Forms of Secularity before Secularism
The Political Morality of Ashoka and Akbar

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Introduction

Not long ago, a virtual consensus existed in India, a view shared by both its opponents and defenders that secularism was alien to Indian culture and civilization. This view was found in the writings of T.N. Madan (e.g., 1991, 1997) who claimed that secularism was a gift of Christianity, a product of the dialectic between Protestantism and the Enlightenment as also K.M. Panikkar who claimed that modern, democratic, egalitarian, and secular Indian state was not built upon the foundations of ancient Indian thought but modern European traditions (Smith, 1963: 57). For Madan this alienness was the principal cause of the crisis of secularism in India. In his view, the distance between secularism and Indian cultural ethos was so great that it had little hope of taking root or bring peace between warring religious communities here. Panikkar drew the opposite conclusion that the alienness of secularism from ancient traditions and Hindu thought meant not the redundancy of secularism but rather the estrangement of ancient traditions and Hindu thought from contemporary social reality. With the birth of new socioeconomic relations and their rupture with older orders, concepts developed in a different earlier context had to give way to new concepts. Thus, there was nothing astounding about the alleged alien character of secularism to ancient Indian culture or thought.

Both these views shared at least one other assumption, namely, that there exists a tight fit between concepts and their background. Madan interpreted this in largely culturalist terms and also assumed at least some general long-term continuity. Once he had made culture primary, continuous, and existing in the long durée, he had to find modern secularism, as he understood it, both alien and unworkable in India. For Panikkar, the background was understood in socioeconomic terms and marked with discontinuities. It followed that a radical change in it necessitated an equally radical change in the repertoire of our conceptual
vocabulary. Secularism was a functional requirement of newly emergent conditions and the whole issue of its compatibility or not with ancient Indian culture was a nonissue.

I began by saying that there was a consensus that secularism was alien to or radically new in the Indian cultural context. This proposal needs a qualification. There are some who believed that in Mughal India, particularly in Akbar’s time and because of his initiative, there was a conscious attempt to formulate the conception of the secular state in India with the implication that this attempt would not have been possible without at least some elements of something akin to a secular state in the Indian tradition (Habib, 1997; Alam and Subrahmanyam, 1998; Khan, 1999). Others go even further back to the 3rd century BCE and claim that Ashoka was the epitome of tolerance and therefore the forerunner of a secular ruler.

This view has been vigorously challenged in India, particularly for its inexcusable anachronism. It reads too much of the present into the past. Obviously at issue here is not the term “secular.” Even if such a claim is ridiculously anachronistic, it is not so because of the extrapolation of a currently used term to an entity or a process in the past. The crux of the matter is the availability of a conceptual resource. The claim made by people like Humayun Kabir in the case of Akbar (1556–1605) and others for Ashoka (274–232 BCE) is that a full-fledged attempt, regardless of its success then or in the future, was made by these rulers to formulate a conception of what we now call the secular state (Kabir, 1968 and other writings). A few years ago I would have ridiculed this claim. However, now I am cautiously critical because I see that scholars such as Humayun Kabir were trying to articulate something important, even though they were making obvious mistakes in doing so.

So, here is what I wish to do in this chapter. I hope to explore the link between the modern conception of Indian secularism and its background conditions. I reject the culturalist view but not the idea that culture forms an important part of this background condition. I do not take the view that there is something continuous in every strand of what we now come to understand as Indian culture. But nor do I take the entirely opposite view that there is an absolute rupture between the cultures of two distinct periods of the history of this region. I reject the idea of a very tight or close connection between concepts and their background conditions. This undermines the idea of the open-endedness of concepts, forecloses the possibility of their novel and plural interpretations, and does not take cognizance of the idea of conceptual space. In my view at certain crucial junctures in Indian history, certain conceptual spaces were opened up which could contribute, under certain conditions, to the growth of modern secularism.
I have used the word conceptual space in the plural. I mean here that some spaces must be opened up simultaneously or over regular intervals of time which enable multiple historical agents to imagine new concepts, provided they have the motivation to do so. A conceptual space may be opened up and may remain wholly unutilized for long periods of time, sometimes so long that it may even recede out of our background, totally forgotten. Or else, it may get filled up by concepts, though these concepts may be in different stages of articulacy, some clearly formed, others only half done, still others barely born. Some concepts in the space may have a very short life – they get made, are used, and destroyed. Others have a much longer period of gestation. Most are revived, modified, recast, recycled, reappropriated. Some are even mutated. The important thing is they are available in the conceptual stock as a resource, for use, dissemination, and, under certain conditions, for mobilization.

A reasonably articulated and complex concept draws elements from multiple conceptual spaces, provided there are agents with the motivation to do so. This usually happens over long periods of time. This conceptual work is never fully finished and frequently never fully related to one another. So, one may find different concepts generated over different periods of time that retrospectively belong to one family or strongly resemble one another. Seen teleologically, some older conceptual elements may even be seen as evolving into something that is seen now to be well formed. At key moments in the history of a society, all these elements drawn from different periods of history and therefore from different conceptual spaces may be forged together to form a broad conception. Such a conception may even crystallize around a single word. Often the same word is used as the foci of the crystallization of many related conceptions. One can trace their different trajectories and offer a narrative of the different sources of a concept and a term associated with it (or many concepts and a term associated with it or one concept with many terms associated with it). So, what I wish to eventually write is a non-teleological conceptual history of what we today call secularism. I begin to take the first faltering steps toward an initial survey of the field – by exploring the relationship of political power and religion in early modern India and in greater detail to a much earlier period, a couple of centuries after the birth of Buddhism. I hope thereby to show that it is not so absurd to claim that forms of secularity existed in ancient and early modern India. The Panikkar–Madan view is mistaken. Conceptual spaces in multiple Indian traditions where elements were formed, opposed, and reinvented and out of which modern Indian secularism was constructed are available.

This shows neither that India has always been secular, in some or the other sense of the term, nor that there is some evolutionary growth of
Indian secularism. The story of the concept I wish to construct contains scattered presences of diverse, disconnected elements and long absences. The great scholar of comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s narrative on the concept of religion, illustrates this point. Cantwell-Smith tells us that the word “religio” was used quite extensively in Christian writings until the 4th century ADE. It had begun by then to reflect a situation of religious diversity and to designate the mode of worship of one set of people, clearly and radically distinct from the religions of outsiders. A little later, another thought accrued to the term that if it is right to worship God in one way, then it is wrong to worship him in any other. Some forms of worship are true, others false, i.e., the idea of true and false religions was born.

However, thereafter, this concept did not flourish till many centuries later. Cantwell-Smith says, “Early Western civilization was on the verge, at the time of Lactantius (240–320), of taking a decisive step in the formation of an elaborate, comprehensive, philosophic concept of religio. However, it did not take it. The matter was virtually dropped, to lie dormant for a thousand years.” It was picked up by thinkers of late medieval, early modern Europe.

