Journal of Dharma 32, 2 (April-June 2007), 153-162

A MAP FOR THE PILGRIMAGE TO THE OTHER

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1. Introduction

"The rituals you see enacted in the temples, such as Tanjore, were already being performed when the temples of ancient Greece and Rome where still in use; yet, while the Gods of Thebes and Parthenon have long been dead and forgotten for millennia, the Gods and temples of Hindu India are still as alive and active as ever. For Hindu civilization is the only great classical culture to survive from the ancient world intact and at temples, such as Tanjore, one can still catch glimpse of festivals seen by Greek or Egyptian ambassadors to India long before the rise of Rome."[1]

Philosophy has fallen asleep over the question 'What is Man?' a question which hopelessly confuses the empirical and the transcendental. "Man is a recent invention; and one perhaps nearing its end."[2]

The above two quotes capture the polarities operating in society between tradition and modernity. This study intends to enter into the discourse on religious literacy in society in the context of this polarity with special reference to Indian society. It will look at the current emergence of this discourse, its specific features in India by situating within the secularist discourse, and then propose a model that could be applicable even beyond the Indian horizons.

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[1]William Dalrymple, "Invoking Nataraja," *Seminar* 572 (April 2007), 14-17.

[2]M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London: Rutledge, 1989, 387.

2. Why Religious Literacy

Religious literacy as a topic of discourse in the public mind emerged as a post 9/11 phenomenon, calling for the rethinking on the prevalent knowledge about the co-religionists in one's country. Literacy is carrying forward the thinking function. To be literate, whether in computer, media, literature, or religion, is a mode of increasing the social capital of a people or society. There is the concern of the policy maker as well as the social worker in rethinking the prevailing biases and working towards overcoming the prejudices that inhere in the public mind.

The concern to remould society differently, from how we find it, is a task equally before the philosopher as well as the political scientist. Therefore, it could be considered that "[t]hinking in the public interest is a social function which rests on two far reaching philosophical assumptions: in the first place, we thinkers are saying that reality is not as it is but as we conceive it to be. Secondly, we are saying that reality as we conceive it to be is a possible world, a world we human beings can choose to inhabit."[3]

What has brought to the public discourse a rethinking on the positioning of religion in public life is the consequence of the alternate mode of keeping religion at bay from public space. "The monopolizing of a society's mental power is as much of a threat to freedom as the monopolizing of its political or economic power."[4] If so, in succumbing to keep religion out of public discourse, was there an attempt to control the potential for imagining coexistence differently?

The secular thinking was built on the premise that it would be conducive to promoting harmonious coexistence in society. When the irreligiosity or anti-religiosity of the state-provided ideology of secularism, began to threaten the wellbeing of a sizeable part of the society whose religious beliefs received no recognition, and alternative models of wellbeing began to surface in society, the need for religious literacy too surfaced.

The presupposition here is that just like in an overtly religious society some mode of secular education and appreciation of the values of neutrality (understood as making space for multiple faiths) is needed,

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[3]Philip Allot, *The Health of Nations: Society and Law beyond the State*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 5.

[4]Allot, *The Health of Nations*, 9.

so too in an exaggeratedly secular society religious education becomes a necessity. In this argument, it is the concern with the health of the society that promotes the religious literacy. The health of the nation, as it is with that of an individual, is disrupted by forces of disease, either genetic or historical. Measures to counteract such forces, as prevention or relief medications or radical interventions, are indeed necessary for the preservation of the wellbeing of all.

The prevalent problems are, then, the consequences of having controlled the public mind in one way. Its solution calls for an adaptive reshaping of the public mind. One can see parallels to such a situation existing in the pre-industrial pre-French Revolution societies wherein the poor and their opinions were made subsidiary to the elite who thought and acted on their behalf. The assertion of J. S. Mill that 'the prospect of the future depends on the degree in which (the poor) can be made rational beings' rings a note that the future of contemporary society depends on making the public religiously literate. In other words, in the Gramscian sense of the word 'common sense', the popular culture is to be invested with an appreciation for the other in order to envision a new society. We shall return to this again.

