

*The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2015*

# **Rethinking Secularism**

## **An invitation to an experiment**

**Shiv Visvanathan**

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## **An invitation to an experiment**

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Back cover shows Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April, 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

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## **A question of concepts**

Sociologists love transitions because transitions are sites where the categories of understanding are both challenged and transformed. Transitions allow for rites of passage where a category has no official status but acquires the characteristics of a liminal entity, of something caught betwixt and between and is therefore both a source of danger and pollution. Crisis and liminality often go together.

One of the great transitions one has witnessed in recent times is the movement from the 20th to 21st century. The 20th century was seen as the age of nationalism and revolution. Yet, all the great movements, the great agendas of transformation faded into oblivion, often becoming an ironic burlesque of their original idealism. The Bolshevik revolution, to use Trotsky's words, belongs to the dustbin of history, the Maoist revolution turned genocidal, the Indian National Movement reached a dead end, Castro is gerontocratic and Che is an advertisement; Sukarno, Nasser and N'Krumah have been forgotten. The Velvet Revolution was temporary and even the great anti-apartheid movement of Nelson Mandela and ANC appears stale. The certainties of socialism and the revolution have been lost and what we confront today is ambiguity and indecision.

The 21st century is much more indecisive. It is a century whose early decades began with reflexivity and self-interrogation. In fact, all the great terms of the contemporary world have been subject to deconstruction, to archaeologies, to acts of re-reading. What was taken for granted or ideologically certain is now facing an epidemic of scrutiny. All the keywords of the era like enlightenment, reason, democracy, secularism, development, science and market are being subject to a savage questioning. All these progressive terms now seem soiled and demand a reworking from fundamentals. In India, three terms in particular have been subject to intense discussion. This trio includes democracy, the nation-state and secularism, creating in fact the trinity of debates that marks the current Indian imagination.

Of these, the term 'secularism' has been the one that has borne the imprint of doubt and assault and this essay is an attempt to create a discussion around its fate.

The term 'secular', in its negative and positive senses, has determined the fate of political parties. The defeat of the Indian National Congress was often attributed to its handling of secularism. The way the Congress handled the term showed one the distinction between system, as an official definition of the word, and life world as the actual use of the term, defining the gap between intention and fate.

The Congress idea of secularism was instrumental, a way of garnering votes from minorities. This turned secularism into an electoral strategy rather than an ideal. By veering towards minorities, the Congress alienated the majority which found its fulfilment in Hindutva. The Congress adherence to secularism was seen more as a lip service, a form of political correctness, a ritual of table manners. In fact, the majority Hindu group found the Congress defining secular in a snobbish, even coercive, way. To the secular elite in the Congress, the Hindu middle-class majority lapsing into traditional folklore and using religious symbols was seen a regression. Modernity, they felt, had to be rigorously secular and yet its own sense of secular, its handling of the riots and handling and of legislative bills became progressively empty. The negativity entailed by the Congress behaviour was manna to the electorally starved Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its president, Lal Krishna Advani, coined the word 'pseudo-secularism', which stuck as a stigma on the Congress. The terms 'pseudo-secularism' worked wonders for the BJP. It invoked a lack of masculinity, authenticity, of decisiveness and, as a result, it became Narendra Modi's favourite dart board. The whole debate on secularism became transformed into a debate on fairness and history. Modi could virtually dub the Congress an extension of the Mughal Durbars and receive major ovations. An emasculated secularism, apologetic or snobbish about itself was no match for a Hindutva in which a majority felt coerced by secularist modernism. In fact, this attitude is epitomised in the reactions to the Gujarat Riots. I remember an IIT Delhi student claiming that thanks

to the riots '500 years of Mughal rule had been defeated'. The BJP party that rode on the vanguard of the riots was elected to rectify secularist history and the minoritarian bias of the Congress Party. An anti-secularist bias became the vector for a new electoral wave. An effete and bumbling secularism had virtually become the catalyst of the Modi regime's victory.

