

The Future of Religion in India

S. P. Udayakumar*

When someone asked Buddha who God was, Buddha answered him with a story. Once upon a time, on one of his hunting expeditions, a hunter shot his arrow and hit a man by mistake. Badly shaken, the hunter rushed to the victim of his carelessness. Wriggling in pain and misery, the wounded man asked the hunter who he was and why he shot him. The hunter replied: "I can answer all your questions, but by then you may be dead. So let me heal your wound first and then I will answer all your questions." The future of the impacts of religions is a more appropriate topic to ponder than the future of religions themselves. There is no better place for such an inquiry than India where most people tend to identify unequivocally with one or other organized religion. Moreover, India has given birth to some of the oldest and the youngest and most prominent religions of today's world. It has also been a prominent victim of religious nationalism and bigotry among Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and their own various denominations. The present author, an opponent of organized religions, religious gurus of various kinds, and committed secularist who has reverence for life and respect for spirituality, posits that the Gandhian praxis is a possible way out of this quandary.

According to the Gandhian philosophy, in a pluralistic society, every single group of people's interests and concerns, *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all), need to be addressed and accommodated. For such a never-ending dialogue and compromise to be possible, the society has to have *Swaraj* (self-rule) and must be marked by a quest for *Satya* (Truth), and the quality of *Ahimsa* (nonviolence). This Gandhian concept of civil society with its standpoint outside the thematic of post-enlightenment thought, its unique achievement of reconciling the contradictory aspects of 'nationalism' and 'enlightened anarchy,' and its involving the 'whole people' within the political nation with the science of nonviolence is immensely inspiring in contemplating on the contemporary Indian society.¹ After all, Gandhi's borrowings from and contributions to the

*S. P. Udayakumar, Research Associate and Co-Director of Programs Institute on Race and Poverty, Univ. of Minnesota. E-mail: spkumar@tc.umn.edu

nonviolence heritage of India have been quite extraordinary.

Despite the partition holocaust and the recurrent communal violence in independent India, the ethico-moral power and the remarkable resilience of the Indian civil society has been very much instrumental in absorbing the shock and healing the wounds rather fast. This inner resourcefulness and the creative conflict management capabilities of the Indian masses despite the overwhelming differences is part of the Gandhian heritage and its language of morality. The secular character of the Indian Constitution with equal recognition and respect for all the religions is also due to the pedagogy and policy built with the Gandhian praxis. India's contribution of the policy of non-alignment at the international level has been another consequence of the Gandhian principle and practice of religious pluralism. Gandhi's positive and creative response to the various religions of India and his untiring efforts to organize and interpret life in the light of the basic values these religions offer is another important contribution to the cultural revival of the country.²

This claim is not to reduce 'India' or 'Indians' to essences as some empiricists and idealists would do,³ but to point out the centrality of religions in ordering and interpreting life in the subcontinent. What Mahatma Gandhi encountered on a peace march in the riot-hit area of Noakhali in Bengal provides a good example. When he was walking through the Babu Bazaar, a predominantly Muslim neighborhood, a fanatic barged out of the crowd, stifled Gandhi's throat and threw him on the ground. As he was falling, Gandhi started reciting *Surat-e-Fatiha* which he had memorized from the Quran. The offender stood astonished to hear such a fine recital of the Quran from the lips of a staunch 'Hindu' and apologized to him for his murderous deed. The man, Allahdad Khan Mondol, became the most trusted disciple of Gandhi.⁴

Although misconstrued manifestations of religious enthusiasm are common place (which, by the way, render making any essentialist claims ludicrous), the daily transactions of life in India are definitely influenced by religions and the values they preach. Even Jawaharlal Nehru with his secular and modern bent of mind, who called communalism the "greatest enemy of the country" proclaimed to the Parliament once that "only a return to moral and spiritual values could control nuclear energy and save mankind."⁵ But for this language of morality and nonviolence heritage, communal violence and bloodshed should be India's daily reality.

Even after fifty years of independence, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and religious pluralism are invoked by almost all political parties and actors to win over the masses to their side. The degree of similarity that exists in the attitudinal preferences and ideological consistency of the citizen and the elite belief systems in India is a rather remarkable phenomenon.⁶ As

Nehru points out, the 'series of revolutions' in India since 1945 such as the withdrawal of the British, merger of the princely states, and the land reform were effected through nonviolence by both the masses and the elites.⁷ It is this inner dialectics of the Indian State and the civil society that comes to the rescue at the time of tensions and turmoil in India. After all, as Ronald Inden reiterates Gramsci's stand, rulers and the ruled are overlapping classes that are mutually, if not symmetrically, defining, and hence the history of the one cannot be done without also doing the history of the other.⁸

As Hannah Arendt rightly contends, the capacity for action is still there with people, but it has to act into a web of human relationships with revelatory character as well as ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the source of meaningfulness that illuminates human existence.⁹ When the Babri Masjid/ Ramjanmabhoomi dispute at Ayodhya spread hatred and havoc across the country with an alarming rise of communalism, a unique demonstration occurred in the southern Indian state of Kerala. Tens of thousands of people formed a 450-mile long human chain across the length of the state and pledged to promote national integration and communal amity.¹⁰ It is in this "transformation of relationship" as opposed to "a seizure of power" (Gandhi) lies the interests of any civil society.