Taking a cue from Cantwell-Smith, I wish to argue that one such space was opened up in 3rd century BCE by Ashokan edicts and filled by the conception of Dhamma. It then lay relatively dormant for several centuries, to be picked up first by Akbar and later by leaders such as Nehru in the anticolonial struggle. Curiously, Nehru too finds inexplicable continuities. In Glimpses of World History, he writes,

Akbar’s name stands out in Indian history, and sometimes, and in some ways, he reminds one of Ashoka. It is a strange thing that a Buddhist Emperor of India of the third century before Christ, and a Muslim Emperor of India of the sixteenth century after Christ, should speak in the same manner and almost in the same voice. One wonders if this is not perhaps the voice of India herself speaking through two of her great sons. (Nehru, 1990: 396)

Common to each of these three conceptions of political secularity is impartiality toward religious and philosophical worldviews. On modern Indian secularism, I urge the reader to read my earlier essays (Bhargava, 1998; 2006; 2009; 2011). Suffice it to say that according to the Indian model, the state must keep a principled distance from all public or private, individual-oriented or community-oriented religious institutions (not exclude religion from itself or exclude itself from religion) for the sake of the equally significant (and sometimes conflicting) values of peace, this-worldly goods, dignity, liberty, and equality (in all its complicated
individualistic or non-individualistic versions). In what follows, I will have something to say very briefly on Akbar. My primary focus in this chapter will be on Ashoka. I hope to establish that it was part of the logic of rule in India, one of the standing conditions of successful rule that as far as possible, political power be impartial toward all religions, not identify too closely with any one, and therefore to keep a distance from all. Ashoka was Buddhist, but he could not rule only as a Buddhist. In all probability, Akbar remained Muslim, but his political power could not be vested only in Islam.

Ashoka

Ashoka’s edicts, rediscovered between late 18th and mid-20th century, lie scattered in more than 30 places throughout India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Most of them are written in Brahmi script from which all Indian scripts and many of those used in Southeast Asia later developed. The language used in the edicts found in the eastern part of the subcontinent is Prakrit, associated with the people of Magadh, the one used in edicts found in the western part of India is closer to Sanskrit, using the Kharoshthi script, one extract of Edict is in Greek, and one bilingual edict in Kandahar, Afghanistan, is written in Greek and Aramaic. Ashoka’s edicts, the earliest decipherable corpus of written documents from India, have survived throughout the centuries because they are written on rocks, cave walls, and stone pillars. These edicts, decodified by British archaeologist and historian, James Prinsep, appear to be in Ashoka’s own words rather than in the more formal language in which royal edicts or proclamations in the ancient world were usually written. At the core of these edicts are a set of precepts about how to lead a good individual and collective life. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I focus on two major rock edicts, no. VII and no. XII.

In the Edict, Ashoka says that ‘he wishes all pasandas (followers of all “religious paths”) to cohabit throughout his kingdom.’ Cohabitation should not only be passive, however. Religious groups must be actively engaged with one another. What should the norms of cohabitation and mutual engagement be? Should they be imposed by the ruler on all or should the ruler search for an acceptable common ground? What are the conditions under which Ashoka seeks to formulate these norms? The 12th Edict implores that all pasandas restrain their speech, a specification of a more general self-restraint, samyama, mentioned in the Edict. This is seen as a virtue, even a civic virtue. But why restrain only speech? Why is this the core, the saara, of all pasandas? Why burden it with so much importance? What is the link between restraint on speech and coexistence?
Does speech have the power to disrupt coexistence? We all know that it can, but under what conditions is it so acutely significant as to become one of the central problems of a society and the chief concern of its royal edicts? Does speech have the power to push everyone over the edge or are people already so much on the edge that even speech can push them over it? Surely, it is easy for a reasonable person to tolerate people with whom she has minor differences. The difficulty of tolerance arises only when people with major, virtually irreconcilable differences encounter one another. What then is the context in which speech is virtually the sole carrier of deeply uncomfortable, major differences?

Early commentators had a rather sanguine view of social and religious conditions in Ashoka’s India. Thus, Vincent Smith claims that ‘the Dharma which he preached and propagated unceasingly with amazing faith in the power of sermonizing, had few, if any, distinctive features. The doctrine was essentially common to all religions. When we apply to Ashoka’s policy the word “toleration” with its modern connotation and justly applaud the liberality of his sentiments, another qualification is needed, and we must remember that in his days no really diverse religions existed in India. Buddhism and Jainism both were originally mere sects of Hinduism – or rather schools of philosophy founded by Hindu reformers – which in course of time gathered an accretion of mythology around the original speculative nucleus and developed into religions’ (Smith, 1920: 61). The same sentiment is echoed by Radhakumud Mukerjee who says,

It is to be remembered that Ashoka’s toleration was easy enough among the different denominations of the time, which were all but offshoots of the same central faith and did not differ among themselves so completely as the religions of Jesus, Zoroaster, or Mahomet introduced later into the country. Thus it was not difficult for the emperor, with due credit to the liberality of his views, to discern ‘the essence of the matter in all sects’ and honour it duly. (Mookerjee, 1928: 66)

To be sure, some commentators recognized that Ashokan edicts were written in times of intense sectarian strife. For instance, D.R. Bhandarkar says that people in Ashoka’s times had lost sight of the essentials of their faith and begun to focus excessively on rituals and theology. In these matters, there was unending acrimonious wrangling. “It is plain that there was friction and bitter spirit between these (Ajivikas, Nirgranthas and Buddhists) sects” and “[w]hen Ashoka lived religious fanaticism and sectarianism was rampant” (Bhandarkar, 2000: 111–13). Yet even he seems not to link this wish of the beloved of the gods for the peaceful cohabitation of his subjects to the rampant sectarianism of the time and to realize
its real import of the relevant Ashokan edicts. What made Ashoka inscribe what he did in Edict VII? What could be context be in which he is compelled to do this? Was it a casual royal wish or did it express a dire need of the times for cohabitation among religions groups?

We get no sense of this from existing literature. At any rate, it is not clear what form this strife took? If intense sectarian strife existed, there must at least have been some violence between sects, even if it was not purely motivated by doctrine. It is again hard to tell unless we try and imagine vividly what the background conditions were to some of these key edicts.

**Background Conditions (1)**

The 6th century BCE was a period of great social ferment. Karl Jaspers has famously termed this extraordinary period in world history as the Axial Age. Jasper’s own formulation is deeply problematic, yet it does point to something of huge importance in every major civilization. Among Indian historians, Romila Thapar came quite close to making much the same point. She describes this period as a “century of questioning.” There was vigorous debate and discussion among multiple sects concerned both with “religious belief and philosophical speculation.” Among these, Thapar singles out the uncompromising materialism of the early Charvakas, the metaphysical subtleties of the Upanishadic thinkers, and the dominant ritualism of the Vedic Brahmins. It seems that for her local, internal critiques had by this period given way to a more general and accentuated social critique, hence the term the “century of questioning.” I do not dispute this, but quite clearly the term “axiality” refers to something deeper, signaling that something extraordinarily new was now at stake. Thapar’s description of this ferment does not quite get here.

I believe that despite all its problems, the term “axiality” is not entirely inappropriate for this period, for something new and very radical begins to take shape, changing the entire intellectual landscape and carrying the potential of an enormous social revolution. In order to better grasp what I have in mind, I would try to offer a quasi-phenomenological account of this period.