The Modi regime that came to power tried, like all regimes, to rectify categories. It wanted to define patriotism as the ultimate virtue and rewrite history so that the syllabi and hopefully the constitution could embody the new truths of history. The regime created a split level world where the past was read as communal and the future as technocratic. The regime's attempt to create a new technocratic fundamentalism was a genuine challenge to secularism. The BJP was convinced astrology and astronomy were continuous initiatives and that ancient Hindu science anticipated many modern developments. The Indian Science Congress had many sessions about the innovativeness of ancient science. Simultaneously, the BJP moved to an instrumentalist approach to science, confusing science as a culture with technology as a commercial possibility. It created a world of big science, challenging the autonomy of scientific research and instituted a drastic change of the syllabi to incorporate its sense of history and culture.

The BJP as an umbrella of intentions which included VHP, the Bajrang Dal and the Shiv Sena started an alleged rectification of culture which was worrying. It began by presenting the model of development as a 'secular' alternative where commitment to national development defined a new notion of citizenship which went beyond ethnicity and minoritarianism. A commitment to the nation-state was its stated secular alternative. Yet, its sense of majoritarianism where it started tinkering with the secular fabric was corroding the idea of democracy as a pluralistic sensibility. Three events in particular became testing points of the regime. First, its ban on books and movies extended to beef bans which cut into the livelihood of the poor and Muslims. Secondly, its rectification of the syllabus alienated professional historians who resented its act of

rewriting history. The murder of an innocent Muslim in the village of Dadri on the mere suspicion of consuming beef and the silence of the regime to that event created a string of protests where writers who had won Sahitya Akademi awards returned their awards protesting also the murder of rationalists like Professor M.M. Kalburgi. The controversy over film stars like Shahrukh Khan and Aamir Khan where one threatened not only the cultural creativity of Bollywood but added to the feeling that a Muslim as citizen was always suspect further undermined the secularist credentials of the state. Between the Dadri murder and the Kalburgi killing, there was a feeling that the BJP as a communal majoritarian state had become a threat to marginals, minorities, dissenters and anyone construed as eccentric. The attacks became so problematic and vociferous that the home minister, Rajnath Singh, complained that secularism was the most problematic word in Indian politics. The sadness was compounded by the fact that parties like the Communist Party of India-Marxist had no answer to the anti-secularist logjam. The growing importance of these events demands a rereading of secularism which reaches out to fundamentals. There is both an immediacy to politics and an urgency to theorising that secularism in India demands. In analysing this one decided that what was needed was not a report card of credit and debit but an overall attempt to reassess the fate of the word in India.

This essay will try to reconstruct the debates on secularism in three domains. It will explore the writings of U.R. Ananthamurthy and his literary examination of the idea of secularism and connect it to the Kalburgi episode. It will trace the recent episodes around Amir Khan to the idea of Bombay talkies present in the writings of Sadat Hassan Manto, and, thirdly, it will look at the debate on the scientific temper initiated by Ashis Nandy and trace its career paths to science and secularism today. One hopes to present this more as three sets of playful experiments rather than as a premature postmortem of the word. In doing so, the essay will go back to the western history of secularism and reconstruct the career of the word, showing it is based both on a restricted idea of problem solving and a false history



of the conflict of science and religion. It will eventually argue for a new kind of social contract between science and religion, religion and state as part of the new imagination of 21st century democracy.

### **The Secularist Debate in Literature**

U.R. Ananthamurthy (URA) was a Kannada desecratisation novelist, socialist who struggled with the questions of secularism, change and modernity throughout his life. His novels, *Bharatipura* and *Samskara*, are classic studies of secularism as are his many literary essays. For URA, any concept needs a storyteller, for a concept without a storyteller becomes a grammar without a language. A concept has a career, a fate through the people who try to embody it.