Philip Allot mentions four ideological premises of the 19th century continuing into the 21st as (i) the great hegemony of the US and the EU lead in world affairs, (ii) the inter-state rivalry leading diplomacy as mainstay of the balance of power between nations, (iii) global capitalism with its social engineering of human effort as having no spatial limits and (iv) the science led social progress generating the momentum of science and technology. It is within these parameters of defining the changing patterns of evolving societies that the future possibilities are to be realistically worked out. The imaginary of a nation is conditioned equally by external factors as much as by internal, intrinsically inherent factors as well. Locating oneself within India, for instance, it could be posed as to what are the factors that prevent concerted political action to rectify the deficiencies of governance despite awareness of it even on a mass scale. One could think of the growing Maoist influence, for example, in the rural districts of Andhra Pradesh, Jharkand and Chattisgarh. There seems to be a collective internal disability to overcome problems through dedicated action, even when they are identified and analyzed to perfection.

3. The Secularist Option

The secular agenda for the country realizes itself in promoting a vibrant civil society that acts as a buffer between the traditional values embedded in the family and the modernity brought to the public sphere by means of globalised state and its governance. In searching for the right role of religion and, therefore, the need for religious literacy the emergence of society itself must be placed in context.

Secularism emerged in India as an Indian version of modernity. There was a traditional way in which communities accommodated one another and the society was termed 'tolerant'. Under the new circumstances of modernity, 'secularism' has replaced or has become the byword for tolerance in Indian society. It is that which keeps a society knit despite competing notions of good and interest. The mode of doing things in public in such a way that the competing and often irreconcilable conceptions of good did not vitiate situation of public interaction among people, but became in effect a secular ethic. What is feared is that due to the institutional entrenched percolation of religion in India as a colonial legacy carried over into post colonial times, mixing of religion and modernity would turn out to be a leviathan – an uncontrollable monster.

In any case, if this fear is to be overcome, religious literacy is a necessity in India: either to practise in such a way as to preserve the pre-modern basis of harmony or to recreate the harmony of the secular state by giving space to the competing voices of religion. The map to the other in the Indian socio-political context consists in delineating its historical development. The route to the other, be it Muslim, Sikh, or Christian is simultaneously an entry into the space of a community that is one's neighbour regionally and linguistically, besides religiously. In this connection, Javeed Alam has successfully shown that the emergence of the 'other' as different from one's own community is a phenomenon of the emergence of the elite in both Hindu and Muslim communities during the colonial period.[5]

In the Indian political discourse, secularism is the word for finding the place of the other. However, it is perceived differently. Alam refers to the history of India seen from Hindu perspective as radically different from the history of Pakistan seen by the scholars there, as if it means the

[5]Javeed Alam, *India: Living with Modernity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, 215-226.

'twain shall never meet'. Building on the divergences in perception scholars have argued that the ideal of a 'secular state' is contrary to all known facts of Indian history. On the other hand, there is an attempt to reinvent the tradition of tolerance and coexistence as a practically lived experience in many parts of the country and theorize the unique potential of a 'secular' meaning of 'multi-religious' than anti-religious state functioning coherently for the general wellbeing. It is this experiment that is still on in the country and its success depends on a new kind of literacy being imparted to the upcoming generation. It ought to draw on the past to show the possibilities of collective existence in amity amidst differences.

The history of the emergence of society in postcolonial India offers the background to the discussions about the present demands for moulding society in one way or the other. In this regard, the distinctions made between 'population, political society, state and civil society' by Partha Chatterjee are useful clarifications. There is a role of educating the population in moving towards civil society through a process of politicization of society for the purpose of formation of the state.[6] The following distinctions he draws help understand the present state of Indian society: First, he observes that the site of significant transformation shifts from colonial period, civil society, to postcolonial period, the political society; second, the debate revolving around transformation in society shifts from 'modernity' in colonial period to 'democracy' in postcolonial period; third, that in the present phase of globalization of capital, there is an emerging opposition between modernity (civil society) and democracy (political society).