Pre-Buddhist India was dominated by the Vedas. The Rig Veda, the first and most important of these, contains hymns first meant only to be recited and much later written down. The hymns were essentially for the Kshatriyas and the Brahmins and reflected the beliefs and practices of these two upper castes. Sacrificial rituals (yajnas) performed for wealth, good health, sons, and a long life for the yajamana – all constituents of a this-worldly conception of human flourishing formed the core of these
hymns. Some sacrifices were simple, domestic affairs, performed by the householder. Others involved animal sacrifice in order to procure horses, cows, land, and more riches, for which the participation of ritual specialists was requisite.

Ritual sacrifice was also seen to be propitiating Gods, powerful, mostly benevolent beings who could be persuaded by these offerings to intervene in the world of men. Dharma in the Rig Veda refers to ritual sacrifice – “sacrifice as the power supporting the cosmos and sustaining life and, socio-economically, as the law men must act upon” (Brereton, 2004: 485; Wezler, 2004: 647). Because it refers to something other than and in some sense beyond human beings, it is not anthropocentric. Yet as it largely involves a transaction between self and the world, it would not be inappropriate to call it an ethic of self-realization. To attain all this-worldly goods, ritual sacrifice must be performed and Gods propitiated so that they can intervene in this world to facilitate self-realization.

Two interesting developments within this worldview must also be noted. First, sacrificial rituals increasingly became longer, elaborate, and complicated, sometimes necessitating the simultaneous involvement of several Brahmins (Jamison and Witzel, 1992: 4). This meant the deployment of massive wealth to perform the ritual and to offer *dakshinas* (donation, fee, or reward) to the Brahmins. Second, as these rituals became more complex and expensive, they appeared to enhance the intrinsic worth of the ritual, as if a magical quality inhered in the sacrifice itself and its performance was sufficient to yield all goals of human flourishing. Even when Gods were invoked, they began to be viewed as instruments in bringing about the sacrifice or in completing the course of mystical ceremonies that compose it. The more sacrifice was regarded as possessing a mystical potency superior even to the Gods, the more the propitiation of Gods became redundant or at best secondary. As Surendranath Dasgupta (1963: 21) puts it, “If performed to perfection, it was capable of fulfilling the desired objective independent even of the gods.” Imperfections in sacrifice, on the other hand, may lead to proliferating misfortune.

How must we reconcile the assertion that the entire purpose of sacrifice was for this-worldly human flourishing with the claim that one of the purposes of rituals was to yield benefits beyond this life and that the world was not only for humans but also included Gods? A couple of points should help resolve this apparent contradiction. First, a distinction between the terrestrial and the celestial is compatible with both spheres existing in the same cosmos. Gods were immortal and moved constantly between the terrestrial and the celestial, but this mobility was very much a part of this cosmic world, quite like the movement of birds and planes, no matter how high they soar is a part of the same world. Gods had a definite origin
in birth and themselves acquired their immortality through sacrifice. Furthermore, they are ever dependent on food supplies from this world. Second, the cessation of life on earth meant a flight to another loka—swargaloka or narkaloka—depending upon the quantum of spiritual merit acquired. However these lokas too were a part of the same cosmos, not radically other-worldly. Life after death was life in another of these lokas, very much in this cosmic world conceived more widely. As G.C. Pande (1957: 284) put it, “The idea of the essentially divine and immortal human soul appears to have been as foreign to the thought of the Brahmanas as to that of pre-Orphic Greece.”

We already have here indications of several sources of potential conflict between followers of different weltanschauungs as well as among those with the same worldview: First, an internal conflict within followers of Vedic teachings, between those who indulged in expensive and elaborate rituals and those who found this baroque quality entirely unnecessary, wasteful, and distracting from one’s primary objectives. Second, between those who believed in the necessity of propitiating Gods and those who gradually moved away from this view and felt that the only significant action (karma) was the sacrifice (yajna) itself.

A third conflict also existed. Several commentators attest to the presence of pre-Aryan people in India. One such group was probably called Munis, a wandering group of sparsely clad ascetics, deeply skeptical about the idea of a creator of the universe, believing that the world in which they lived was real and that salvation in this world was possible by exacting practical discipline (Pande, 1957: 257–62). They were generally pessimistic about other forms of liberation in this world and had little conception of any other world. The Munis are infrequently mentioned in the Vedas, but that is probably due to their radical difference with the Vedic tradition and their consequent marginalization. It does not mean that their existence in this period was rare. Thus, a third major conflict existed between Vedics and pre-Vedics, one ritual-oriented, oriented to this-worldly gains, and very largely materialist, the other renouncing the world of this-worldly pleasures and rituals, rejecting beliefs in Gods and seeking liberation deep in the forests through rigorous practical discipline.

More on Background Conditions

I believe we now possess a richer understanding of the background to Ashoka’s Dhamma but are still nowhere near capturing the deeper and perhaps more central conflicts of that period. A new cosmology born out of the confluence of existing Vedic and pre-Vedic traditions but radically opposed to them illustrates the first of these.
The key difference lies in the birth of the idea of radical transcendence and therefore of a duality between this world (samsara) and Brahmna or Atman, the ultimate reality pervading the whole universe or our deepest inner, imperishable selves. Samsara is radically separated from Brahmna or Atman in that the latter can be achieved only by totally negating the former. Liberation (moksha, mukti) from the cycle of samsara could be achieved only through jnana, knowledge of an inner, intuitive, experiential kind that could only come upon the seeker as a sort of revelation that would transform him instantaneously. Moksha cannot be attained by performing sacrifices. Nor by physical austerities, even for thousands of years. Offerings (dana), sacrifices, celibacy, recitations of Vedas, and performance of austerities may earn merit but only steadfastness in pursuit of the knowledge of Brahmna would help us achieve moksha or true immortality (Singh, 2008: 208–09).

Both Brahmna and Atman are wholly outside the given, immanent, and mundane world (samsara) and manifest a point from which one can, to use Benjamin Shwartz’s phrase, “stand back and look beyond” and contemplate it. Hence the appropriateness of the term “radical transcendence.” Hence also the aptness of the use of axiality. The Upanishads provide the axial turn in Indian civilization. Here we have the birth of a major potential conflict between vastly different weltanschauungs. For nothing that the Vedic peoples or the Munis think to be significant is truly or ultimately important for Upanishadic thinkers. Indeed, what is of great value to one worldview might be of least value to the other.