Secularism for URA is a concept that begins in childhood. As a child he lived close to a forest and a forest is a sensorium of sights, sounds, smells, of memories and also an assemblage of folktales, fears, myths, superstition. All this makes secularism unviable. The forest created the sense of the sacred which was difficult to erase. In fact, URA argues that secularism is a way of life not a mere concept and has to be understood as a way of living. Karnataka, URA said, was a society of mixed beliefs and mixed metaphors where he would sit next to his grandfather learning his multiplication tables and the 'magic shlokas which protected me from the fear of ghosts and the roar of tigers'.

He also observed that time in India is not linear and, in fact, he explains in a conversation with his doctoral guide that time in the West was linear, that if one wanted to reach into the past one had to travel to an archive, while in India if one wanted to travel in time, one walked across the neighbourhood, because Karnataka was a land where Galileo and Gandhi were next-door neighbours.

URA claims: 'I was surrounded by sacred objects. A tree was sacred; a stone under a tree was sacred. The river which was channelled into three by Bhimsena to propitiate the sage Durvasa was sacred.' He adds, 'To demystify the sacred world in which I lived was to do something dramatically unusual and prove to myself that a stone was a stone and a tree was a tree. I thus selected a certain

stone under a particular tree which I was told was a potent *Parjurli* and I urinated on it secretly. Thereafter, I spent terrified days and nights expecting something to happen to me by way or punishment.’ The sacred was deep in one’s psyche and not easy to exorcise. In fact, this simple example of childhood doubt and innocence, one which the rationalist Kalburgi also cites, made both of them targets of Hindutva forces later.

Yet, it is not just a story that URA tells. He also provides a grammar, a perspective for reading the way you look at the world. He talks of two ways of reading in India. The first, he claims, was the centre/periphery model where power determined the way you thought. India, URA said, had a different way of digesting alien power and ideas and he proposed an alternative the model of the front yard and the backyard.

Front yard and backyard, he explains, were two different worlds, two different domains. The front yard was the domain where his father and grandfather presided. Into the frontyard came strange people wearing pith hats or turbans. It was the world of government people and revenue accounts and village elders. The backyard was the world of the kitchen, where intimacy began and women took over. The backyard was the domain of storytelling and ‘my grandmother’s snuffbox’ without which storytelling could not begin.

Indian culture, URA argues was a giant digestive system, where foreign ideas were domesticated, digested, indigenised between the reciprocal dynamics of front yard and backyard. Politics and literature played out the logic of frontyard and backyard. English was a frontyard language while the Bhakti movement of Kabir and Nanak was a backyard phenomenon. Nehru was a frontyard politician while Tagore and Gandhi were backyard phenomenon. URA argued that secularism cannot be seen as a frontyard phenomenon. To officialise secularism was to confine it to the frontyard. Secularism, he claimed, had to be open to both and also be translated into many languages. Only when secularism was internalised into dialects would it be real. He added that India was a world of ambivalences where a straight-laced opposition between the secular and the religious

sounded almost surreal. By making change dichotomous one failed to understand the difficulty of secularism in Indian life.

URA's *Bharatipura* is a brilliant example of the fate of secular change and its ambiguities. *Bharatipura* is a story of a rationalist, western-educated hero who returns from England to his old temple town to search for his identity. He wants to authenticate his socialist secular self and he feels it can only be done by destroying his relation with the God of his temple town, Manjunatha, who controls the cosmic world and the emotional life of the inhabitants.

On an auspicious day, he wants to take the untouchables into the temple to prove to the devotees that untouchables will not vomit blood if they enter the sanctum sanctorum. To enforce this demystification he takes the Shaligrama of his family, the personal deity outside to prove once and for all that it was an everyday piece of stone and not a sacred object. The untouchables are mesmerised and horrified as he asks them to touch it, so that a stone becomes a stone. In fact, the very attempt to destroy the myth, enhances the power of the stone, making it more potent than it was when it was untested.