An example from contemporary Uttar Pradhesh (UP) politics clarifies this issue further. The political alliance between the Dalit Bahujan Samajwadi Party of Mayawati with the Brahminic forces in UP, through an alliance with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), brought Mayawati to power. Reflecting on this development, Kanchah Ilaiah comments that while political power is shared easily by the Brahmin with the Dalit for survival, not so easily shared is the spiritual power. He poses a question to Mayawati as to whether her politics will also make the Brahmins share their spiritual power, by bringing about true spiritual

[6]Partha Chatterjee, "On Civil and Political Society in Post-Colonial Democracies," in Sunil Khilnani and Sudipta Kaviraj (eds.), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 165-178.

democracy in Indian society, wherein anyone can share in the priest craft. In the Indian context, then, the role of religion ought to strengthen the democratic spirit in civil society as well as in state-based governance.

This is all the more called for because there is a feeling that sense of the nation is weak in the public mind in India. The subsidiary or more closer affiliation to the states as sub-nations of ethnic communities, religions, linguistic, and regional self perceptions eats into the sense of the 'Indian' creating this weakening. This, however, is no deficiency as it goes hand in hand with an equally open internationalism in the emerging context, even as it did earlier. Both Gandhi and Tagore are characterized by this universalism. Standing in their shoes, it would seem that nationalism is a kind of inevitable evil of the contemporary times to be trodden over and bypassed. The resurgence of internationalism in Europe, thus, coincides with the reawakening of its hidden dimension of the Indian self-identity in the public mind. Religious conversion in India is a culturally embedded reality. The transformation in religious sensibility transmutes the culture as well. Conversion, as a religious act having a cultural impact and transformation potential, takes us back to the discourse on the Other.

4. The Route to the Other

Modernity is credited to have invented the Other. The arrival of modernity into Indian subcontinent can be qualified with the emergence of the Other in the modern sense. For instance, the modernist reading of the Indian caste-ridden society which Louis Dumont expertly accomplished in his classical anthropological work entitled *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966)[7] epitomised the Brahmin-Dalit antithesis on the basis of purity-pollution. Once the dynamic of the 'other' is perceived, it is easy to predate it to the pre-modern set up, and even to the ancient map. However, it is to be noted that it still remains as a modernist reading of the pre-modern times.

The Foucaultian stress on the changes in the episteme of an epoch or a period going into the making of a culture is significant. The relevance of both the structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to languages as the vehicles of these respective 'episteme' also is

[7]Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988.

noteworthy. The shift, over the millennia, from Sanskrit to regional vernaculars and through them to international English is a marker of this cultural confluence of encounters with 'others'- be they next door neighbouring ethnic group or the intruding foreigner.

On closer analysis, the exclusionary dynamic which begins with the religion based enumeration of membership in the society is to be faulted for the construction of the 'other' as an outsider beyond the boundary – of the caste, region, culture, etc. Religions construct overarching meta-narratives and supposedly conceive it as if meant for all. The emergence of the outsider as the promoter of the alternative is incomprehensible. The vision of the self, as seen from the framework of the respective religion (or region, language) based affiliation of the community, is narrowly enclosed within its boundaries.

The emergence of the 'other' is thus the direct consequence of the inability to include the 'other' as part of the self-definition, the '*lokam*' (world) of oneself. What falls outside, is perceived as different, as incompatible and therefore becomes the *other*.

The dynamics of creating space for the 'other' rises from the inadequacies of the prevailing order: for example, "free representative institutions cannot be conceived within the framework of colonialism, freeing labour from the sway of capital for their self-realization is not possible under capitalism; equality of cultures is unthinkable under enlightenment rationality."[8] Here the roots of racism and exclusion of the other are inbuilt.

In sharp contrast, dialogue is a process of discovering the 'other' as constituting the self, the 'other' as created by the self and the 'other' as but one half of the self. This is seen in the non-violent resistance movements across the world. David Hardiman highlighted this in his study of Gandhi and the global impact of non-violence. The signs of this dialogue are visible in the wise words of Gandhi, "non-violence has not failed us but we have failed non-violence," or the words of Martin Luther King, "Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love."[9] Or again, as Nelson Mandela said, "Man's goodness is a

[8]Alam, *India: Living with Modernity*, 12-13.

