

REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION AS SOCIAL CAPITAL

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PREFACE

The Centre for Social Studies has created an endowment fund to honour late Prof. I.P. Desai, the founder-Director of the Centre. As part of the programme, we have instituted the I.P. Desai Memorial Lecture series. Prof. N.R. Sheth delivered the fourteenth lecture entitled 'Reflections on Religion as Social Capital'. It gives us great pleasure to make this lecture available to a wider academic community.

We are grateful to Prof. N.R. Sheth for having readily responded to our invitation to deliver the lecture. I must thank my colleague Dr. Babasaheb Kazi for preparing the copy for the press.

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Thank you, CSS for this opportunity to pay tribute to my teacher and mentor of many parts¹. I met IP Desai in 1952 as one of his first undergraduate students at Baroda. I witnessed the ceremony of his mortal remains being handed over to a hospital in the early hours of January 27, 1985. During the period of our live relationship, I went through sweet-and-sour experiences of dealing with all the nine *ravas* of IP Desai's enigmatic personality - from frightening anger to reassuring affection. His views on my acquaintance with sociology often made me smile or shiver. I can never forget the rare insights I received from him while grappling with my research data and his company at a hot Hindi movie which he watched with a few friends in Ahmedabad. The Centre is a shining memorial to his achievement as institution builder in the face of a hundred obstacles. He obviously possessed plenty of social capital of faith and respect among people in academia, bureaucracy and government.

IP Desai's presidential address at the All-India Sociological Conference in 1978 stressed the importance for sociologists to study social reality with reference to movement toward desired states of society. Under his leadership, the Centre developed a salutary special interest in comprehension of the Indian social reality from the vantage point of the poorer, deprived and disadvantaged sections of the society. Since then, sociology along with other social sciences has travelled a long distance in pursuing a desired social order. My reflections on religion are formulated in the context of the need for sociology to pursue a desired social order. I should perhaps insert an apology to IP Desai. Srinivas has recently been quoted describing him as communist and anti-religion².

My choice of religion as social capital is partly due to personal proclivity. I have been trained to look at religion beyond ritualism and dogma and comprehend the humanitarian and moral values it holds for its constituents. In this respect, I am a humble supporter of the great social advocates like Tagore, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan who have worked hard to show that all religions in

the world contain a set of core values of love, fraternity, understanding, tolerance, compassion and altruism as a mark of dedication and worship towards a superhuman entity described by the word God in English language. I regard these values as some of the most significant aspects of social capital. Religion is a dominant institution which incorporates the values which serve as social capital. During the last few decades in my roles as teacher, administrator and social observer, I have repeatedly observed at close length these values being butchered at the altar of human arrogance, greed and lust for power and prestige. The degradation of values often appeared so rampant that you would think respect for values should be urgently documented and examined before they vanished. At the same time, as I looked for cases of adherence to humanitarian values, I discovered that such cases were well distributed in any population although their strength was modest. To use a simple metaphor, society seemed to contain Gandhis among its various sections – including the most deprived as well as the most maligned.

A word about the term social capital may be in order here. It has been recently resurrected by economists from old usage to refer to “trust, networks and norms shared by a group of actors that enable them to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”³. The utility of this concept in economic analysis has been a matter of much controversy and skepticism. I have borrowed it simplistically to describe social relationship, institution, group or other entity that contributes to achievement of given social objectives. The objectives to which I have tried to relate religion as social capital are today’s *avatar* of what we have promised ourselves as a republic.

Most of us are intellectually conditioned to visualize a desired social order in terms of two magic words: democracy and development. The main pillars of democracy are well laid in our conceptual space: freedom, equality, fraternity, and social justice. In societies like ours, we have striven to achieve these objectives by collective action for elimination or reduction of hunger, poverty, destitution, discrimination and disadvantage. We have defined development in tune with global perspectives on production of wealth, standards of living and quality of human existence. We have used mixed models of capitalism and socialism for optimizing production of wealth and human satisfactions. Over

the decades, we have learnt that the state should act as the main engine of change towards our goals, but civil society should also bear the burden of effort. Voluntary organizations and individual citizens should contribute their might on the road to democracy and development. This trend has reinforced the value of concepts such as human dignity, participation, empowerment of the weak, affirmative action, civil liberties and universal human rights in the vocabulary of modern democracy. All decent democracies are committed to following the spirit of governance and action for change symbolized by these concepts and programmes of social change based on them.