URA shows that change cannot be understood in dichotomous terms, that there are ironies and ambivalence which can be lethal. In fact, he comes back to it with devastating effect in his last work, where he explains why he cannot live in a Modi-ruled India. He shows that a communal India ruled by a majoritarian sense of artificial history, can be ironically lethal. URA argues that while history is ironic, it is the development models of the BJP which are emptily secular. He points out two fatal flaws contending that the idea of nation and development begins when the sacredness of civilisation loses out to the empty linearity of the nation-state. He shows that the BJP is communal about the past, but empty-headed about economics and nature.

Nature, with notions of myth and the sacred, resisted the onslaught of man but when nature becomes a resource, then a secularised nature is unable to withstand the onslaughts of development. By secularising nature as forest and communalising history the BJP has

opened India to unprecedented violence. This idea is best caught in a comment by Arvind Panagriha, chief economist of the Niti Ayog, in a recent seminar sponsored by the London School of Economics, on urban futures. Panagriha implied that economic development was secular. He claimed that it was about suffering. An economist, he explained, had to choose who will suffer because suffering comes to all. This secularisation of pain in a world without the sacred makes the Modi regime a deeply problematic one.

I will now move from literature to the world of film to examine the fate of secularism.

### **Enter Manto**

I want to approach Manto by looking at the recent Amir Khan controversy. The film star, famous for historical movies like *Lagaan* and *Mangal Pandey* and for contemporary hits like *Three Idiots*, confessed in an interview that his wife, Kiran Rao, felt insecure, afraid for the safety of her children. Khan in his *Indian Express* interview observed that 'the rage toward intolerance' had created a fear which had seeped deep into society. Even his family was not immune from it. The Khans even discussed the possibility of migration. His wife, he confessed, was even scared to open newspapers in the morning.

What Khan articulated was a normal fear. Usually fears are articulated in private but Amir spoke about his anxieties openly. He added that creativity demands that one should voice what one feels in public. The reaction to Khan was stereotyped with the Shiv Sena telling him that he could leave the city. Interestingly both the Sena and Khan spoke about citizenship and patriotism but neither emphasised the creative role of the city. Neither talked of Mumbai as part of the imaginaries of the city. Both the Sena and Khan ignored the traditions of Mumbai and this was strange as Amir, in particular, has deep genealogies in the film industry.

The sadness of the discussion which emphasised the nation-state rather than the city was that it disempowered Mumbai as an imagination. Before partition, one talked of Lahore, Amritsar, Delhi and in different tones. These were cosmopolitan cities with great

traditions of creativity but partition destroyed them as culturally potent imaginations. The new post-independence Nehruvian City was Chandigarh. Corbusier's Chandigarh was designed to erase the memories of partition. The man who evoked this alternative imagination was Manto.

Sadat Hassan Manto was the greatest storyteller of the partition. One story in particular has an acute poignancy in this context. It is the story of *Toba Tek Singh*, a classic tale about how the governments of India and Pakistan decide on an exchange of lunatics. Few of them could understand 'why India was partitioned and what Pakistan was'. Their incomprehension added to their lunacy. One of them climbs a tree and delivers a speech that touched upon the problem of both countries. As the guards try to bring him down, he climbs higher still yelling, 'I neither want to live in India or Pakistan. I am happy in this tree.' The voice of lunatics captures the poignancy, the irrationality of choice. Manto shows that the partition of cities is like a separation of lovers. The final poignancy comes with a Sikh lunatic who wants to know where his native land is, since it seems to have disappeared into a non-place between India and Pakistan. In fact, he in turn asks another lunatic who believed he was God where Toba Tek Singh is and the latter with a cackle decrees 'Nowhere, for I have not given the order yet.' The final drama comes at the moment of exchange. Truckloads of lunatics under police escort move from Lahore's asylum. Finally, it is Bishen Singh's turn. He asks where Toba Tek Singh is and the official says in Pakistan. He jumps back a few steps. The guards try to drag him towards India but he refuses to move, standing gently, rigidly immobile at a point on the middle of the border. He stands there as the rest of the exchange is completed. Bishen lay between the barbed wires of India and Pakistan.

