

Vivekananda and the Rise of Assertive Hinduism

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BY THE TURN OF THE century the upper caste Hinduism began to regain some confidence. A lot of texts were translated into English because of the efforts of scholars like Max Mueller in Germany, Asiatic Society and support of some princely states like Mysore, Travancore, and Baroda.

In this atmosphere Vivekananda appeared. He was a young man with some unusual skills. First he had tremendous energy to propagate the cause. He was a very skilled promoter and good administrator. All this came useful after his return from Chicago where he attended the world conference of religion. On its own his performance was not very different from other representatives, including the one from the Buddhist from Sri Lanka. However one newspaper reported it very enthusiastically and Vivekananda used the report very effectively in India to promote himself and the Ramkrishna Mission. Upper caste Hindu society was ready to receive this foreign certificate to its greatness.

Vivekananda gave Hinduism an all India image and made it into a religion. Neither of which is the nature of Hinduism. In truth Hinduism is not a religion. It is a set of several religions (sampra-dayas), many of which have deep contradictions with each other. Theologically Vivekananda identified Hinduism with Advaita of Shankaracharya (8th century AD). Within the Indian tradition, Advaita was a small sect and was heavily criticised in the theological debates of medieval India, often accused of borrowing from Buddhism and passing it off as the correct interpretation of Vedas, Gita and Brahmasutra Bhashya. However it suited the imperial design of one great India because Shankaracharya was supposed to have set up places of pilgrimages in the four corners of India viz. in North (Badrinath), East (Puri), West (Dwaraka) and South (Rameshwaram).

Vivekananda also gave it a Christian Mission kind of character in the form of Ramkrishna Mission. It is modelled on Jesuits of Catholic Christianity with its celibate priests, schools, colleges and hospitals and more recently with its 'rural development' programmes. Over time it developed all the ills of the Catholic Church. That is, its high handed authoritarianism, corruption – both material and moral, enormous wealth, landed property and real estate.

AGGRESSIVE HINDUISM

The assertive, grand and 'imperial' image of India that Vivekananda created inspired Hindu chauvinists right from Savarkar, Golwalkar to Advani and Vajpayee. The present generation of leaders like Modi and his ilk use this kind of Hinduism to achieve political power. The Sangh Parivar also publishes and sells a lot of literature about Vivekananda. They fought for the land at Kanyakumari, (the southern tip of the Indian peninsula) and created a Vivekananda

memorial. This had been a place of joint spiritual worship for both Christians and Hindus. While it is true that Vivekananda spent some time there, so did various spiritual leaders of the Hindu and Christian communities. The agenda of the Sangh Parivar is to use the different images of Muslims and Christian to portray them as danger to Hinduism, create hate propaganda and carry out mass killings whenever they can get away with it.

What is the basis of this aggressive Hinduism? Aggressive Hinduism aims primarily to achieve political power in post-independence India through elections. Not all upper-class Hindus support it; nor do the really religious people support it. But most of them do not oppose it either. And for these communal forces it is enough if they are not opposed. The discourse they use is that Hinduism is threatened by conversions and by reservation policies. Hinduism is threatened by the Muslims, Christians and SC/ST population because of their aspirations to acquire education, sharing power etc. The aim of the Sangh Parivar politics is that these communities should stay as second class citizens and be available as slaves and workers to the mainstream upper caste Hindus. This of course strikes a sympathetic chord in the hearts of many upper caste Hindus, many of whom have power and wealth in the present society.

There is of course a real basis for perception of this threat. It was Ambedkar who first said, 'I am born as a Hindu, but I will not die as a Hindu'. For centuries Hinduism faced this threat because of its practice of inhuman slavery towards the lower castes. First a large section of the artisans converted to Islam and later a large section of tribals and scheduled caste communities converted to Christianity. While part of Hindu society did respond to the threat through social reforms of the Hindu society and legally abolishing untouchability and creating the reservation policy through the Indian constitution, many did not accept it in their hearts.

This battle has raged throughout post- independence India. It took an ugly shape in 1975 when reservation did not get abolished as envisioned in the Constitution, and anti-reservation agitation shook the country. The Mandal Commission in 1987-88 added fuel to the fire by prescribing reservation for the backward castes also. The crisis came to head with the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. The Hindu fascist block threw its challenge with the Sangh Parivar putting it out the message that Muslims and Christians can exist in India only as second class citizens, obedient to the upper caste Hindu society. If you condemn the Babri Masjid demolition, you are opposing this agenda and vice versa. The battle lines were clearly drawn.