We know that our achievements on this journey to democratic development are indeed quite modest. We are regularly enlightened by researched information as well as praxis of social existence to understand that inequalities of wealth, status and power have been growing in many ways. Human freedom and dignity are violated within families, local communities, workplaces and the various areas of socio-political enterprise. All the efforts for redressal of social injustice at the level of state and civil society have yielded slow and small results. Ignorance, malnutrition and disease continue to rule the roost for large sections of the society. Pure water is steadily acquiring the stature of luxury goods for the population in many areas. My television facility induces in me dreams of life in a post-modern society interspersed with nightmares of wars of water.

As we muddle through our goals with the baggage of tradition acquired over the millennia, we are blessed with a distinctly captivating process of change all around us. The new millennium seems to be riding on waves of enlightenment in the field of man’s potential to conquer nature. Knowledge in space science, genetic engineering and information technology has suddenly expanded our leverage in unfolding the universe, conquering space, manipulating genes, processing information and such other activities in ways which were considered beyond human cognition some time ago. The power of knowledge has driven the human creature into territories which had so far been recognized as god’s exclusive domain. This explosion of knowledge and its significance for tomorrow’s society should be placed in the context of the swirling socio-economic force romantically acronymed LPG – liberalization, privatization

and globalization. For the present purpose, this force upholds and idealizes the indispensability of global economy, global markets, global culture and free enterprise. The proponents of this new global force of socio-economic change hold out a seductive promise of enhancement in economic development, social welfare and human happiness for all players in the LPG sport. Such a promise looks all the more attractive in the background of the collapse of socialist governments in most parts of the erstwhile world.

Let us look at the obverse of this scenario. As the wealth of nations rises, the proportion of people who feel deprived or discarded also goes up. The gap between the rich and poor has been growing. Global trade in consumer goods and services provides opportunities to more and more people at all levels of social hierarchy to acquire wealth and status through participation in straight business or underworld transactions. The proportion of the new rich in the expansive middle class is rising by the day. The new rich come from traditional middle class backgrounds (businessmen, professionals, bureaucrats) as well as from humbler categories (sub-contractors, middlemen, fixers, bullies). These people support a new culture of greed. They develop an itch for acquiring wealth by fair means or foul and spending it on consumption of material products as a device to reinforce or enhance their social standing. This sets in motion a chain of need for conspicuous acquisition and consumption of things. Who cares if this results in willifying natural resources and upsetting the balance between the human species and the rest of the universe with apocalyptic effects? A lot of us seem to be consumed by the urge to possess and consume. The craze for consumption is horrifyingly aggravated by the pervasive audio-visual media by reaching out to the poor and the wretched. We hear of young daughters of slum-dwellers pulling resources to buy beauty creams, never mind their parents cannot even dream of a decent meal for the family or education of children. Possession and consumption of material products create insecurity about losing something or being deprived of something. Hence you develop an urge to amass as much as you can. To achieve this goal, you are willing to prostitute yourself or those you can influence in whichever way you can approach. Once you attain power in any social space, you should draw material benefits out of it as much and as quickly as you can. You should enhance your material and social assets. If

fulfilment of your desire implies stripping others of their right or dignity, so be it. Let them do the same when their turn comes. Me and mine should be at the head of any queue for rewards or spoils. Whenever your conscience raises questions of propriety, legality, ethics or morality you have a simple formula to get over it. So many people around you are known for serving their material wants at the cost of the community. Why should you be bothered by conscience? Life is short. Nature is niggardly. Accumulate. Consume. Earn social status. Feel socially recognized and adored for now. Society, community are distant worlds. Let them look after themselves.