In the vast, diverse and intricate 'India,' the context is definitely "one of a multiplicity of different, yet interlocking, histories--legendary, secular, reformist, sectarian, legitimist, nationalist, rebellious, nativistic--all of which end, as it were, in a final denouement." Hence it is only appropriate to avoid the sequential narrative with an implied teleological range and to go for an "open-ended strategy of multiple description" which helps us to move freely between sequence and episode and draw upon the many histories of India.¹¹ Thus there are innumerable religious, cultural, historical, political, economic, legal and other factors that contribute to and constitute the 'popular memories' of the vast and complex 'Indias.' This local-national, resilient-rigid, gullible-shrewd, erratic-consistent, dissenting-agreeing, tangible-elusive 'memories' evade any kind of quantification, generalization, theorization and even meaningful representation. The nationalistic and communal discourses preempt this difficulty by imposing a singularity and specificity on the many memories and identities.

The Geertzian view of seeing religion as a cultural system of symbols informs only little unless we recognize that there are human origins, particular class interests, and historical and cultural conditionality at work in religious discourses. Any study of religion may have to rewrite what the religious may try hard to elide as long as that religion is considered to be a human product conditioned by the space and time in which the concerned humans lived.¹² So

of mobilization in the subaltern domain and open up a space for the nationalist elite to interpose with its own organization so as to direct the political activity of the masses toward the goals set up by the bourgeoisie. In the lexicon of Gandhism, Guha claims, the name of that mediating function was discipline. See Ranajit Guha, "Discipline and Mobilize" in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993. p. 111. It is only fair to mention, however, that Gandhi was particular about abolishing the Congress Party on achieving independence and resorting to Panchayat Raj. When all is said and done, Gandhi's influence both on the peasant consciousness and the elite leadership was rather extraordinary.

3. Of the various theories of human agency in the social sciences, the individualist school attributes human action to a human nature, the socialist school attributes it to a structure, and the hermeneuticist one "confines it to a study of the intentions and meanings of natural persons." Arguing that human agents are not "instruments or accidents of an underlying and unchanging substance" and that their acts are "not the expressions of eternal inherent essences but...the changing or repeated contents of that history," Inden posits: "The shift from a quest for essences to a focus on agency, the shift from the positing of a substantialized agent to the description of actual, transitory agents entails a heightened focus on the actions of those agents and the constitution of those agents themselves." See Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. p. 264.
4. Firoz Bakht Ahmed, "The Mahatma and the Muse," *The Hindu*, January 28, 1996.
5. Quoted in Satish K. Arora and Harold D. Lasswell, *Political Communication: The Public Language of Political Elites in India and the United States*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968. pp. 57, 22.
6. For some sample studies, see Arthur H. Miller, Vicki L. Hesli, and William M. Reisinger, "Comparing Citizen and Elite Belief Systems in Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59/1 (Spring 1995); and M. Kent Jennings, "Ideological Thinking Among Mass Publics and Political Elites," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56/4 (Winter 1992).
7. Quoted in Arora and Lasswell, 1968, pp. 38-9.
8. Inden, 1990, p. 270.
9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. pp. 320-5.
10. *Center for South Asian Studies Newsletter*, UH-Manoa, 7/3 (1991). pp. 10-11.
11. Majid Hayat Siddiqi, "History and Society in a Popular Rebellion: Mewat,

- 1920-1933," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28/3 (July 1986). pp. 442-3.
12. Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. p. 324.
 13. Phrase used by Brian Smith. See *ibid*.
 14. See Peter van der Veer, "'God must be Liberated': A Hindu Liberation Movement in Ayodhya," *Modern Asian Studies* 21/2 (April 1987). p. 300.
 15. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. p. 183. For Karl Marx, however, these objects of human worship were simply the projections of human beings' most valued qualities onto an external being which was then believed to have power over them. The concerned people would recognize themselves as the true makers of their history if the alienation was overcome. Thus religion was an expression of the lack of power over their own lives. See Arvind Rajagopal, "Ram Janmabhoomi, Consumer Identity and Image-Based Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly* 29/27 (July 2, 1994). p. 1661.
 16. For example, see Rajagopal, 1994. K. N. Panikkar, "Religious Symbols and Political Mobilization: The Agitation for a Mandir at Ayodhya," *Social Scientist* 21/7-8 (July-August 1993). pp. 63-77.
 17. Yogendra Malik and V. B. Singh, *Hindu Nationalists in India: The Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994. pp. 55-6.

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