Religion, Religiosity and Secular Concerns

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The God Market: How Globalisation Is Making India More Hindu by Meera Nanda; *Random House India, 2009; pp 240, Rs 395.*

Different aspects of social life are increasingly becoming free of religious sanctions and taboos in India. At the same time concerted attempts to arrest the process of secularisation, especially in the domain of expression and speech, in the name of religious sensibilities, are also gathering ground. The most brazen example of the latter was made by the Sangh parivar during its anti-Babri Masjid campaign when it claimed that "faith was above the law".

This contradiction, between secularisation of social life and making faith the basis of social discourse and public behaviour, is usually explained in a variety of ways. However, the role of the State, in encouraging this, has not been explored and contemporary instances of this are hardly commented upon. For instance, why did the Indian state promote the Amarnath pilgrimage in Jammu and Kashmir as a mark of patriotism and spirituality, in the midst of its brutal military suppression? There are other seamier sides of the nexus which remain unexplored, such as the link between the organisation Abhinav Bharat – accused of the Malegaon terror attack, a self-styled shankaracharya, an ashram, a Kashmir-based religious trust, a military school run by a right wing group, and retired or serving officers of armed forces and civil servants. Why is the role of temple trusts and ashrams as conduits for money laundering not being investigated? Apparently, there is greater political premium attached to chasing crooks across the border than for going after those on our side of the divide.

Accessing Unexplored Terrain

The great merit of the book under review is that it goes where few have bothered to go before and offers a framework to understand the phenomenon of religiosity. In five chapters the author takes us through globalisation in India and links it to how the prospering Hindu middle class is taking to religion, making the "texture of public sphere…distinctively Hindu than ever before" (p 8). It explores the nexus between the State-Temple and Private Sector; how the successes of Indians abroad are perceived as a result of the "Great Hindu Mind"; and finally how the "god market has continued to boom under the peculiarly Indian brand of secularism" (p 9). Each chapter offers sharp insights which can, in themselves, become the subject matter of further research.

In the first chapter Nanda reminds us that the "devious genius of neoliberalism" is to combine "unconstrained market forces" with the desire for "freedom from unchecked state power and individual freedoms of thought and speech" (p 20). And that it "simultaneously celebrates individual freedom, and trivialises it by treating individual persons merely as economic agents who are only motivated by the pursuit of material gain" (ibid). She points out that growth in inequality which has accompanied economic liberalisation has belied promises of the "trickle down" theorists. Indeed she goes on to point out that the privatisation of the public sector assets was in part justified as providing resources for education and health. Instead what we have is that "education, especially higher education, has become one more reason which the State is disinvesting from, leaving the field open to private enterprise…" (p 47). In 2000 there were 21 privately-owned deemed universities whose numbers climbed to 70 in 2005 and to 117 in 2007! The number of private colleges shot up from 5,748 in 1990 to 16,865 in 2003 (p 49). She points out that by making education open to the private sector "while relaxing oversight on course content has created conditions for Hinduisation of education" (p 53).

In the next chapter the author points towards "how openly ritualistic, ostentatious and nationalistic" this religiosity is. She contrasts this to the previous generation which combined scientific thinking with "neo-Vedantic preference for a more cerebral, philosophical Hinduism…" (p 62). A "recent" (date and year unspecified) Pew Global Attitude Survey shows that 89% of middle class Indians were pro-free market (p 67). The same survey shows that 92% claimed that religion is important to them. However, she appears tentative when she disputes the findings of the same survey which also show that 92% wanted the State to step in and help the poor and that 90% wanted religion to be kept out of government. Accepting one part while rejecting another part of the survey necessitates more detailed analysis because she also refers to a Centre for the Study in Developing Societies (CSDS) survey in 2007 for CNN-IBN-*Hindustan Times*, which shows that in the "last five years", in contrast to 47% Christians, 38% Muslims and 33% Sikhs, only 27% Hindus claim to have become more religious (p 70). And she observes that it is "not despair or alienation, but rather ambivalence over their new found wealth that seems to be a more plausible explanation of the growing religiosity" of Indians (pp 104-05).