Rest of India stood aghast and helpless at this naked flexing of muscles. Why helpless? Because the ruling classes themselves were following a similar agenda in a secular and religious discourse since 1984. On one hand Rajiv Gandhi appeased Hindus by opening the locked gates of the makeshift temple at Ayodhya in the Babri masjid premises, changed the Indian Constitution to appease the Muslim clergy in the Shah Bano case; on the other hand he helped Anderson of Union Carbide to escape from India and prepared grounds for neo-liberal policies or what came to be known as liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. This policy actually came into being in a full scale through Narsimha Rao as Prime Minister and Man

Mohan Singh as Finance Minister in 1991. Hence Narsimha Rao's government stood frozen, time stopped, while the masjid was being demolished over several hours. All the parliamentary parties have joined this agenda. What bothered them was election politics, how to stay in power. So the 'secular' political parties also began to woo Muslim clergy and Muslim political parties and the Sangh Parivar rightly dubbed them as pseudo secularists and Muslim appeasers.

INDIA TODAY

Today the agenda of neo-liberal policies has overshadowed the communal agenda as can be seen by the response to the Court judgement on the Ayodhya issue. Even the communal forces, once they got power in Gujarat, Karnataka, and Chhattisgarh etc. have been busy in pursuing these policies, although they keep the communal agenda alive. These neo-liberal policies have resulted in:

1. Enormous creation of wealth. The rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer. However a 'creamy layer' has emerged from each section of the middle and poor classes
2. Incredible levels of corruption
3. Ecological disaster
4. Enormous rise of conflicts
5. Enormous increase in violence against the poor, women and even children
6. Growth of unemployment and lumpenisation of youth

With the global recession all these are reaching crisis proportions and Indian society may be on the verge of collapse. However the Indian poor, Muslims and Christians continue to face the twin attacks of the Hindu right and the attack of the neo-liberal policies.

LUMPEN YOUTH

The neo-liberal policies have created a large population of youth between the ages of 18 to 25 years who have nowhere to go. Their education is not good enough to give them any capability to be employed either with government, industry, in agriculture or through self-employment. They are often called 'lumpens' or 'goondas'. They have need for money for fulfilling some basic needs as well as some youthful fancies like tea, smoking, mobile phone, alcohol etc. They are easy prey to political agitation and also are the goonda elements in public religious functions such as Ganesh Puja, Durga Puja or even Warkari walks in Deccan region.

PROJECT OF THE PEOPLE

The project of the people in a broad sense is defeating capitalism and building socialism. It is captured in the slogans 'Our short term goal is unionisation. Our long term goal is achievement of socialism'. So the immediate task is always organising people.

The people's project in the religious and cultural front is visualised as uniting the oppressed people belonging to lower castes through reviving the small tradition. In Dalit politics the lower castes are called 'Bahujan' (majority) because they are in majority.

SMALL TRADITION

The small tradition to which lower castes (mainly the BCs) Hindus belong, is called small not because of number of people involved, but because they are in small local groups, unlike the 'great' tradition which is highly articulate, powerful and tends to have an all India face. This tradition in the North is that of *nirgun bhakti* saints, the most famous of them being Kabir. Theologically they maintain that between God and man there is no need of an intermediary like the Pandit or the Mulla. They do not have rich temples or expensive religious rituals. Typically the artisan castes are the followers and their saints also came from these castes. In India the Muslim Sufi tradition is very similar and most of the converts to Islam came from the artisan castes. This small tradition tended to oppose the division between man and man based on caste and birth and generally had a more egalitarian approach. They used simple language and have contributed to the emergence of modern Indian languages in a big way. This tradition has different names in different parts of India and in many places it is close to the Sufis.

The BCs have a dual religious allegiance. The peasant castes subscribe to mainstream Hinduism, often Vaishna-vism, whereas the artisan castes subscribe to the *Nirgun* tradition of the Bhakti movement. There are regional differences too. Deccan, for example, is not a very productive region and has relatively poorer peasants. Here, therefore many peasants too tend to belong to the *Nirgun* traditions. Most of the twentieth century peasant movement involved the peasant caste and today they are ruling groups in many of the regional states whereas the centre is still dominated by the OCs.

The *Shudras* and the *Panchamas* do not belong to any of these traditions and there is tendency among them to leave Hinduism for other religions, although the Sangh Parivar tries very hard to keep them in the Hindu fold. Their political aspirations and its articulation is a relatively modern phenomenon, Ambedkar being the most famous of them.

The small tradition left to itself could have contributed to the emergence of a modern egalitarian society. However this was not to be. Colonialism intervened and the development of the Indian society took a different route. It is only today with the birth of poor people's movement that this tradition is receiving more attention.

