ICCR Public Lecture

Inequality, Secularisation, and Democratisation of Religion: Recast(e)ing the Secularism Debate in India

Professor D. Parthasarathy
ICCR Chair Professor of Indian Studies, South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore

I ABSTRACT I The substantial and substantive academic and political debate on secularism in India has thrown little light on processes of secularisation. Going with emerging perspectives that stress the need to comprehend processes and ideologies of secularism and secularisation conjointly, this talk will first critically engage with western enlightenment debates on religion, secular imperatives, inequality, and democratisation (especially Kant, Marx, and Weber). It will then attempt to theorise the ironic and simultaneous processes of secularisation and increased religiosity that is observed in India today, by deploying MN Srinivas's concept of secularisation; an argument will be advanced that both secularism and secularisation in India must be critiqued by contextualising historical caste and gender based segregation and discrimination in matters of religion. Using illustrations from field work in south India, the talk will elucidate the secularisation of religious orthodoxies in the “Visa Balaji” temple in Hyderabad, and the Kanchi and Ahobilam religious institutions (saivite and vaishnavite mathams respectively). The articulation of secularisation processes with the new politics of aspirations and transnational global flows are seen to be significant aspects of the secular transformation of upper caste religious traditions. In all three cases, secularisation is observed to be connected to the enhanced ability and scope of lay religious followers to reduce the rigidities of religious orthodoxies, and hence of religious and caste hierarchies and taboos.

I ABOUT THE SPEAKER I D. Parthasarathy is Professor of Sociology at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, and ICCR Chair Professor of Indian Studies, South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore. He has earlier worked at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-arid Tropics, and has held visiting positions at the Australian National University, Asia Research Institute (NUS), and Zentrum Moderne Orient, Berlin. He is the author of Collective Violence in a Provincial City (1997), and has recently co-edited “Women’s Self Help Groups: Restructuring Socio-Economic Development” (2011), and “Cleavage, Connection and Conflict in Rural, Urban and Contemporary Asia” (2013). He is the author of numerous papers in journals and edited books in the areas of urban studies, governance, women and development, legal pluralism, and risk and vulnerability. Parthasarathy has carried out sponsored and consultancy research projects in the areas of climate studies, technology assessment, micro-finance, development planning, and urban studies. He has been on government advisory committees and bodies in India on issues related to disaster mitigation, climate change adaptation, and micro-finance. His current research interests include urban informality with a focus on urban religion and politics, transnational urbanism, legal pluralism and resource governance, and vulnerability to climate risks. Parthasarathy has carried out field research in India, Singapore, and Thailand, and has been part of collaborative projects involving partners from China, Brazil, South Africa, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. He is the recipient of awards and grants from Panos Media Foundation London, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Global Development Network, and University Grants Commission, India.