However, she draws our attention to the fact that in 2000 India had 2.5 million places of worship but only 1.5 million schools and barely 75,000 hospitals and that 50% of all package tours are accounted for by pilgrimages compared to 28% for leisure. She points to how various rituals such as *yagnas,* etc, receive patronage of public sector units like the Haridwar based "gayatri mantras" whose clients include Bharat Heavy Electricals, National Thermal Power Corporation, Sales Tax Department, the Labour Department, the Department of Education and a number of nationalised banks (p 82). Even the representatives of the Left Front government in West Bengal participated in the *bhoomi puja* (ritual before the start of any project) performed by Tata Motors on the land forcibly acquired and leased to them in Singur (p 85). She reminds us that the role of the "living gurus" such as Sri Sri Ravi

Shankar (whom *The Economist*, described as sounding "less as a spiritual leader and more like a politician") in speaking of the appeasement of Muslims (p 100) is important because the "Bhagvad Gita and the Yoga Sutras have been turned into self-help manuals for making money and achieving success" (p 105).

Corporate-State Hinduism

But it is chapter three which is the most significant part of her book for there she shows how the secular Indian government and India's corporate sector support Hinduism and work together to promote it through education and tourism. She refers to three types of "Hindu Traditionalist" institutions which receive state patronage: those propagating priest craft; colleges run by ashrams and temples; and outright grant to temples. Land is gifted or sold at a highly discounted rate to temples or religious endowments for building schools, universities, hospitals and the corporate sector steps in to give donations. Where higher education is concerned the State gives it "deemed university status" (p 114). Indeed contrary to the charge made by right wing Hindu activists the Indian state shows "great solicitousness and deference…for the orthodoxy of temple priests in matters relating to temple rituals and worship" (p 115). She also shows how the State's management of temples and religious tourist sites has resulted in helping them collect fortunes not to mention enabling the exponential increase in the number of pilgrims.

She refers to the introduction by the University Grants Commission in 2001 of college level courses in *Jyotir Vigyan* and *Purohitya* (astrology and priest craft) and to the fact that corporate czars like Dhirubhai Ambani, Lakshmi Mittal, Anil Agarwal, etc, have been generous benefactors of various gurus and swamis. The book also exposes the link between the Hindu communal outfits such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its various fronts such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal, etc, and these gurus and swamis. For instance, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Swami Ramdev, Kanchi Shankaracharya Sri Shankara Vijayendra Saraswati, etc, have participated and blessed the activities of the VHP. Most of these religious figures lacked the courage to condemn the State organised carnage of Muslims in Gujarat. Nor did they find anything wrong in the permission given to the Akshardham temple in Delhi on the banks of river Yamuna, and which flouted all norms, rules and laws and ignored ecological concerns.

Banal Nationalism

Nanda says that

> the actual practice of secularism in India seems to be replicating the pre-modern, pre-Mughal Hindu model of the State-temple relationship. Elected ministers and bureaucrats see themselves in the mould of Hindu kings of yesteryears who considered it their duty to protect dharma. The temple priests and gurus, in turn, think nothing of treating elected officials as VIPs, if not literally as gods. The seamless partnership of faith and politics continues under the thin veneer of secularism (p 139).

But how does this feed into what she calls "banal nationalism"? How do the rituals and dogmas which enable the

middle classes to adjust to global capitalism deepen a sense of Hindu chauvinism and breed an everyday kind of Hindu nationalism? This is what she has to say:

> Gods are to India what the red-white and blue flag is to America. In India public worship of Hindu gods and the public performance of distinctively Hindu rituals serve the role of 'flagging' the national identity of the citizenry as Indians. Whereas the 'religions of the book', that is, Islam and Christianity, bind the faithful by demanding obedience to the letter and the spirit of their revealed dogmas, Hinduism deploys familiar rituals, festivals, myths and observances….to knit a many-stranded rope that binds the faithful to the faith with so many little ties, at so many different points that one loses sight of the ideological indoctrination that is going on (pp 140-41).