Nonetheless, there is one sense in which the break between the pre-Vedic/Vedic and the Upanishadic followers may not have been total. This has to do with the necessary place of others in an ethic of self-realization. What follows are very tentative remarks, the principal import of which is that higher order other-related values or principles (let’s call this morality higher, separate, and transcendental) are negligible or secondary in pre-Buddhist thought in the Indian subcontinent. Allow me to elaborate. For Vedic Brahmanism, dharma has less to do with what we owe one another. Neither sacrificial rituals nor Gods are invoked for the good of the generalized others, say for the Munis. In both its individual or collective forms, this is a self-focused ethic of fulfillment or realization. The content of this ethic does not change with the introduction of the idea of radical transcendence. The early moment of the axial turn in Indian civilization does not appear to make the generalized other central to its ethic of individual or collective self. To be sure, notions of justice, right, and wrong exist, but these are probably in the hands of the Kshatriya king, matters decided in any given context by his will or judgment. Dharma in its Vedic or post-Vedic, Upanishadic senses has very little to do with what we must, by some transcendental necessity, owe one another.
All this begins to change with developments in later Upanishadic thought and more clearly with the Buddha. With Buddha’s teachings, the transcendental point, to use Gananath Obeyesekhe’s (2002) phrase is “ethicised” (in my terminology, one might say, moralized). From now on, judgments of the rightness or wrongness of action are “mediated and delayed.” They may even be enunciated after one’s death. This is the birth of transcendental morality – a transcendental evaluation of the rightness or wrongness of action in relation to others which affects a person’s life not in this world alone but his destiny after death, outside this world. This also entails a shift in the meaning of dharma. Dharma from now on also begins to mean this radically transcendental morality. Quite clearly, there must have been not only a conflict between ancient ethics and this new ethic inspired by Buddha but also a contest over the meaning of key terms, such as dharma. We now have two radically differing notions of dharma, one a particular ethic of a single-cosmos–oriented (this-worldly) self-realization and the other, a transcendental morality for all concerned with right interpersonal conduct. Indeed, even the term “interpersonal” is not quite correct, because the conduct in question includes how human beings behave toward non human animals. “All” means all humans and animals, virtually all living species. The protest over ritual sacrifice was perhaps more against the sacrificial killings of animals. Buddha’s teachings thus instantiates a major transvaluation of Vedic values, a “dynamic best captured in Assmann’s notion of normative inversion whereby one group’s rights and responsibilities are turned by another group into prohibitions and scandals” (Pollock, 2005: 404).

A thicker description of the multiple sources of manifold conflicts in Ashoka’s times is now clearly available. In addition to the three conflicts mentioned in Section III, I have provided in this section an account of at least two conflicts that probably go much deeper: Between pre-Vedic and Vedic immanentists on the one hand and transcendentalists who developed the Upanishads and evolved the notion of the radical distinction between samsara and Brahmana/Atman. A second even deeper conflict exists between two different ethics, one Upanisadic, which has a transcendental metaphysics but no (or perhaps a weak) conception of transcendent-AL morality, and the other which opposes transcendental orders of the real outer or inner world but develops a strong idea of transcendental morality that allows judgments from outside any this-worldly point on the actions of every subject, both self- and other-related – i.e., related to ones kith and kin, ones community (jati), and even those entirely outside one’s fold. The social ramifications of this conflict can hardly be overestimated.

I hope to have shown the deeply mistaken character of the view that religious interaction in Ashoka’s period of rule was relatively trouble-free
and that he must have had an easy time finding a common ground among followers of different schools of thought. It is well known that shared philosophical and cultural assumptions provide no immunity against intense conflicts. The assumption that offshoots of an entity conflict weakly with their parent is even more untenable. Buddhism may have been an offshoot of “Hinduism” but conflicted with it at many levels, on many issues. As for Jaina philosophy, it is not even entirely clear what epistemic gain ensues to see it simply as an offshoot of Hinduism. Thus, Vincent Smith and Radhakumud Mookerjee clearly underestimate the depth of conflict in Ashokan times. Thapar and Bhandarkar are right that this was a period of intense and bitter sectarian conflict. However, in my view, even they are unable to home in on the novelty of what was at stake in Ashoka’s period. By vividly representing the central conflicts of those times, this account now gives an entirely different gloss on Romila Thapar’s remarks that this is a period of intense sectarian struggles and to her claim that 6th century BCE was “the century of universal questioning (Thapar, 1961: 4). It also helps us to see the real issues at stake in those struggles – a conflict between notions of weak and radical transcendence as well as between immanent and transcendental moralities. The 6th century BCE must have been a century of massive intellectual and emotional turmoil with gigantic social implications, the like of which had never been witnessed earlier. It appears that the need of the times was a political morality that could arbitrate between multiple, radically different, often incommensurable rival conceptions, so that each could coexist and learn from one another."10

How to Build a Common Ground

What then, despite profound differences in worldviews, could the basis of such coexistence be? For a start, the possibility of coexistence depended on toleration, the capacity to put up with the practices of others despite deep moral disagreement. Better still, it needed mutual adjustment and accommodation. Vedic, Brahmanical ethics needed to be moralized, to some degree; The Shramanic worldview, the worldview of Buddhists, Nirgranthis, and Ajivikas, needed to accept some value in rituals and rites. This could hardly have been easy, given the Shramanic contempt for rituals and the Brahminic distaste for anti-ritualistic, transcendental morality. The edicts encourage partial reconciliation. They note that rituals play an important role in the daily lives of people. They are also significant on occasions of birth or marriage of sons and daughters, journey, sickness, and death.11 Yet, several edicts mention their value is often exaggerated. They may be appropriate in certain contexts but are of “doubtful value.”12 More
importantly, rituals do not address one of the most burning moral issues of the times: Inter-Pasandic disagreement and conflict. Hence, Edict XXII says,

The beloved of the Gods does not wish to overvalue gifs and sacrifice. More important than these is the reverence one’s faith commands or the number of its followers or its core ethical values. Even more important than these ethical values are the essentials of all faiths and pasandas. It is these essentials that constitute the common ground of these seemingly conflicting conceptions.\textsuperscript{13}

What then is the common ground among rival conceptions? Brahminic rituals, Jaina self-denial, or Buddhist transcendental morality cannot constitute this ground. For Ashoka, \textit{Dhamma} constitutes the all-important common ground, the essentials, of all \textit{pasandas}. What then are these essentials? Interpreters here give differing answers: \textit{Dhamma} is sometimes seen as virtue, religious truth, or simply piety. But the most convincing answer, consistent with what is mentioned above and provided by Obeyesekre and Tambiah is that \textit{Dhamma} is akin to empirically identifiable political morality. If so, it is fair to say that for Ashoka, rites and rituals have no meaning unless embedded within an ethical perspective and the ethical import of these gifts is overridden by their lack of moral significance. This is why they may be offered only \textit{as long as they are not injurious to anyone} (humans as well as nonhumans). No animal may be killed in order to be sacrificed. Nor should there be any \textit{samaja} (assembly) for such a purpose, implying that other kinds of assemblies, especially the \textit{sangha}, are permissible.\textsuperscript{14}

What then is the content of \textit{dhamma}? The fundamental principle of \textit{dhamma} is \textit{vacaguti}, variously interpreted as restraint on speech or control on tongue. It is significant that the edicts recommend that there be restraint on speech but have little to say on restraining actions. It is almost as if the spoken word is not only more important than the written word but also more significant than physical action. Here again, it is crucial to retrieve the surrounding context of Ashokan edicts.

\textbf{The 12th Edict: Restraint on Speech}

We cannot recover that world but we can imagine one where virtually nothing is written or read. Writing and reading have not yet taken possession of our psyche.\textsuperscript{15} Speech has no visual presence; it can’t be seen. Every word is spoken. Language is rooted and resides almost entirely in sound. Text, meaning something strung together, is also only spoken and heard. Everything is thought aloud and communicated. The spoken word
carries the entire burden of our emotional life, all that uplifts or gets us down, brings us together or pulls us apart. The entire complex of Art, Philosophy, and ‘Religion’, poetry, our deepest metaphysical thoughts, acts to honor Gods and Goddesses are all spoken, recited, sung, chanted, and heard. All these are composed, transmitted, stored, reproduced, and enriched orally. One might even say then that life itself is lived in sound. And, perhaps, destroyed in sound too.