[9]Martin Luther King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 63, cited in David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005, 272.

flame that can be hidden but never extinguished."[10] These words refer to the emergence of dialogue and positioning of the other with one's self perception that is the outcome of hard reality hitting in the face and no mere idealism. That is to say, "to make peace with an enemy one must work with that enemy and that enemy becomes your partner."[11]

The search for the face of the *other* is a search for an alternative. An alternative to the economic-political-social oppressive structure emerges from the discord experienced therein and its lack of encompassing all the experienced reality. Oppressive systemic structures are built on the exclusion of the 'other' in principle. Therefore, the alternative conception of the 'other' has to be built as a non-exclusionary dynamic. Such non-exclusionary approaches have been attempted in the history of thought and politics. Gandhi and his *ahimsa-satyagraha* or non-violence approach based on the merits of truth is one such. It has been in different degrees reworked by Martin Luther King, Malcom X, Nelson Mandela, Steve Bild, Medha Pathkar, Baba Amte, and Aung San Sui of Burma. Its power is gripping though opposition to it has been rampant.

Construction of the 'other' is part of the self-construction. The mode in which the *other* is constructed varies from West to East. The other is a regulatory, normative comparative reality for the West; for the very definition of self in the western – Cartesian-Kantian-Hegelian tradition is that the self is not the other; self is the non-other. In contrast, the *other* is cast as part of the self in the East, and yet distinct: the non-dual, the *ardhanariswara*; the meeting of opposites, a containment of the different. This syntegration attempt is found also in the West, as in the East, and it is to be construed as a middle path. The stress and emphasis vary, from east to west, giving different cultural-intellectual hypotheses.

Religious literacy is an absolute contemporary need due to various factors: neglect of one's tradition, growth of atheism, the science-religion debate, the plurality of religions, the consideration of religion from purely political or sociological or anthropological viewpoints, and the fact that religion was used to justify injustice, slavery, colonialism and genocide at various times in history in more than one culture.

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[10]Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 615, cited in David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, 280.

[11]Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, 280.

Against this background, religious literacy also got to do with supporting and preaching a religion that is liberal, just and promoting oneness of humanity.[12]

The need of the hour, it would seem, is the cross fertilization of cultures and it could be partly achieved by an introduction to the religious history of one's own religion and that of others. There is, however, inherent in this or any other mode of religious literacy campaign the danger of being subverted as propaganda for fundamentalist positions. This danger could somewhat be averted by means of presenting the negative impact of religious affinities on world history with the benefit religion and spirituality have brought to humanity.

In this regard, there is something more probably to be learned from Gandhi, one who experimented with religion and politics, quite successfully in the last century. When accused that his spirituality was overtaken by politics he responded disclaiming any sainthood:

> Though by disclaiming sainthood I disappoint the critic's expectations, I would have him to give up his regrets by answering that the politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine, and if I am to take part in politics it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries.[13]

His emphasis on two aspects is summed up by the grandson biographer: "One, he preserved his balance in the tempest of politics by holding tight to a firmly fastened religious bar or rail. Two, that a religious bar or rail was something moral and universal, transcending Hinduism."[14]

5. Conclusion

Religious literacy in the 21st century India means providing in all earnest a roadmap to the other: a journey of discovering the other in one's own tradition, language, religion, region, and culture. Dialogue, is the path

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[12]See the responses to the work of Steven Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*, SanFrancisco: HarperOne, 2007, in the comments that ensued after its release: reference.aol.com/nowyouknow/religious-literacy accessed on 2.08.08.

[13] Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas: True Story of a Man, His People and an Empire*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 246.

[14]Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 246.

that is chartered out by eminent personalities in each part of the country, be it Ramakrishna or Ramana Maharshi, Jyoti Rao Phule or Sri Narayana Guru, Gandhi or Ambedkar, Basava or Tagore. Religious literacy could or should provide the alphabets and accents for the conversations or dialogues among us to emerge. Our society needs probably to move in the direction of a post secular religiosity and a post religious secularity. We have ample models in our culture, pointing the way in this direction, and our tracing the path will be a contribution to posterity. It is important that we create an upcoming generation, in our schools, colleges, and universities who see "the social world as a place not primarily of struggle and conflict over control but as a context where conversation may be pursued with patience. And this is a deeply political matter … for it alters what we think we can expect of each other…"[15]

[15]Rowan Williams, "What is a University?" *International Journal of Christian Higher Education* 12 (January-March 2007) 1, 20. The author is the archbishop of Canterbury and the quote is from a lecture given at WuHan University in China on 13 October 2006.