If Manto's partition stories captured the impasse of partition, his work in the film studio, Bombay Talkies, captures a glimpse of a solution. Bombay Talkies was no melting pot American style. It represented a syncretism where a secular city arose because people retained their identities, their ethnic and professional backgrounds and created the pool of talent that cinema required. It was a cosmo-

politanism where German filmmakers, Russians, women from *kothas* occupied this multilingual world which had to be secular because the mixing of sensuality and sensuality demanded secular open spaces.

Manto's *Bombay Talkies* is a portrait of a secular city *desi* style. He talks of *Bombay Talkies* as a citizenship of talent and he demonstrates how ethnicity with its roots in different cultures creates the craftsmen, the musicians, the actors, the prostitutes, the technicians that cinema needs. But Manto hints at something further. It is not just a mix of ethnicity and religion. Cinema itself adds to a different notion of the city. This is the Bohemian city not the regulated city of Chandigarh or the miniature panopticons the Shiv Sena wants to create in Mumbai. Manto shows that very alchemy of the film city is present in the narrative of cinema. This happens at several levels. First, Manto observes that men like Ashok Kumar and Shyam, the heroes of yesteryear, were devoid of communal feeling. Partly, it was innocence where the actor as part of a fantasy world, felt he was above such sordidness. Manto talks of time during partition, when Ashok Kumar drives him home through a riot area. Manto is in panic worrying that history may never forgive him if anything happened to Ashok Kumar, the heartthrob of thousands. As Manto sighs in relief, Ashok Kumar tells him that they will not touch an artiste. A fan in that sense joins the citizenship of the secular. Now, fantasy and sociology are both on the side of *Bombay Talkies* as the answer to partition.

There is a third element that we must add. Cinema has always been a resolver of contradictions through myths. In fact, myths are mechanisms for embracing, resolving or living with contradictions. Cinema always resolves the oppositions of town and country, family loyalty versus law, the battle of secular and religious. Every hero or heroine in a moment of crisis finds refuge or a moment for reflection in a religious place not necessarily his own. The Indian solution is different. We are secular not by separating religion from life but by embracing all religions. *Bombay Talkies* in Manto's essays becomes a promiscuity of bodies, cultures, rituals that creates a cosmopolitanism deeper than the current imaginations of the secular. As one reads

Manto, one wishes the Khans in their periodic battles with the Shiv Sena had cited the tradition of Bombay Talkies. That and not some theory of rights is the answer to Shiv Sena dismemberment of the secular city of Mumbai.

## **The Scientific Temper Debate**

Secularism covers a whole series of words, concepts which create an interlocking world view. A thesaurus would include rationality, rationalism, science, scientific temper, disenchantment, communalism, etc. Science and the scientific attitude become central to any debate on secularism. In fact, the current BJP government's attitude to science must be located in the broader debates on science.

Oddly, when one looks at it both left and right produced hyperbolic models of science. The left produced the debate on scientific temper demanding that it be introduced into the constitution. The left created science as an immaculate conception without realising that science was embedded in religion. Any link to religion as an association with Guru or an adherence to a ritual was seen as a violation of the scientific spirit. Even the conduct of Visvakarma puja in research laboratories was seen as a superstitious act. Eventually, the left was so evangelical about science that it reduced it either to an ideology or to a vaccine which if injected guarantees immunity against superstition.