Not only life but also public life is lived and extinguished in sound. Indeed, the public domain is constituted almost entirely by the spoken word and can therefore be disassembled by it too. After all, when words flow off the tongue effortlessly, they also tumble out inadvertently and what is worse, carelessly. But then, words that matter must be enunciated with great care, even greater thought, for once uttered they can’t be withdrawn. It is important in such cultures to differentiate such unguarded speech from one that carries weight or is valued. If they are to perform all the functions that the written word serves for us now, such treasures must be stored and remembered in memorable forms. To be remembered without being written and to be effective, this speech must be crafted with great economy and be crisp, rhythmic, and rendered with great power. Only thus will it transform into a powerful mode of action. Words in oral cultures have always had enormous power. They can beckon Gods to help us tide over problems, create something out of nothing, empower or disempower others, turn them into stone, even kill them. Words can be weapons or an elixir. They can soothe or cause grievous hurt. In oral cultures, words have magical potency.

One can hardly overestimate the immediacy and vibrancy of social interaction and, more pertinently, the agonistic energies in predominantly oral societies and its publics. Verbal duels, speech fights, word-wars, verbal tongue lashing of adversaries in intellectual combats, all these are commonly found in societies largely unaffected by writing. Moreover, vitriolic reciprocal name-calling exists frequently with fulsome expression of self-praise and excessive bragging about one’s own prowess.

Given this context, one can now understand why oral speech acts appear to have more weight than all other forms of action. It is almost as if the greatest harm that might be inflicted on the other is through speech rather than physical action. It is not clear from the edict what the level of physical violence in that society was, if social interaction was already civil enough for people to even conceive that they could injure or kill one another over philosophical or religious differences. At any rate, either “hate speech” was considerably more significant than physical violence or else physical violence was largely confined to the territorial aggression and politics among the Kshatriyas. Quite certainly the antagonistic energy in speech
was unmatched even by physical violence. Generally people knew how to do things with spoken words. They poked fun, ridiculed, abused, cursed, mocked, scoffed at, were satirical and sarcastic, belittled and humiliated others – all by subtle manipulation of the spoken word.

Madhav Deshpande (2009) provides an extremely interesting example of the oral skills of ancient Indians. The term “devanaampriya” literally means beloved of the Gods. In the edicts the word is used extensively as an honoric adjective for Emperor Ashoka. This is a bit odd because the edicts were written after Ashoka had turned Buddhist and in this early period of Buddhism, the existence of Gods was frequently denied. The Vedics frequently refer to followers of Buddhism and Jainism as devadvis, i.e., haters of God. Deshpande recounts an interesting passage from the Skanda Purana in which Vishnu is reincarnated as Buddha in order to first lure the asura ⁶ Mauryans. The Shudras, Vedics believed, had wrongly usurped the rule of the earth into abandoning the Vedic dharma, making sacrifices redundant and denying the existence of Gods and then destroying them in a battle between devas and asuras. In a battle between good and evil, the real lovers of the Gods, the Vedic people, had to defeat all those who were haters of Gods. In short, devanaampriya could be used as an honoric title only for Vedic kings. How then could Ashoka, a ruler who was not from the Kshatriya caste and who is widely believed to deny the existence of Gods, refer to himself as devanaampriya? From Ashoka’s point of view, to follow his ancestors in using this term was perfectly valid politically and morally. He wished to support and get support from all pashandas, not only from the fellow-Buddhists, Ajivikas, and Nirgranthis but also from followers of Vedic dharma, those who believed in Gods and in the value of ritual sacrifice for their propitiation. But from the Vedic point of view, this usage must have been entirely inappropriate. However, instead of trying to reappropriate this term the Vedics began to use it as a term of abuse and contempt. Even Upanashadic philosophers might have used the term in the same manner, implying a fool (moorkha), i.e., devoid of the knowledge of the Brahma. Devanaampriya became a synonym of devadvis. Devanaampriya now begins to have a negative valance because a once positive term is being used sarcastically. In short, they fiercely contested the legitimacy of Ashoka’s use of the term for himself by first disassociating, then renouncing, and finally denouncing the term.

Two Forms of Self-Restraint

We do not have much evidence of the verbal battles and hate speech of that period but the edicts imply that verbal wars in that period were intense and
brutal. They simply had to be reined in. But what kind of speech must be curbed? Edict 12 says that speech that without reason disparages other *pasandas* must be restrained. Speech critical of others may be freely enunciated only if we have good reasons to do so. However, even when we have good reasons to be critical, one may do so only on appropriate occasions and even when the occasion is appropriate, one must never be immoderate. Critique should never belittle or humiliate others. Thus, there is a multilayered, ever-deepening restraint on one’s verbal speech against others. Let us call it *other-related self-restraint*. However, the edicts do not stop at this. They go on to say that one must not extol one’s own *pasanada* without good reason. Undue praise of one’s own *pasanada* is as morally objectionable as unmerited criticism of the faith of others. Moreover, the edicts add that even when there is good reason to praise one’s own *pasanada*, this should be done only on appropriate occasions and even on those occasions, never immoderately. Undue or excessive self-glorification is also a way to make others feel small. For Ashoka, blaming other *pasandas* out of devotion to one’s own *pasandas* and unreflective, uncritical, effulgent self-praise can only damage one’s *pasanada*. By offending and thereby estranging others, it undermines one’s capacity for mutual interaction and possible influence. Thus, there must equally be multi-textured, ever-deepening restraint for oneself. Let this be *self-related self-restraint*.

Elsewhere, in the 7th Edict, Ashoka emphasizes the need not only for self-restraint, *samyama*, but also purity of heart, *bhaav shuddhi*,17 again a self-oriented act. *Bhaav shuddhi* is frequently interpreted as self-purification, purity of mind. However, this term is ambiguous between self-purification within an ethic of individual self-realization or one that at least includes cleansing one’s self of ill-will toward others. My own view is that in the context of the relevant edicts, the moral feeling of good will toward others or at least an absence of ill-will toward others must be a constitutive feature of what is meant by *bhaav shuddhi*. Self-restraint and self-purification are not just matters of etiquette or prudence. They have moral significance.

Given all this, and in order to advance mutual understanding and mutual appreciation, it is better, the 7th Edict says, to have *samovaya*, concourse – an assembly of *pasandas* where they can hear one another out, communicate with one another. They may then become *bahushruta*, i.e., one who listens to all, the perfect listener, and open-minded. This way they will not only have *atma-pasanda vraddhi*, the growth in the self-understanding of one’s own *pasanada* but also the growth of the essentials of all. The edicts here imply that the ethical self-understanding of *pasandas* is not static but constantly evolving and such growth is crucially dependent
on mutual communication and dialogue with one another. Blaming others without good reason or immoderately disrupts this process and, apart from damaging *dhamma*, diminishes mutual growth.

