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An Ancient Indian Secular Age?

TIME: September 05, 2-3:30pm
PLACE: Council Room, Level 11
Tenison Woods House
8-20 Napier Street, North Sydney

ABSTRACT: Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age' is a book about the social imaginary of the North-Atlantic and to some extent European modernity. But much of its argument and I believe the reason for its success lies in its characterization of what the secular age leaves behind, what no longer exists, perhaps what it has lost. It is a feature of Taylor's work that he enables us to experience the transition from one kind of life-world to another. Among these lost worlds, he discusses 'early religions' which still exist in some parts of the world. This paper must be viewed as part of a larger project that hopes to explore the transition in India from its world of early religions to a world with a marked resemblance to one inhabited by post-axial religions. However, it tries to answer a very narrow question. If Charles Taylor is correct about his understanding of what is meant by 'secular' (which by the way is closer to the modern Indian understanding of secular than to the more mainstream western understanding of the term) and if further, he is correct in his characterization of the secular age, is it at all conceivable that a secular age existed in ancient India—not India, the modern nation state but India the territorial cum civilizational unit? Is it plausible to suggest that a secular age existed in ancient India? The central task of the presentation is to answer this question and if the answer is even a tentative yes, to draw out some of the implications it has for our understanding of modernity with which secularity is invariably linked.

BIO: Professor Rajeev Bhargava is Professorial Fellow at the Institute for Social Justice, Australian Catholic University (Sydney), and Professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (Delhi), where he directs its recently launched Institute of Indian Thought. His publications include: Individualism in Social Science (Clarendon Press, 1992), What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It? (Oxford University Press, 2010), and The Promise of India's Secular Democracy (Oxford University Press, 2010). His edited works are Secularism and Its Critics (Oxford University Press, 1998) and Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution (Oxford University Press, 2008).