

God on Their Side!

By A Correspondent

What is common between golfer Jyoti Randhawa and actress Khushboo? In fact, looking at their distinct fields, it would certainly be difficult to discern any thread of commonality. But if one would have come across the latest survey published in a leading newspaper one would already have got an answer. According to this survey, both of them do not believe in 'any higher power'. For Jyoti 'the only power I believe in is willpower- the power within you', for Khushboo 'my power is within me. I live for people whom I love and who love me'.

Interestingly people like Jyoti or Khushboo cannot be considered as lone rangers in this society which is becoming rather more religious with time. (A trend which is definitely at variance with what is happening in the West) Sixty-six respondents out of a group of thousand plus clearly stated that they are non-believers.

Of course, the commonality shared by these two stalwarts of their own fields vis-a-vis their understanding about 'higher power', is not the only interesting fact which readily emerges from the survey done by the *Times of India* people with TNS, a leading market research agency to know 'how Indians view God and their faith'. (10 city TOI-TNS poll, TOI, 26th November, 2006.

To be very frank, the recent survey done across ten cities—Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangallore, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Patna, Lucknow and Nagpur with 1,007 respondents, which was restricted to people falling in socio-economic categories A, B and C present a mixed set of conclusions.

According to the survey three fourths of Indians are strong believers; 72 percent of those in their twenties strongly believe in god ; mere 11 percent of respondents saw god as explicitly male ; number of people who said they are more religious today than they used to be was considerably larger than those who felt they had become less religious: God is perceived as a source of energy and not someone to be feared; people are not convinced that God is a micromanager, around 46% said s/he was an observer, not a controller. Despite the fact that 87% of the respondents in the survey were Hindus, only one third of them said that they sensed the presence of God in *murtis* (idols).

The survey also brought to the fore the unwritten divide existing between the south and the north. While according to the survey 92% of the respondents in the north had expressed their belief in God, the figure slipped to 86% in South. The scepticism of the south is also evident in things like belief in spiritual gurus or on questions less directly connected to religiosity. As the paper puts it 'Whether it is belief in miracles, astrology or communicating with the dead, Chennai and Bangalore are consistently the least given to such ideas'. As far as the non-believers were concerned, their attitude towards life was 'whatever has to be done, we have to do it ourselves'.

The observations tend to emphasise the growing religiosity of the Indian people, especially its younger lot, and thus could boost the ratings of social/political formations whose *weltanschauung* itself revolves around god. They also demonstrate the growing 'market of spirituality' the country where people find themselves amidst Jet set gurus and channels beaming out sermons by these self-proclaimed representatives of god.

One is witness to the way neither the social life nor polity could remain aloof from the manner in which people viewed religion. Psephologists are considered to be the best people to underline this phenomenon who keep prophesising the voting behaviour of a people from the community to which they belong. A presumption is also at work here which communicated an understanding that one's this worldly view has a lot of bearing with one's otherworldly views.

Interestingly despite this growing interest in becoming more religious or exhibiting one's religiosity to the hilt, there are quite a few things which show that people are smart enough to differentiate between the spiritual and temporal.

Like when the respondents were specifically asked whether they think religion is a private or a social affair, a majority of them (43 %) were of the opinion that it should be a private affair and only 29% were of the opinion that it should be a social affair. Of course 28 percent of the respondents underlined that it should be both. Despite the ongoing propaganda against religious conversion by the Hindutva brigade organisations, 67 percent of the respondents clearly opined that people should be allowed to convert. As an aside it might be emphasised here that the constitution gives right to faith and its propagation and if properly fought by a team of legal luminaries in the highest courts of the country all those laws which have been put in place by different states (mainly the Hindutva ruled. Of course they are not the only guilty ones. MP and Orissa have drafted laws to ban 'religious conversions' long before the Hindutva attained legitimacy in the eyes of the people) could prove *ultra vires*.

The respondents were very clear about the alleged correspondence between 'being religious' and 'being moral'. Everybody is aware that a social common sense has emerged down the years (thanks to the manner in which religion plays a normative role in modern societies and the concerted campaign undertaken by institutions/individuals who think that it is their duty to communicate to the wider people the 'ultimate truth') which establishes a direct relationship between religiosity and morality. The connection between belief and goodness of an individual was also posed before the participants and the overwhelming opinion was that it has nothing to do with one's non/beliefs. Sixty-five percent of the respondents were of the opinion that 'it is not necessary to be believer to be a good person.'

It cannot be denied that all such surveys have their own limitations. At times they suffer from the initial premise provided by the respective organisation, or there are constraints in reaching any fruitful conclusion if the sample size chosen is not representative. And looking at the fact that the above mentioned

survey focused itself on socio-economic categories A,B and C and left the categories D, E out of its ambit, one can always say that the conclusions are skewed in favour of the middle or upper middle class.

Does the present survey carry any import for all such people who are worried about intrusion of matters of faith in the running of the state and society?

First of all the survey does provide resource(s) of hope for all those people/formations who yearn for secularism to prevail in this country. It is true that the idea of secularism and its practice has received lot of battering during last sixty years of independence. One need not mention the genocide of Muslims *a la* the Modi brigade in Gujarat or the carnage against Sikhs with due connivance of the 'secular' Congress regime at the centre or the killings of lakhs of innocents of different communities at the altar of vested interests camouflaged under a religious garb.

But despite the high voltage propaganda by the religio-centric people, if more than 6 percent of people have no qualms in emphasising their (non) belief or if a major chunk of the target population still considers religion to be a private matter or have no qualms if people convert according to their own will, then it should be considered as a silverlining. It gives an impression that notwithstanding the majoritarian assault, by and large people still cherish pluralism. Political Hinduism or political Islam may create conditions conducive for harbouring illusions about 'others' but people seem to be still keen that the state should remain above any particular faith or creed.

Perhaps this explains the silence maintained by the wider populace when the Shankaracharya and his junior were put behind bars for being 'party to the planned killing of one Shankar Raman—an employee of their Ashram itself. It also explains the absence of any big uproar in a city like Mumbai or for that matter Madurai when illegal religious structures—may it be temples, mazaars or churches—in their hundreds were pulled down by the municipal authorities not sometime back. It also explains why it took around 60 years of consistent work for the Hindutva formation to attain some sort of legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

This 'silverlining' among a sense of gloom definitely brings forth the task of defence and rejuvenation of secularism high on agenda, a task which has been largely neglected by all those forces/individuals whose credentials vis-a-vis secularism can never be questioned. One thinks that the gigantic task for promotion and strengthening of secularism was rather left to the state to deal with which has culminated in grievous consequences for the fabric of our society which has still retained its composite heritage despite heavy odds.

While there seems to be a fresh need to revisit the whole idea of secularism as it is understood and practised in India, there is also an urgent need to take into consideration the efforts people as individuals/ formations/parties—need to put in. Is not it high time that one moves forward from the 'Sarva Dharam

Samabhav' position to a position of what an intellectual calls 'militant or uncompromising secularism'.

And looking at the fact that the purity and pollution based regime of caste as well as gender oppression practised by the majority community among the Indians derives sanction and legitimacy from religion, is it not necessary to integrate 'anti-caste struggle' and struggle against gender oppression in fight for secularism. ↵