The rightist response began by claiming that Indian civilisation through its contributions to astronomy, medicine, linguistics was always scientific and that the scientific temper was an ingrained part of the Indian tradition. The anomaly or the monstrosity the right created was of a different kind. It blended the communal rewriting of the past with an instrumental reading of the scientific present which had two fascinating consequences. It fetishised the past and it idolised science through the millennialism of the innovation chain. It removed the idea of the sacred from nature to facilitate a secular growth where nature had no sense of the sacramental. Simultaneously, it fetishised technology, leading Narendra Modi to even call nuclear energy, the inauguration of the second modernity. By fetishising technology and

communalising history, the BJP created a techno-fundamentalism, an ideology which was neither religious nor scientific. This techno-fundamentalism was located in the new Indian double, the NRI who tried to blend Nalanda and Silicon Valley into a new civilisation of the mind. It is URA who points out that by an instrumental use of history and technology within the vector of the nation-state the BJP had created a new Frankenstein where both nature and knowledge had lost their sense of the sacred. It is as if a misguided history of the past creates a hyperbolic sense of the future. It is now no longer a battle of the religious versus the secular but an amalgamation of a communal history of the past and a fetishised sense of technology.

Techno-fundamentalism goes beyond the standard categories of the science and religion. At a time when science is discovering its sense of limits, when ecology is creating a new nation of scale and diversity, Indian science lost its sense of sustainability or sacred. The crisis is a deeper one than just communalism. The secular has become the site for a Draconian construction of science where neither panarchy, risk, ideas of self-organisation, complexity haunt the official scientific imagination. The BJP has hyphenated religion and science by emptying history and fetishising science. This world view is embodied in the idea of development and it is this violence of development under the idea of a nation-state that persuaded URA he would not like to live in a Modi-ruled India. Its categories violated both the integrity of religion and science, creating a state which intruded into every area of culture and threatened both the integrity of the constitution and the professional autonomy of the syllabus. Viewed this way, whether it is religious change, or development, or the culture of the city, the Indian idea of secularism faces a moral and political impasse, where protest in a didactic form serves as a substitute for dialogue and debate.

### **Rereading Secularism**

The question one has to ask is whether one should re-look at secularism. When one reads the history of the western, whether it is western colonialism, western science, western history, one can



playfully create the outlines of a different polity and a different idea of history. There has been a tremendous rethinking of secularism which neither academic secularists nor political activists have incorporated in their debates.

In reconstructing secularism, let us begin by admitting that the old idea of secularism was weak and inadequate. Secularism failed because it took a parochial idea of history and tried to universalise it. The original model of secularism was western and it was a device to separate church and state so that one could adjudicate between Protestantism and Catholicism. Secularism was a political device to mediate between competing sects of Christianity rather than a model for mediating between the diversity and difference of religions. In fact, I was wondering what would happen if we were to shift the markers of the debate from the 16th century to 1492.

The year 1492 is a magical trope, critical to the history of the West. It is read as the year Columbus went in search of his false India we now call America. However it was not just the year of Columbus, but the year the forces of Ferdinand and Isabella expelled Jews from Spain, forcing them into exile. The death of the old Granada becomes a new starting point.

Granada then becomes the beginning of both a reductionist and expansive west. Historians have shown that Moorish Granada was a city as polyphonic as any novel. It was a city where for eight centuries Jews, Muslims, Christians co-existed in a raucous pluralism creating a cosmopolitan community. Granada almost becomes a historical fable here. It was a city of literatures, of books, where doctors read Hippocrates, Avicenna, Galen and Maimonides. Granada reflected a confluence of three religions of the book which celebrated each other. It was a world which traded ideas as it traded spices and pepper, completely at right angles to the inquisition and the crusades that followed. The year 1492 thus becomes a marker for the death of heterogeneity in the West. Viewed this way secularism is not a progressive problematic but a provincialisation of the West.

Thirdly, secularism is not just a bad genealogy but a false history. Secularism is preceded by the birth of the linear perspective. Robert

Romanyshyn and others point out that the linear perspective created the sense of objectification and alienation. The anatomisation and desacralisation of nature helps inaugurate the birth of science.