The edicts add that no matter how generous you are with gifts and how sincere your devotion to rituals, if you lack *samyama*, *bhaavshuddhi*, and the quality of open-mindedness. *Bahushruta*, then all the liberality in the world is in vain. Conversely, one who is unable to offer gifts but possess the aforementioned virtues lives a *dhammic* life. Thus, one whose speech disrespects no one, who has no ill will toward others, and who does no violence to living beings is truly *dharmic*. Dharma is realized not by sacrifice but by right speech and conduct.

**Buddhism and Ashokan Dhamma**

But it might be argued that since Ashoka promoted *dhamma*, sometimes with missionary zeal and he was a self-proclaimed convert and dedicated to Buddhism, in the last analysis, he did after all promote Buddhism. His state was then aligned to one particular faith. His policy of toleration was either secondary to his primary loyalty to Buddhism or stemmed from purely pragmatic, not principled reasons.

A number of issues are involved in this argument. First, how was Ashoka’s Buddhist proclivities compatible with his policy of “toleration”? Here there are two broad views. First, the view associated with Thapar and Gokhle. For Thapar (1997: 149), Ashoka invented the whole policy of *dhamma*. He may have borrowed from Hinduism and Buddhism but “it was an essence an attempt on the part of the king to suggest a way of life which was both practical and convenient and highly moral. His policy of *dhamma* was not merely a recording of Buddhist principles.” What of those pillar edicts where he explicitly espouses Buddhist principles? Thapar claims that in such edicts he was expressing himself not as a Mauryan emperor but as a private individual. After all, the term “nirvana” central to the Buddhist conception does not appear even once in the inscriptions. So, as an individual, he might have been a Buddhist, but he cannot really be called a Buddhist king.

Stanley Tambiah (1986) disagrees. He concedes that Ashoka’s *dhamma* embodies a sociopolitical morality for all *pasandas* and could not have reflected a simple Buddhist worldview. He was no crude promoter or propagandist of Buddhist faith. His policy could not have been called Buddhist in any straightforward sense. Yet, the sociopolitical morality that he espoused was profoundly shaped by Buddhism. After all, Ashoka tried to implement a universal, even transcendental political *morality*, in a
context where law and morality were not distinguished and both were seen as purely human, this worldly products. His emphasis on the priority of dharma over danda in a domain where dharma supposedly had no jurisdiction earlier and his view of the polity as an agent of universal morality and righteousness could not have been possible without Buddhist inspiration.

There appears to be truth in both views. There is surely something anachronistic in Thapar’s distinction between a person’s politics and his personal, private faith. There is a decidedly modernist flavor to the way in which she strictly separates faith and politics. Yet, it is also true that Ashoka’s dhāmma was no simple translation or extrapolation of Buddhist principles into a hitherto uncharted political domain. Dhāmma was Ashoka’s invention, a political morality that grew not only from Buddhism but from the needs of a diverse society. Tambiah is right that Ashokan dhāmma should not be judged by the yardstick of canonical nibbānic Buddhism. Yet he would not disagree with Thapar that dhāmma was Ashoka’s own policy not concerned narrowly with the propagation of Buddhist preachings. It seems reasonable then to accept that Ashokan dhāmma could not have been possible without a profound moral revolution and that it did not merely reflect Buddhism, narrowly conceived. Moreover, it was a response shaped as much by Buddhist transcendental morality as by the political needs of an increasingly diverse and often conflicting society.

My own view on this can be expressed thus. In pre-Ashokan Vedic times, dharma was mode of relation between men and Gods for the fulfillment of their ethical goals. It had little to do with law, politics, and morality. The duty of the king was to maintain orderly human relationships by punitive measures (danda), not to provide for their welfare or be concerned with higher morality. Ashoka transformed this by claiming first that the king had an important facilitating role to play in fulfilling the this-worldly ends of life and that this ethical function of the state required that the polity be governed by a higher, transcendental morality. Dhāmma could not reflect a single ethic but had instead to do with the moral regulation of multiple ethics. This is why rituals were permitted as long as they were not injurious to other humans or animals. This is also why collective festivities leading to animal sacrifice were not permitted and this is also why though some animals could be killed for food, none could be killed purposelessly for sacrifice. Ashokan restrictions on the treatment of prisoners and his emphasis on proper treatment of slaves, friends, and strangers, friends and family, all stemmed from the same moral need of specifying what we own one another as members of a moral community. Ashoka did not wish to interfere in the ethics of other pasandas.
He tolerated them because there was some value in these practices but only as long as they did not contravene basic moral norms.

A second point in favor of my position arises from the very nature of Buddhism. When Ashoka sent his emissaries to other lands, he did not do so to convert their peoples by force. He stressed the idea of moral rather than physical conquest. Teachings alone would and should persuade people to embrace Buddhism. Besides, as a universal moral perspective, Buddhism did not require that to enter it, others had to exit from their faith. Conversion did not mean entering the new and leaving one’s previous pasanda but rather embracing Buddhism in addition to the faith one already had. Leading a Buddhist life meant introducing the idea of proper conduct in relation to others within one’s existing ethic. Loyalty to one’s existing faith was entirely compatible with Buddhist morality. Buddhism was compatible with multiple ethical visions, albeit appropriately modified Ashoka.

Akbar

I begin with my exploration in the reverse chronological order and first briefly take up the context within which Akbar’s inventive policies emerged. In a context where the religious views of rulers failed to coincide with the religion of the subjects, dissenters within Sunni Islam continued to invoke the sharia but altered its meaning, using it to legitimize an ideal city as one that is composed of diverse religious and social practices and an ideal ruler to be one who ensured not the well-being of Muslims alone but of the entire people consisting of diverse religious groups. For these dissenters, sharia was not to be interpreted in narrow juridical terms but in broader philosophical terms (Alam, 2004). It became a more flexible concept of practical political philosophy rather than a rigid concept of law. In the narrow juridical interpretation found for instance in the works of Barani and Sirhind, the rule of the sharia meant not only the total dominance by Muslims but also, if not their elimination, at the very least the humiliation of infidels. To those who interpreted sharia more philosophically, e.g., some of the Mughals, the sharia came to be synonymous with the Namus (nomos, divine law) the most important task of which was to ensure a balance of conflicting interests, of harmony between groups and communities and of noninterference in their personal belief.

Second, dissenters within Sunni Islam developed a conception of a state based on justice which if not entirely independent of sharia was at least not incompatible with it. This view is also found in the Nasirian tradition, in Akhlaq-i-Nasiri by Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274). In Akhlaq (ethics) texts, the focus turns on man, his living, and the world. According to these texts,
though, the perfection of man cannot be achieved without the adulation of divinity, it is equally impossible to attain it without a peaceful social organization and cooperation. Social cooperation, in turn, depends on justice. If justice (adl) disappears, each man will merely pursue his own particular, self-related desires. This negates social cooperation. To facilitate it, a balancing agency is required. The sharia serves this purpose but it cannot work without being administered by a just king whose principal duty is to keep people in control through affection and favors. Cooperation can be achieved in two ways: (a) through mohabbat, mutual love. Or, in the absence of such natural love, (b) by an artifice, i.e., justice. If love among people were available, insāf (equity) would not be needed. (The word insāf comes from nasf, which means taking the half, reaching toward the middle. The munsif, the dispenser of justice, divides the disputed object into two equal parts. Division into halves implies multiplicity whereas love is the cause of oneness.) So, social cooperation is to be achieved through justice administered in accordance with law, protected and promoted by king whose principal instruments of control are affection, favors, and justice rather than simple command and obedience.