REVIVING SMALL TRADITION

The small tradition or the anti-authoritarian trend in religion carries the seeds of democracy and secularism. As has been said above in India, it has been suppressed by capitalism under colonial conditions. The present crisis gives an opportunity to revive and make it a tool for liberation of the poor.

Politically it was Ambedkar who tapped the potential of Buddhism for dalit liberation. However even before Ambedkar, Acharya Dharmanand Kosambi, Rahul Sankrityayan, Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan and other Buddhists had realised this potential. Rahul Sankrityayan personified this kind of blending of communist and Buddhist and rationalist ideas coming together.

After the emergency, by 1977 a new political/ideological common platform started emerging. The rationalist movement in parts of India is joining the Buddhist and other dalit and religious groups like Kabir panthis and creating a lot of literature and activities representing the small traditions. This has the sort of role that communist literature has for cadre education. In fact they also use communist literature for this purpose.

Culturally the small traditions of Hindus and Muslim in India have lived peacefully together for centuries. Sufi majars are visited by both Hindu and Muslim. Acharya Kshiti Mohan Sen has recorded this tradition in his 'Hindu Muslim Jukta Sadhana'. In as much as the Hindu right is attacking all the poor both economically and on religious front, it opens a possibility of coming together of these anti-authoritarian religious tendencies. There is possibility of genuine secular forces helping this tendency as has been witnessed in the Kabir festival in Bangalore last year. This was followed by similar events elsewhere. In Hyderabad, There was a performance about Lal Deg, the Sufi woman poet from Kashmir and later Mujaffar Ali performed with Abida Parveen. As a follow up of Kabir festival in Bangalore Sindhi Sufi poets were presented. The theatre movement in India has a long tradition of this kind of work. Some trade union activists and some dalit activists are also exploring these possibilities. There is also a regional spread of these ideas and movements. For example Prahald Tipanya singing Kabir in Malwa region has very large regional followings among dalits.

However these ideas are not new. Even during independence struggle people were familiar with these ideas although no one carried it forward much. Ambedkar rejected them outright because these involved mainly peasant and artisan caste and dalits had no place in them. Secondly they did not reject caste. Ambedkar correctly realised that within Hinduism there is no possibility of egalitarian politics. That is why in 1935 at the Depressed Classes Conference, he made the famous statement, 'I was born a Hindu but I will not die as one'. His slogan for the dalits was 'educate, organise and struggle'.

Today while there is certain amount of common platform between Dalits and backward castes, tribals appear to be on their own, although in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh certain amount of political coming together has occurred.

The challenge is to unite the entire Bahujan Samaj with a political struggle of the poor for liberation, equality and peace. Some observations in this regard are:

1. This struggle is possible mainly at a regional level, using local language and culture. This at a positive level means using local people's religious festivals, such as Jatras, Urs or mass pilgrimage walks in Deccan like Warkaris. One should however note that capitalism has penetrated many of these festivals and it needs to be combated. Only local traders with local wares should be allowed. Multinationals, particularly of electronic gizmos – mobiles, Ipod and clones,

bottled water and soft drinks, plastics etc. can be banned. This can be done by local organising committees. They can also be enriched by secular independent inputs, like secular interpretations of these traditions.

2. At a negative level, the so-called national or imperial festivals like Ganesh Puja and Durga Puja, Diwali, Dussera, Holi etc., can be boycotted, and controlled by not allowing/restricting forced collections, use of public tanks and rivers to dump the idols, use of loudspeakers, use of roads for erecting pandals etc. Similarly pilgrimages to Tirupati, Sabrimalai, and the four great traditional places of Badri, Puri, Dwaraka and Rameshwaram should be discouraged as they all have become capitalist money grabbing institutions.
3. The biggest threat to all this is the nexus between politics, religion and the lumpen youth. However youth also like idealism and given a realistic goal which also gives them a purpose they can be a great asset. In fact organising Bahujan youth will be the biggest project. In the religious festivals many green ideas can be combined to create jobs for youth. There lies an example of Gadage Maharaj who repaired all the Ghats of religious places on the river banks in Maharashtra. Today instead of polluting the rivers and lakes by immersing the idols in them people can have projects to clean these bodies. These festivals can also be used to promote local and green products and boycott multinationals.
4. Organising contract, informal sector and municipal cleaning workers, agricultural labour, shepherds, dais and so on who largely belong to the lower castes, and are unorganised. This opens the scope of uniting the revival of the small tradition with secular movements.

There are anti-authoritarian trends in other religions also which represents dalit interests like Sufism in Islam and Quakers in Christianity. Almost all Buddhists in India are dalits. Similarly there are dalit Muslim, dalit Christian, dalit Sikh organisations. The challenge is to unite all these tendencies with the secular project of the people, which is socialism!

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