I know I have indulged in exaggerations. But my experience with human responses in a variety of social situations persuades me to contend that my hyperboles are sociologically bearable. I live with a trunkful of broken idols of what one could describe as social character. I therefore submit for your thoughts the contention that we are living through a trend of aggravating moral disorder. We need to strengthen our defences against this dysfunctional social process. We should look for ways to build and sustain relations with others as individuals and collectivities with less concern for self-interest than at present. We need to promote the social value of understanding, tolerance, accommodation, compassion, self-denial and altruism to move more convincingly towards our goals of democracy and development. Hence our image of desired society should include compassion, understanding, tolerance etc along with the conventionally accepted indicators such as freedom, justice, quality of life and participative governance.

The moral disorder I have tried to highlight is obviously not in evidence for the first time in human history. Probably all major social and religious revolutions were partly engendered by swells of materialistic greed, selfishness and intolerance among contemporary populations. The pioneers of major religious movements such as Buddhism, Islam and Christianity have diligently emphasized the importance of reform in human character towards love, altruism, compassion and moderation in worldly pleasures. Indian scriptures condensed in books such as the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Bhagavatam* repeatedly stress negative virtues like avoidance of violence, untruth, possessiveness, arrogance, pride etc. This kind of emphasis on control over negative human

qualities suggests beyond doubt that such qualities were widespread in contemporary human behaviour. Religious admonitions on human character cumulatively formed the spiritual legacy of a society. This spiritual legacy is the backbone of the moral code of the society and continually feeds the literary and philosophical treasures of the society. Religion thus constitutes social capital in the sense of providing a code of conduct in our games of collective survival, progress, development, democracy, quality of life or whatever else we regard as our goal at a point of time. Religion in this sense inspires us to live life king size as long as we are alive. It should guide us to live and let live. It should make us aware that the earth belongs to us as well as to earthworms and all the insignificant-looking micro-organisms which wield power to put us in our place. We cannot hope to survive long if we ruin the balance of human life, other forms of life and the inanimate elements of the universe. Greed, selfishness, arrogance, intolerance and violence can yield temporary pleasures but are destructive in the long run. Service to others is service to God. Oneness with God should inspire oneness with fellow humans. Such oneness should serve as the foundation for the spirit of equality, freedom and collectivity which are instrumental in enabling us to move towards our goals of democracy and development.

It is this aspect of the social value of religion that attracted the attention of some distinguished scholars of science and humanity in the context of the modern industrial civilization and its discontents⁴. As we know, the birth of enlightenment in the West was marked by commitment to rationality, individualism, utilitarianism and secularism. Religious ideas and phenomena were naturally beyond the immediate realm of reason. They were discarded by the enlightenment thinkers and scientists as a function of ignorance. They were expected to lose significance with the progress of reason and secular ideology. Moral values were detached from religion and incorporated in the social arena outside religion. August Comte is regarded as the founder of a new universal religion of humanity and equated human love with the love of God as defined in religion. Even as this new faith of reason was maturing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some scholars reaffirmed the value of religion in the face of the emerging dehumanizing effects of the industrial revolution and modern utilitarianism. This view moulded the theoretical base of early

sociologists like Durkhleim and Saint-Simon. These scholars saw religion as a part of the wider society within the functionalist paradigm. Religion, said Saint-Simon, can never disappear; it can only be transformed. This opinion was shared by more recent sociologists like Talcott Parsons and Robert Bellah. They do not expect secularization to wipe out religion. This contention is well supported by the spurt in religious activities in the erstwhile communist block of Europe which embraced democratic polity during recent years. Interestingly, Marx and Engels had a good comprehension of the force of religious commitment on the moral conduct of people and expected socialism to play the same role as religion played in the past. Unfortunately, the praxis of socialist ideology has so far failed to fulfil the Marxian ambition in this regard.