But, she points out, while this process is going on and makes for wider appeal of Hindu chauvinism and banal nationalism, nevertheless, it is contested (p 158). She cites the CSDS study based on the 2004 elections on the question of majoritarianism which showed that respondents were divided 35% each, in support and opposition, when asked whether in a democracy the opinion of "majority community should prevail". However, she points out that twice as many of those who participate in religious organisation tended to support majoritarianism.

But is religiosity confined to the middle classes? If not is there a difference between classes insofar as the form that their religiosity takes? She is right in saying that religiosity is not confined to the middle classes and that the "masses too" are taking to gurus, swamis and practising rituals in a big way motivated by the same desire to get rich. However, is the fear of losing the riches acquired or the upward mobility of the middle classes different from the desire of the marginalised to get rich? This raises the issue of the role played by inequality. She may be right in saying that the "elites and the masses are turning to gurus and pujaris who are more than willing to find religious justification for getting rich" (p 190). But do not these preachers, at the same time, also defend inequalities?

She addresses the question partially, when she deals with the question of whether religiosity implies the end of the road for secularism.

Hunger for Community?

She argues that secularism is a universal phenomenon and contends that, notwithstanding the differences between different religious doctrines, the globalising spread of capitalism, science and the nation state act as "carriers of secularisation" and therefore, separation of religion from the public sphere is happening in India too. This does not imply that the "demand for belief in supernatural beings will decline". However, she contends that "religiosity, like other cultural trend, is most likely to wax and wane in intensity" (p 196). Drawing on the work of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular* (2004), she argues that seen in a wider span of time one can discern a decline in religious beliefs. And this bears a co-relation with "existential insecurity" experienced by people. Norris and Inglehart found a correlation between income inequality and religiosity and found that "higher the income level, lower the religiosity as measured by frequency of prayer" (p 198). However, she goes on to argue that, life in post-industrial societies breeds despair and encourages religiosity because workers "are hungry for community which unions have failed to provide, except in purely economic matters like wages". Also she reminds readers that her book shows that "if poverty makes people pray, so does prosperity". Therefore, "bringing class and economics into discussion of religiosity is not to reduce religion to a sideshow of economic imperatives…(it is) to challenge all attempts to eternalise religion, to turn it into a primordial impulse which supposedly stays constant and unchanging in a changing world" (p 200).

She concludes by saying that "it is not the decline, but the persistence of religion that sociologists are now trying to explain. The new idea is that *demand* for religion is never going to go away or decline, while the *supply* of religion will vary in different societies at different times." This poses a challenge for us in India where the "triumphalist tone of mainstream Hinduism and the physical violence against Christian and Muslim minorities has created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity among these communities which is hardly conducive to the kind of vigorous growth that Hinduism is expecting" (p 202).

There is much food for thought in this book, which has marshalled evidence to provide a persuasive perspective inviting us to interrogate it further. Nevertheless, I would have liked her to explore the link between religiosity and the welfare state. Especially in Europe, with its century-long working class struggle which brought about a remarkable social transformation and resulted in ending "existential insecurities" which defines life in India and the US. Could this account for the decline of religiosity in Europe, unlike in the US and India? While she has dealt with middle class religiosity I feel there is a need to explore the motivations and impulses which drive the underclass to take to religiosity. Has there been a decline? Can one perceive an inverse relationship between participation in religious organisations and voting behaviour? One is tempted to ask her to develop the argument about "hunger for community" which secular organisations such as trade unions fail to provide. In Europe, particularly north Europe (as against east Europe where the welfare state was dismantled in the rush to "westernise") the sense of community is not sought in religion but in secular organisations which are a fallout of a century long class struggle? Finally, I wish she had looked into how class and caste hierarchies get represented and play themselves out in temples, ashrams and sanctuaries of the living gurus. How access to "god and god" men/women is easy for the rich, mighty and the privileged and does it or does is not create a disequilibrium, which can undercut religiosity?

Thought Provoking Book

The interesting thing is that these questions come to mind on reading and engaging with her arguments. It is an enriching experience both in terms of evidence and analysis. Barring a few typos and the rather unfortunate cover design, this book is written in an appealing style. It ought to be read by all those who are either deeply concerned, or enamoured by the encroachment of religion and disrespect for diversity that has gripped India's public domain.

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