Unfortunately, secularism not only has a provincial mindset, it creates a false history of a conflict between religion and science. Historians of science have pointed out that few religious cosmologies were in conflict with science. It was only Christianity that was anti-evolutionary. The conflict between religion and science was created by the clergy when the battle for the universities took place and as religion was reduced to a secondariness within the university system. The question I am asking is why should false histories and incomplete provincial histories be reified into the future.

The philosopher William Connolly goes further. He mentions that the old model of secularism had three flaws. First, it was too embedded in Christianity to mediate anything else. Secondly, by privatising religion it created a flat land of ethics in public life. Religion might have been privatised but secular ethics was in no position to face the challenges of the discourses of public life as it had lost many of the metaphors which could have made public life more engaging. Thirdly, secularism as an arid rationality had no sense of the body. The secular answer to illness, disease, tyranny, brutality, guilt, envy and stigmatisation was the rationality of public life. As William Connolly observes, the very organisation of suffering, the very construction of categories, resides in the under-side of these categories. Secular suffering can at best produce humanitarianism. At it worse, it creates the triage which was applied as the systematic policy to Africa. Fourthly, the bottled down ethics of secularism is a liquid diet, an effete concoction that is in no position to analyse the new problems of science. Science no longer belongs to the Newtonian mechanical world. Science speaks the language of anarchy and complexity. It needs the new language of ethics to handle the problems of complexity and risk sciences. Secularism might have begun as an attempt to reduce the suffering of religious wars, but in categorising suffering in such a simple way, secularism has lost the dialects that understand the new varieties of suffering. As John

Caputo has pointed out, secularism slides over the problematic of suffering. As he said, 'Flesh is soft and vulnerable. It tears, bleeds, swells, bends, burns, starves, rolls over, exhausted, numb, ulcers... flesh smells.' Secularism has no theory of suffering beyond the old model of welfare state. Such an inherited language of parochialism has no answer to suffering beyond humanitarianism and triage. The recent death of a Syrian boy showed that secularism has no answer to the outsider. What we had either was cosmetic sentimentality or a guarded form of inclusion where a reluctant Europe created the entry of refugees with pipettes. It took a religiously inclined Pope invoking the words of Mother Teresa to break the secular impact of economics to allow some compassion, some justice.

What I want to suggest is that secularism began as a theory of problem solving, as a way of distancing church and state but what I wish to emphasise is that while the solution might have been efficient at a certain period in history, its attempt to decipher the problem between science and religion is composed of a series of false histories. Scientific cosmologies were eventually religious cosmologies. For example, evolutionary theory was only problematic for Christianity. No other religious cosmology had a problem with Darwin. The conflict between science and religion was an artificially constructed battle between clergy and newly emerging scientific establishments. It was the struggle for control over the university rather than a deep debate within knowledge. So, anyone discussing secularism today has to realise that as a form of problem solving it is parochial and limited. As a theory of ethics, it is provincial. Science has changed. The modern world of science after the quantum revolution realises that in a deep and fundamental way science and religion are no longer competing opposites but dialogic contemporaries working out a drama of reciprocity and difference.

A re-invented secularism then has to re-examine its basis as a theory of problem solving. It has to move beyond a world of dichotomies to a universe of pluralism. It has to respond to the return of the sacred and think of a re-enchantment of nature whereby nature enters the new social contract. Secularism has to move from

a contemporary theory of temporality to an understanding of both the transcendental and the futuristic. Secularism has to be seen as an experimental space whose narratives are incomplete and whose contemporary basis has to be redefined. What one now needs is a theory of reciprocal learning not a search for homogenised unity or a kind of artificial universality, but a world where conversation and communication takes place. The model here is not Kant but the philosophies of Alfred Wallace and Deleuze.