It is well known that a large number of western philosophers including distinguished scholars like Toynbee and Bertrand Russell were convinced that the Indian religious tradition had the strength to act as a beacon of human existence and social order in the world society in future. Indian philosophers such as Tagore, Vivekanand, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan brought out the universalist and humanist character of Indian religion and advocated its value for modern society across religious dogmas and practices. Tagore's treatise on human religion⁵ was an attempt to reconstruct religion on a set of humanist principles (human character, sin, sanctity, harmony, God). Radhakrishnan looked at the humanist core of various religions and presented the human face of each to advocate understanding and tolerance among them⁶. Indeed the first commission on education in independent India under Radhakrishnan's chairmanship pleaded for mandatory religious education for promotion of faith and tolerance in society. Gandhi often expressed pride and joy for being a Hindu because Hinduism had helped him to understand the principles of other religions and appreciate the common human value of religion in all creeds. I have here referred to those intellectuals who had presented Hinduism or Indian religion as the torch-bearer of the social value of religion. But we should note that all these scholars looked upon Indian religion as a manifestation of the spiritual essence of all religions of the world.

The common human value of religion has in recent years been underscored by social scientists to project the potential worth of religion in managing the human problems of the LPG society. Srinivas observes:

The only kind of development that India, and indeed the world can afford is sustainable development --- Sustainable development needs to be underpinned by a proper *weltanschauung* and that cannot be secular humanism. It has to come from a religious world-view --- Underlying institutional religion is a universal layer, referred to by the philosopher Leibnitz as "philosophia perennis". According to Aldous Huxley, perennial philosophy underlies every religion known to humankind⁷.

Madan has expressed a similar view.

May be religion is not as fake as Marx asserted, may be there is something eternal about it as Durkheim maintained. Perhaps men of religion such as Mahatma Gandhi would be our best teachers on the proper relation between religion and politics --- values and interests --- not only the possibilities of inter-religious understanding ... but also opening out avenues of a spiritually justified limitation of the role of religious institutions and symbols in certain areas of contemporary life⁸.

Similarly, Sundar and Das⁹ have suggested the advisability of recognizing religious spirituality as an important dimension of human and socio-economic development. Most recently, scholars like Sen and Shivshankar¹⁰ have pleaded for adequate appreciation and use of the secular base in every religion to deal with the rampant problems of greed and corruption in India. Sen asserts:

The moral order of the new civil society will have to originate outside a bankrupt political sphere which is devoid of idealism and hostile to ideas. Its influence on religion has been largely pernicious, transforming the profound agenda of disinterested sages into obscure ritual ... Yet India's religious and philosophical tradition will need to play a pivotal role in this new secular, moral order.

Religion thus occupies an important place in the thoughts and hopes of social observers and analysts concerned with the growing moral depravation at various levels of our society. Concurrently, religion has lately provided a major source of inspiration to social and scientific thinkers in the areas of management, medicine, mental health etc. A large amount of literature has been produced by management scholars in ethics, values, stress reduction and human resource management which draws a close connection between human and spiritual qualities and performance at work¹¹. The human and spiritual qualities are predominantly drawn from religious classics such as the *Bhagavadgita*. Some religious leaders have developed proficiency in professing the importance of spirituality in various aspects of managerial behaviour and efficiency. Similarly, some modern practitioners of medicine have emphasized positive effects of prayer and spirituality on healing of major illness such as cancer and heart disease¹². We are also well aware of the role played by spiritual *gurus* in education in physical fitness and management of mental stress.

We have thus plenty of evidence of advocacy of religion as social capital both in dealing with immediate problems of social living as well as in neutralizing the evil effects of the LPG process on individuals and social institutions.

At the individual level, vast masses of people follow the dogma, beliefs and ritual discipline of their religion as a part of life's routine. This helps them to manage their experiences with comfort and reassurance. Religion in many ways is reconstructed by individuals and groups to make existence more bearable and less threatening. There is some evidence to suggest that the younger generations among middle classes are increasingly seeking security and confidence in religion against mounting threats of alienation in the family and the chaos of modern life-styles¹³. God's will is not a small asset in the business of leading ordinary life. God may be an artifact for the sociologist but for many of us ordinary people God is as valid a fact as my grandfather both of whom I have not met in person.

These affirmative ideas on the social values of religion are not accepted by today's modal social scientist within the framework of his/her discipline. In

fact, such ideas are widely suspected as regressive or reactionary for democracy and development.