In the Akhlaq literature, justice in the ideal state is social harmony and the coordination and balance of the conflicting claims of diverse interest groups that may comprise people of various religions. Divergence from adl causes clashes and thus destruction. In a treatise of the 17th century compiled in the Deccan, it is argued that the objective of the state, the sultanate is to fulfill worldly human needs but since human being follow diverse religions, conflict might ensue. The role of the perfect God-sent person, Namus or sharia is to avoid such conditions of conflict. Justice further requires that no one should get either less or more than he deserves as a member of his class. Excess and shortfall both dislocate the nature of the union and social relations of companionship. Throughout, this emphasis on the desirability of justice is argued from the point of view of a secular ethic. The function of the state is to achieve ideal social balance. Justice is for all and is against discrimination against one or the other section of the subjects (riaya). A primary advice to king is to consider his subjects as ‘sons and friends’ irrespective of their faith. So justice serves a real public interest. A non-Muslim but just ruler will serve society better than an unjust Muslim Sultan (Alam, 2004: 59). The ancient Sassanid kings remained in power for 5,000 years (sic) even though they were all fire worshippers and infidels. Akhlaq and Mutazilite theories of justice had a lot in common except that the former was dependent on the will of God and the latter on human reason. In the Sunni tradition, the former prevailed but aspects of the second whose ethics was close to that of the first also crept into the tradition.
Akbar creatively deployed resources from this tradition to invent his own policies that enhanced the value of what he had inherited. Since the sultanate was equated with the caliphate in India, every Muslim ruler was dependent on the religious guidance of ulema. The Sadar-us-Sadur was the chief theologian of the state—responsible for the interpretation and application of the shariat and invariably an exponent of the narrow juridical view. When it came into conflict with the broader, philosophical interpretation, Akbar claimed that as a just ruler, he was not bound by any particular interpretation of sharia and if there was any disagreement on a point of law, he had full authority to give a legally binding interpretation—in conformity with the injunctions of the Quran and the prophet. In fact in 1579, Akbar drastically reduced the powers of this official.

Over time, other influences became preponderant. Though formally unlettered, Akbar had diverse spiritual interests. His tutor introduced him to Rumi (d. 1273) and Hafiz of Shiraz (d. 1389) under ideological influences traceable to Ibn al-Arabi and Abd al-Karim al-Jili (Aquil, 2007: 232). In August 1562, he remitted the tax on pilgrimage centers of Hindu. In March 1564, Akbar abolished jizya (tax on Hindus).²¹

An eclectic man, Akbar’s Sulh-I-Kul (“absolute/universal peace”) was to be his basis for the fraternity of faiths (Rizvi, 1992: 3–21; Habib, 2004). Once the mahzar of 1579 failed to appease the Muslim orthodoxy, the subsequent years from 1581–1605 saw the emergence of Din-i-Ilahi— independent of either orthodox Islam or Hinduism and questioning both with a neutral terminology for both intra- and inter—controversies—heavily influenced by pantheism: “God creates visible differences whereas the Reality is the same.” Pursuit of empire and spirit of syncretism saw the steady evolution of mutually consistent religious ideas from a multiplicity of sources.

Akbar’s liberal religious outlook is also considered to be the motive force of his Rajput policy. His close relationship with the Rajputs was, initially, essentially political, based on an elite commonality of interests. Subsequently, it symbolized a broad liberal social tolerance (Chandra: 43). This alliance strengthened cultural rapprochement and opened space for the Sufi concept of Wahdat-al-Wajud (monism as a reality/unity of being) as well as the nirguna bhakti emphasis on religious unity and social equality.

Akbar’s contact with Shaykh Taj-al-din Ajodhani in 1578 moved him to a realm of his own (Ahmad, 1964: 167–81). He forbade forcible conversions to Islam, removed restrictions on the building of temples and appointed Hindus in high places. He organized religious discourses, initially only for the ulema, open to the Hindus, Jains, Parsis, and Christians after 1578. In February–March 1575, he gave orders for the erection
of *Ibadatkhana* (House of Worship) for religious discussions. Between 1579 and 1605, Akbar hosted three Jesuit missions but his profound faith in *Wahadat al-Wujud* remained deeply rooted. In his search for the transcendent truth, Jainism and Hinduism, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, as well as Iranian dualism contributed. In the making of *Sulh-I Kul* as the state policy, Ibn al-Arabi’s acceptance of idol-worship insofar as the object of a man’s worship is God himself and the theory of “perfect man” significantly contributed.

Between 1579 and 1582, Akbar passed through the most critical years of his spiritual experiences leading to profound changes. Matrimonial alliances across religions were pursued and the Mahabharata and the Upanishad were translated into Persian. *Jizya* was abolished again in 1580. Various Hindu festivals were celebrated in Akbar’s court. Following Hindu yogis, Akbar abstained from eating meat and had the center of his head shaved. He named his own household servants chelas (disciples of yogis were known as chelas). He appointed a Brahmin, Purushottam, to translate *Khirad Afza* and showed interest in the worship of fire and the sun. He had always permitted his Hindu wives to worship their idols within the palace and now showed some interest in the idea of reincarnation. He also venerated Virgin Mary and gave permission to construct churches.

This was in sharp contrast to other parts of the world where religious bigotry and intolerance were virtues. One can hardly forget that the ‘Age of Akbar’ coincided with the period of bloody religious wars in France and elsewhere in Europe of which the St Bartholomew’s massacre (1572) was only one small episode. Closer home, the Ottoman emperor claimed that the enforcement of sharia was an important part of state policy. Of course, Akbar’s policies of laying down rules of governance without reference to sharia were resented by orthodox Muslims, most notably by Badauni and Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (for a very brief time in 1590s Akbar appears to have adopted a hostile attitude with regard to orthodox Islamic practices and institutions) (Rizvi, 1992) and even Raja Mansingh (his trusted Hindu Rajput ally) cautioned him when he learnt of Akbar’s increasing interest in Christianity. But by any yardstick, *Sulh-i Kul* compares favorably with other such contemporaneous attempts such as Erasmus’ pamphlet “The Lamentations of Peace, Banished from Everywhere and Ruined” which accepted war against non-Christians while crying for peace among them (Vanina, 2004: 84–85).

Akbar developed and implemented *Sulh-i-Kul* to liberate himself from the traditional religion. The debate on whether Akbar was a Muslim (or an apostate from Islam), what did his eclecticism amount to (liberal Islam), whether he was a believer seems to assume that denominational classification and religious boundaries were stable, impermeable to
This tradition of equal respect and impartiality developed in Akbar’s times toward all religions was continued in large measure even by the British. In medieval India, a broad theme of “religious eclecticism” (Shrimali, 2007: 29) can be detected which embraced Akbar’s imperial and aristocratic innovations as well as numerous popular monotheism(s) and mysticism(s) and it is not far-fetched to conclude that while the Europeans learnt the idea of toleration of other sects from their own experience, the conceptual space for the idea of impartiality toward all faiths was created in the subcontinent and learnt by Europe, if at all, from colonial encounters and the legacy they inherited from the polities of their colonial subjects.

