not be sacred in another religion. But, any two religions will always have kept the duty to worship sacred symbols as supreme. The sociologist, G.S. Ghurye highlighted different features of Hindu caste system, which also included civil and religious disabilities of different sections. These disabilities include not allowing Shudra to read the sacred scriptures. This lack of accessibility led people from lower castes and communities to adopt what M.N. Srinivas, one of the students of Ghurye, coined as '*Sanskritisation*'.

Srinivas's work on Coorgs in South India showed the spread of 'sanskritic Hinduism' like a wild fire. It also showed the researchers the power of meanings and hierarchies in a society. The colonial practice of census in 1931 also showed the alarming rate at which communities and sabhas were changing their lifestyles to adopt the lifestyles of those highly placed— Brahmins. For it allowed inclusion and acceptance of those who were branded as *achyuts* or the polluted ones.

These foregrounding definitions of sacred and profanity were challenged by Karl Marx, who saw it as an instrument of domination and oppression. The mainstream religion legitimises inequality and privilege. The 'opium of masses' as he termed religion, however, had some psychological functions too. It compensated people by giving them hope, solace, promised them a future of heaven and reincarnation. No ideology could replace an institution as strong as religion. Marx urged people to challenge the domination and social order. The categorisation of bourgeoisie and proletariat too had elements of religiosity. The workers who were made to perform for mornings and evenings looked miserable and sweat like animals, they were confined to the gloomy rooms in factories, while those who generated surplus from their labour enjoyed the high status. The 'religion of capitalism' has only one motive—to generate profit from social necessary labour time. And this motive was shared among all capitalists, like a common ritual to let this institution thrive and remain in circulation. Dalits and untouchables in the Hinduism, faced more misery, as they were not even considered befit to share the same food— commensality restrictions.

In the modern times, there have been instances where secularisation has come to being. It is the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance. Some researchers contend that reason has replaced faith in various sectors. Geographic

mobility and large-scale migration has forced people to meet and interact with people of different beliefs. The consumerism and religious marketplace has opened doors of accessibility to those who were denied such choices. The religious texts like *Bhagvata Gita* or *Quran* can be ordered through Flipkart or Amazon e-retail platforms.

The ancient Indian Society was marred with innovations in literature and with it, the deepening of faith in God/Gods. The elite sections of society were placed highly due to their birth groups. The

chaturvarna hierarchy allowed Brahmans and some other designated sections to conduct rituals and sacrifices like *Ashwamedha* or horse sacrifice. The caste system, which originated from Rigveda, blinded people with the ideas of religion so strongly that the reality was obscured. People were forced to believe that religious values reign supreme to human values.

The caste ideology in ancient India meant a set of ideas which had the power to justify inequality. For Popper this ideology is '*a closed system of thought*', an answer to everything and that, which is immune to rational arguments. For Marx, the ruling class ideology was false consciousness. Gramsci looked at it through chains of hegemony, which functioned through force, ideology and intellectual dominance.

The dominance was also propagated though limited reach of knowledge. But it was challenged by two new *shramanic* traditions of Buddha and Jaina. *Shraman* referred to a non- Vedic ascetic or a renouncer. Unlike the earlier languages (Pali or Vedic Sanskrit), they preached their messages in people's language—Prakrit. It was easier for people to understand and hence, follow them. The 24th *Tirthakara* of the Jaina, *Vardhamana Mahavira*, spread a message similar to Buddha but focused more on celibacy. The focus of Jainism was on *triratna* (three jewels): right faith, knowledge and conduct. Those who followed Jaina religion, were known as '*bhikkus*' ('renouncer/beggars'). The Buddha belong to *Sakya* gana and was a *Kshatriya* himself. It was also the time of rising '*mahajanapadas*'. The kind of buddhism espoused by Ashoka, ruling one of the mahajanapadas, came to be spread across borders and boundaries. Various traders and travellers toured the 'land of enlightenment' and wrote histories and accounts.

Both the religions of Buddhism and Jainism stressed on secularism. They allowed men and women from all social sectors to follow the traditions. They emerged to counter the hegemonic Hindu traditions. Religion and power usually went hand-in-hand. These *shamanic* traditions had economic and political impact, as it allowed participation and a platform to engage with ideas. The closed society which resulted in relative deprivation of groups was now being opened and the deprivation came to be challenged. The importance of the priest was obliterated, and worshipping was made an individualistic experience which focused win meditation and self introspection. M.N Srinivasa highlighted some orthogenetic changes, or those coming from within the society. Both of these traditions were part of such changes in the ancient Indian society.

In the earlier times, literature and stories created a fertile ground for more imagination in religion. People imagined Gods as human-like. The "folk deities" took new forms and, often combined with the "high gods" of the period. The life of the Buddha was portrayed in the *Jataka Tales*. These attempts were successful as propagating messages of a religion was now easier and simpler. From the early writings in Sanskrit and Vedic Sanskrit, it now expanded to performative experiences and stories.

The modus operandi of both Buddhism and Jainism was to produce an alternate faith and counter the Brahminic version of the truth. In Jainism, they produced alternative versions of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, wherein Rama and Krishna were portrayed as Jaina heroes. They were subject to the principles of Jaina ethics. In this story, Ravana was not killed by Rama, but by Lakshman. So, in this

way, Rama can take a rebirth in heaven for his observance of *ahimsa*. This belief in Ahimsa sets Jainism apart. Ahimsa is a fundamental principle forming the cornerstone of the ethics and doctrine of this religion. Therefore, it is believed that it is the virtue of all virtues in Jain System is—“*Ahimsā parom dharmah*”.

In the Buddhist context, the emperor, especially Ashoka was portrayed as *chakravartin* (wheel-turner). He exemplified the non-personhood of *bodhisattva*, and maintained stability in the social order, legitimated and advised by monks. In Buddhism, the emphasis was on *karma* (appropriate action), including donations and morality. In the Buddhist case, until the rule of Kanishka, Buddha was depicted symbolically, through the lotus and the throne. During the rule of Kanishka, there emerged another school of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, wherein Buddha was portrayed with human like attributes. This was a remarkable

change in Buddhism. It also brought with it change in the definition of *bodhisattva*. Now, it was not a compulsion on the *bodhisattva* to renounce the world on attaining enlightenment. Instead, he was to help others to attain enlightenment. Under the new school of Buddhism, statutes of the Buddha were also made. A confluence of culture was seen as architectural elements were borrowed from Taxila and Mathura. Those who preached Mahayana Buddhism called the other school of Buddhism as Hinayana Buddhism. But this older version called themselves as Theravada Buddhism. Both of them continued to be followed by various kings across the world.

The Metanarratives-Vedas and Upanishadas- which gave validation to the claims of Brahmins were challenged by counter cultures of Buddha and Jain. The hegemonic validations declined and paved way for new religions. These restored meanings for people in the ancient Indian society. In the current time, we see there are various forms of fundamentalism—Hindu fundamentalism is active in various part of India, while there is also Buddhist fundamentalism in Sri Lanka. In Israel, there is Jewish fundamentalism. The ways in which religions adapt to the surroundings, shapes the manner in which their followers interact with the society. The original shape of Buddhism and Jainism has certainly gathered new meanings, but the grounding principles remain same- to give peace in times of mental turmoil and havoc. Buddhism even today promotes peace and tolerance. The 14th Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) is one of the most influential Tibetan Buddhist leaders.