For the social scientist wedded to objectivity, religion is most observable in its dogmatic, theocratic, ritualistic and exclusivist manifestations. These manifestations have grown alarmingly over the decades. My socialization process includes in good measure brainwashing in the superiority of my faith over others and adherence to the main symbols of God and the clergy along with the authority ascribed to them. This is good breeding ground for development of fanaticism and fundamentalism. Impatience and hatred for other religions, prejudice, violence and destruction of human life and property thrive on this foundation.

Religious affinities and differences are generously exploited by economic and political power brokers at all levels from small neighbourhoods to international relations. Cultural heritages are destroyed, innocent people are butchered, local communities are exiled and torturous codes of conduct are imposed on people in the name of one's god and religion. Ghastly exploitation and violence are justified or supported as god's commandments. Wielders of power in multi-religious societies use their authority to manipulate legal and educational institutions to impose their ideology and will on others. Antagonisms and conflicts between religions at the level of groups or communities are allowed or engineered to influence the thoughts and behaviour of people at the ground level. Religion which is rooted in humanism is dehumanized down the scale of social organization. Religion is reconstructed to serve as social capital to nourish the vested interests of political bosses, economic underworld and self-promoting priestly classes. This aspect of the reality of religion in India and many other parts of the world is becoming horrifyingly dominant. Hence it draws the attention of social scientists much more convincingly and comfortably than the less visible role of religion as an asset for the society and its members¹⁴.

We should, however, note that religious orders and institutions have begun to adopt a new world-view in response to the environmental forces of globalization and liberalization. Religious priests and establishments have

begun to project themselves as egalitarian and humanitarian by organizing financial and social assistance during natural calamities such as drought, floods and earthquakes. A large number of religious orders were in the forefront of rescue and relief operations for the victims of scarcity and earthquake in Gujarat in recent years. Religious leaders increasingly demonstrate commitment to the welfare of people regardless of divergence in religious loyalties. Many sectarian groups have set up religious missions and programmes outside India. They use modern information and communication technology to expand their influence on the Indian Diaspora in Europe, America and other countries. In Gujarat, for instance, prominent religious groups such as the Swaminarayan, Pushtimarg and Jains have organized permanent shrines and activities in western countries. Concurrently a large number of spiritual leaders (e.g. disciples of Sivanand, Ramakrishna, Mahesh Yogi and young leaders like Ma Anritanandamayi) have reconstructed Hindu faith to provide spiritual patronage to people with divergent religious upbringing. They have converted the message of ancient scriptures to jell with the ideas and lifestyles of today's people. Some of them have also pioneered programmes to provide educational and health facilities to people with special attention to the poor and deprived sections of the society (e.g. Sri Ravishankar, Rishi Prabhakar). Religion is thus preached and practised in a modern avatar.

It is worthwhile here to note the social contribution made by the Swadhyaya movement. It represents a unique attempt to reconstruct the Indian scriptural religion in the context of present social reality¹⁵. It redefines scriptural ideas of individual, society, religion and God to serve contemporary values of equality, selfless service, work ethic and universal human wellbeing. It propagates universal brotherhood under God's fatherhood. Devotion to God is sought to be freed from the burden of ritualism and superstition and treated as a social force to be used for human welfare. The most important social programme of Swadhyaya consists of trips of devotion regularly undertaken by the followers to build and strengthen new bonds of fraternity in rural and tribal areas. They disseminate ideas of human equality and brotherhood which are practised in collective social and religious programmes. They have launched a variety of socio-economic experiments in collective farming by pulling human resources (physical labour, technical knowledge, managerial skills etc.) and production

of impersonal wealth for the community. Some of these community projects also hold promise in enriching the ecological wealth by upgrading water and vegetation resources. All these activities are promoted and sustained as a mark of worship to God and are open to anyone regardless of traditional religious loyalties.