We need a new framework to understand a world where worship and secularism can coexist where secularism is not eliminated but is seen as one more style of problem solving. And, yet, we must ensure that neither is secularism demonised by a majoritarian regime. I think the anthropologist who provided such a framework was Raimon Panikkar. His *Worship and the secular Man* is a heuristic understanding of the relation between the religion and the secular. Panikkar distinguishes between three ways of life—heteronomy, autonomy and ontonomy. Heteronomy involves hierarchy, autonomy seeks self-determination, while ontonomy creates a web of ontological relationships. In heteronomy, one sees the dominance of religion. God is an absolute. In heteronomy, secularisation is a blasphemous undertaking soiling religious authority. In autonomy, secularisation is seen as the grand achievement of modernity while ontonomy seeks to interpret the process in different light. For Panikkar, western civilisation has been dominated by two contrasting models. In the first, religion and politics were either fused to create a theocracy or separated so that religion and politics were seen as incompatible forces. In the first, we create models of fundamentalism. In the second, we create the world of liberalisms. Panikkar feels that the western dichotomy between religion and politics is coming to an end. He adds, religion without politics becomes uninteresting while politics without religion turns irrelevant.

One needs a reinvented secularism which creates a dialogue between myth and history, science and religion, democracy and pluralism. We lost the first battle of secularism because we read the idea of secularism too parochially. We read it as a form of ritual

correctness rather than an epistemic model to minimise violence. Today, a re-invention of dialogic secularism is the basic requirement of the imaginative democracy. We have to invent the ways of Manto and Ananthamurthy. Modi is not the solution. He is a symptom of the mediocrity and tyranny of our time. If India is to be a knowledge society, it has to recognise possibilities of a new pluralism. Only this can be an antidote to the mediocrity and violence of today.

The **Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lectures** from the previous years can be downloaded from [www.soscba.org](http://www.soscba.org)

- 2014 Chaitanya Mishra - What Led to the 2006 Democratic Revolution in Nepal?
- 2013 Vandana Shiva - Seed Freedom and Food Freedom in Times of Globalisation
- 2012 André Béteille - Varieties of Democracy
- 2011 James F. Fisher - Globalisation in Nepal: Theory and Practice
- 2010 Elinor Ostrom – **Institutions and Resources**
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- 2008 David Ludden – **Where Is the Revolution? Towards a Post-National Politics of Social Justice**
- 2007 Ashis Nandy – **The Return of the Sacred: The Language of Religion and the Fear of Democracy in a Post-Secular World**
- 2006 Michael Oppitz – **Close-up and Wide-Angle: On Comparative Ethnography in the Himalaya and Beyond**
- 2005 Gérard Toffin – **From Caste to Kin: The Role of Guthis in Newar Society and Culture**
- 2004 Kumar Pradhan – **दार्जीलिङमा नेपाली जाति र जनजातीय चिनारीका नयाँ अडानहरू**
- 2003 Harka Gurung – **Trident and Thunderbolt: Cultural Dynamics in Nepalese Politics**





**Mahesh Chandra Regmi**  
(1929-2003)

The **Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture** was instituted by Social Science Baha in 2003 to acknowledge and honour historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi's contribution to the social sciences in Nepal. The 2015 Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture was delivered by **Shiv Visvanathan**, currently Professor, Vice Dean and Executive Director at the Centre for the Study of Science, Society and Sustainability at the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, Haryana, India.

Professor Visvanathan is a trained social anthropologist with a PhD from the University of Delhi. He has taught at the Delhi School of Economics and at the Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar. He was a Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, and served as visiting professor at a number of places. An interdisciplinary thinker, prolific writer and delightfully bold and eloquent orator, Professor Visvanathan's articles and writings reflect his dissection of diverse issues with a sharp and critical wit. Among his publications are *Organising for Science: The Making of an Industrial Research Laboratory*, *A Carnival for Science: Essays on Science, Technology and Development* and *The Loneliness of a Long Distance Scientist* (forthcoming).