Akbar developed and implemented the largely Sufi doctrine of Sulh-i kul for which all religions were equal and therefore that the festivals of all religious communities were to be publicly observed. This tradition of equal respect and impartiality by the state toward people of all religions was continued in large measure even by the British. It is not far-fetched to conclude that while the Europeans learnt the idea of toleration of other sects from their own experience, the conceptual space for the idea of impartiality toward all faiths was created and consolidated over centuries in the subcontinent and learnt by Europe, if at all, from colonial encounters and the legacy they inherited from the polities of their colonial subjects.

**Conclusion**

I have claimed that conceptual spaces are found providing a fertile ground for the development of significant ideas in the history of every society. I have also claimed that a plausible account can be constructed to show that such conceptual spaces, crucial to the development of modern Indian secularism, opened up at crucial junctures in the history of Indian society. Among such key moments, I selected two for elaborate discussion. In the 3rd century BCE, responding to the newly emergent diversity in several parts of India, Emperor Ashoka conceived the idea that rather than live separately, or back-to-back, followers of all ways of life and philosophical traditions should coexist in all parts of his empire. He also tried to develop political norms for such coexistence to flourish. These included restraint on speech—a disposition to neither criticize nor praise others without good reason or occasion and never do so immoderately. I argued that the emphasis on two forms of self-restraint, one relating to others and the other purely to oneself, makes the Ashokan idea novel and ethically compelling. I also argued that it is not entirely implausible to imagine that
such an idea detached itself from its Ashokan moorings and became more generally available as a resource. It was reimagined by Emperor Akbar in 16th century ACE and both Ashoka and Akbar’s views on the relationship between faith and public power had a lasting influence on modern Indian secularism, providing it with a distinctive character that has few parallels in the rest of the world.

Notes

1 This is my first very tentative attempt, an outline of a sketch of work that I wish to do in the next 10 years or so.

2 This is one of the most difficult terms to translate. Its standard meaning is “heretic,” but clearly Ashoka does not use it in this sense. The standard translation is “sect” which is unsatisfactory because of its Christian association. There is an imaginative suggestion, now rejected, that it might be linked to prasha, a term in avestha and similar to prashna in Sanskrit, meaning “question.” An imaginative translation could then have been a group of questioners or enquirers. But there is no strong evidence to support this view. Radha Kumud Mookerjee (1928) links it to Parishad, meaning assembly. But that too is not accepted by everyone. Perhaps, the best translation would be “followers of a school of thought or teachings.” I here use it to mean this and will continue to use the Prakrit word “Pasanda” in the main text.

3 There is virtual consensus that this was a period of bitter sectarian strife. See Bhandarkar (2000: 112).

4 On problems in the idea of axial age, particularly in its application to the Indian context, see Shulman (2005) and Pollock (2005).

5 It has been argued especially by Sheldon Pollock that many features here described as prior to and definitive of the Vedic culture may in fact have developed in response to the threat posed by Buddhism. But he agrees that such proclivities were always present within it (Pollock, 2005: 410).

6 Monier Monier-Williams (1960) has a long discussion. Among other things, he speaks of “seven worlds described as earth, sky, heaven, middle region, place of re-births, mansion of the blessed, and the abode of truth.”

7 According to Edward Fitz Patrick Crangle (1994: 28), Early Vedic practices involve, by and large, a worldly attitude whereby the worshipper seeks to appease gods by performing various ritual sacrificial ceremonies. The Rg Veda, however, mentions some opposed to Aryan rituals.... These were unbelievers, riteless people.... Outstanding in this regard were the Munis.... The Rig Vedas offer the earliest literary evidence for the existence of Munis.

8 D.D. Kosambi also mentions the existence of non-Aryan people called Nagas who were settled in parts of what now are Bihar and UP. They did not speak the Aryan language and appeared not to have any contact with the Aryans. This appears to confirm G.C. Pande’s (1957) claim that a group of wondering ascetics called Munis, marginal to Vedic life, also existed in the region.

9 Dasgupta (1963: 88–89) discusses the ways in which Asvaghosha reinterpreted the teachings of the Buddha by incorporating some of the Upanishadic ideas, but since his time is believed to be after the Mauryan Empire, it is not of much relevance here, except for highlighting the fact that within Buddhism elements of Brahminical thought were incorporated, and vice versa.
Kosambi proposes that a number of sects with subtle metaphysical differences arose in protest against the “monstrous cancerous growth of sacrificial ritual in the tribal kingdoms.” The greatest fruit of the *yajña* sacrifice was success in war; fighting was glorified for its own sake as the natural mode of life for the Ksatriyas, while the Brahmin’s duty and means of livelihood was the performance of Vedic sacrifices (p. 166).


Rock Edict II in Nikam and McKeon (1962), p. 44.

See Zimmer ‘Ashoka, rather than trying to uphold one view or the other – and thereby identifying himself with one school or the other – sought to emphasise what he held to be the “essence” common to all sects and schools. Doing otherwise would have been to encourage a more vociferous conflict of ideas and practices among these sects and schools, thereby compromising the concord and cohesion he was trying to build up within his kingdom.’


This is denied by many scholars who wrote early in the 20th century. Mookerjee (1928: 102) writes that literature and culture seem to have filtered down to the masses so as to produce a comparatively large percentage of literacy. Vincent Smith (1920: 139) points out that the existence of edicts in the vernacular shows mass literacy. Such views are naive. The epigraphic habit had barely begun to form in Ashoka’s time. The rulers had begun to play with the new technology, no doubt. Ashoka can even be credited for having realized the enormous future potential of writing and to have been among the first to have used it for dissemination and “moral conquest.” But mass literacy at that time is inconceivable, because there was little need for it. Besides, a large heterogeneous empire dictated that edicts be written in different languages. Nothing about wide spread literacy can be inferred from it. To say that the edicts were written in the vernacular would entail that Greek and Aramaic were vernacular languages, which is absurd. It is best to go along with Stanley Tambiah on this issue. He writes, “The intellectual milieu in which early science and philosophy advanced was essentially oral, small scale and face to face. If this was true of early Greece, it was emphatically true of India in the Axial Age” (Tambiah, 1986: 461).

Here *asura* means “evil spirits.”

Here it also implies expunging all feeling of ill-will toward other living beings.

Literally meaning, one who listens to and learns from many or all.

Embodied power and source of punishment.

This introduced a degree of ambiguity in sharia, a point mentioned above.

On one view, “these were steps dictated principally by the exigencies of state … rather than … religious tolerance…” (Athar Ali, 2007). This is supported by evidence from 1564 to 1575 during which Akbar made efforts to strengthen his state broadly within the framework of Sunni orthodoxy. The massacre at Chittor between February 23 and March 9, 1568 and the reimposition of *jizya* in 1575 may confirm this point. Yet, sound judgments are often made over a period of time. It became clear later that Akbar’s policies were not governed by political expediency alone.

See the writings of V.A. Smith, Haig, and E. Wellesz.

See the writings of M. Roychoudhury, S.R. Sharma, and Tara Chand.

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Forms of Secularity before Secularism


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