The efforts to reconstruct religion in terms of its relevance to modern rationalism, secularism and humanism as illustrated above are likely to continue and grow in the years ahead. On the other hand, social scientists tend to approach the study of religion with caution and mild interest. This is perhaps because religious institutions and action are for the most part associated with irrationality and celebration of the unverifiable constructs such as God and heaven¹⁶. Basic doubts are also raised on the potential of religion to provide the values of human equality, tolerance, forgiveness, compassion etc which have recently inspired some social scientists to advocate religion for resolution of the emerging problems in our globalizing world. The evil effects of religious exclusivity, fundamentalism and bigotry and the growing political exploitation of these attributes are perceived to have overpowering weight to destroy the humanism underlying religion as a social force. In this view, secularism is essential for healthy development of religion. Religion cannot be advocated as an alternative to secularism. Accordingly, the study of religion is mainly guided by the urge to lay bare its divisive and destructive effects on a society and its sub-systems¹⁷.

So be it. Let us not pose religion as a substitute for secularism in dealing with human problems of modern development. The underlying message of the advocates of religion should be that it has plenty of potential to raise the acceptance of human values we need desperately to handle our social affairs. Most importantly, the intervention of God in guiding people through humanist values is acclaimed to be unique. This is a major aspect of social capital contained in religion. The psychological and social role of religion at the individual and group levels needs to be examined and comprehended in its various facets. In reality, we often see people ready to compromise with sacred values to concede to profane temptations. It is not uncommon to find people using their faith in God to seek concessions in evaluating the guilt or remorse

caused by violating the sacred code. Sociology should attempt to find how often and how intensely such compromises are devised. That will give us precious clues to the force of religion and sacred values in the concrete behaviour of an individual or group. We perhaps need to know much more about the practice and manifestations of religion at the level of individual social action. What elements in it constitute positive social capital? What creates burdensome baggage? It is far from easy to undertake such sociological investigations. I wonder if it is impossible. Is it not important?

Concurrently, we should examine possible ways to contain the gruesome political exploitation of religious faith. We know all great religions have been put to political carnage sooner or later after they were launched. I wonder if this trend is irreversible. Is it possible to define religious faith in a universal humanist perspective? A global society needs a global supernatural spirit which could connect with everybody and everything in the world and still remain unaffected by what we do jointly or severally¹⁸. I believe it is quite possible for all players in the field of religion to devise a minimum common faith in what is beyond science and consciousness. They only need to look beyond their nose which all religions expect their adherents to do.

A universal spirit can also inspire a universal concept of humanity. An unconstricted view of humanity can bring more coherence in the reconstruction of moral values across religious cultures.

The point is: religion deserves much greater attention in social science than it has received so far. It does not deserve prejudice, fear or disdain. It can even do with some lead and light from social science. Religion is not dead. It is unlikely to die in the foreseeable future. It shows promise to play constructive role in global society. It should be taken more seriously than it has been.

Is I.P. Desai listening?

Notes

- 1) I delivered the lecture on the basis of a crude draft of the script presented here. The audience at the lecture will notice some discrepancy between the content of the lecture and the present text. I ask for their indulgence. I am grateful to M Kaliappan for secretarial help.
- 2) See Shah 2000, p.631.
- 3) See Blomkvist et al 2001, p.639.
- 4) I have borrowed the information and ideas on the sociology of religion in the west mainly from Davis 1987.
- 5) See Tagore 1988.
- 6) See Radhakrishnan 1997.
- 7) See Srinivas 1993.
- 8) See Madan 1992 p.408.
- 9) See Suñdar 1996; Das 1999.
- 10) See Sen 2001; Shivshankar 2001.
- 11) See, for instance, Chakraborty n.d. and Sekhar 1997.
- 12) See McDowell et al 1996.
- 13) See Panjwani et al 1996; Jain 1998; Umashankar 1999.
- 14) See, for instance, the views of Beteille 1994 and Bailey 1991.

- 15) See Shah et al 1998 for detailed information on this movement.
- 16) This trend is noted in the western context by Glock 1959.
- 17) See, for instance, Bidwai et al 1996; Kishwar 1998; Aloysius 1998.
- 18) Beyer 1996 has made an important contribution on this subject.

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