
The destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindutva mobs in 1992 marked a major watershed in the history of inter-community relations in India. The controversy has, of course, yet to be settled. With the Vishwa Hindu Parishad [World Hindu Council] and allied groups now raking up the issue again, threatening to launch a mass campaign to build a temple on the site where the mosque once stood, the Ayodhya dispute seems to be hurtling back on to the centrestage of the troubled world of Indian politics.

This edited volume, a collection of nine essays of varying quality, seeks to provide a general overview of the state of inter-community, particularly Hindu-Muslim, relations in India in the years following the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the tragic loss of thousands of precious lives that followed in its wake. Seven of the nine contributors are openly critical of the politics of religious hatred that now seems to be engulfing India, seeing secularism, variously defined, as the only hope to preserve the country, despite its enormous diversities, as an ongoing proposition. Two writers, the Belgian Catholic-turned-Hindutva apologist, Koenraad Elst and the Indian-born and Canada-based Shrinivas Tilak, differ, and unabashedly argue the case for Hindutva as the basis of a Hindu polity for India. The reader is thus treated to a variety of different perspectives on the direction in which India seems to be moving today.

Secularism is defined in different ways by the contributors who insist that a secular polity alone can stem the tide of ethnic civil war in India. In his survey of the post-Babri Indian Muslim predicament, Theodore P. Wright, Jr. argues that while the Indian state has increasingly been veering round to a Hindu nationalist position, the Indian Muslims have sought to resist the threats to their existence by, among other means, seeking to ally themselves with various ‘secular’ parties, in the process abandoning the Congress for its soft Hindutva. The shrill rhetoric of some Muslim groups can only be counterproductive for the community, he insists. In his view, the only way in which Muslims can hope to stave off the Hindutva challenge is by working for the preservation of secularism, practically abandoning demands such as a separate personal code and other “communal” agendas, on the one hand, and, on the other, by accepting the status of what he calls “Hindu Muslims”.
This abject surrender to the Hindutva camp would, of course, hardly seem a reasonable option for most Muslims, and Wright does not tell us how Muslims could be made to see the “wisdom” of his advice. But then, in the rarefied atmosphere of conference rooms and the academia anything is possible. More to the point is John Carroll’s understanding of the prospects for secularism in India. He argues that the uniquely Indian version of secularism — equal treatment by the state of all religions, rather than a rigid separation between religion and the state or state hostility towards religion — has actually enabled the Indian state to dabble in the politics of inter-religious contestation. In the process, Indian nationalism has, for many, been seen to be synonymous with Hinduism. An urgent task before the Indian state, Carroll argues, is to consciously display complete neutrality in matters of religion. A rigid separation of the state from religion is also stressed by Subhash Kashyap and Dhirendra Vajpeyi, who make roughly the same argument as Carroll.

The Ayodhya dispute, centred as it is on rival understandings of Indian history, has had momentous consequences for the way many Indians understand themselves and their traditions. Matthew Cook writes that the symbol of Rama, on whose birth-place Hindutva extremists insist the Babri Masjid stood, is to be seen as sufficiently broad and encompassing to mean different things to different social groups, while grounded in a vision of a utopian social order. The Hindutva vision of Rama Rajya [The Rule of Rama], he says, has little to do with Hinduism. An urgent task before the Indian state, Carroll argues, is to consciously display complete neutrality in matters of religion. A rigid separation of the state from religion is also stressed by Subhash Kashyap and Dhirendra Vajpeyi, who make roughly the same argument as Carroll.

This debate over tradition and history is brilliantly examined in another essay included in this volume, Steven Hoffman’s piece on “Historical Narrative and Nation-State in India”. Closely examining the history textbooks produced by “secular” historians for the National Council for Educational Research and Training [NCERT] in the period under Congress rule, Hoffman shows the complex process of the construction of the notion of the secular, multi-religious Indian “nation-state”. Challenges to this understanding of the Indian state, he says, come principally from two quarters — the subaltern historians with their critique of state-centric historiography and from the Hindutva right-wing. Hoffman’s analysis is sharp, incisive and enlightening, although discussion of the saffronisation of the NCERT in recent years is totally absent.

While the other contributors to this volume seem to imagine Hindus and Muslims as two clearly defined groups, neatly set apart from each other, Vasudha Narayan challenges this reified notion of community identity in
her fascinating essay on Hindu-Muslim relations in Tamil Nadu. She writes of the remarkable give-and-take between Hindus and Muslims at the everyday level, from Tamil Muslims writing on the Ramayana to the Muslim wife of a Hindu deity at a popular temple and Hindu attendance at the dargâhs of Muslim Sufi saints. Although Hindus and Muslims are aware of the boundaries between them, Narayanan writes that often these boundaries are porous and “fuzzy”. Hindus and Muslims need not always, or even at most times, see themselves as inveterate foes.

In sharp contrast to this understanding of Hindu-Muslim relations are two jarring pieces written by Hindutva apologists Elst and Tilak. Elst’s essay, written in a journalistic mode that ill befits an academic treatise such as this, deals with the Hindutva ideologue Sita Ram Goel, proprietor of the Delhi-based Voice of India publication house. Goel, Elst tells us, is critical not just of “secularists” and “pseudo-secularists” but even of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the apex body of Hindutva, arguing that the RSS itself has become a victim of the discourse of secularism. He insists that the Hindu-Muslim problem can only be solved by attacking Islam as an ideology, for, in his view, Islam and terror are inseparable. Elst seems to fully agree with this uninhibited outpouring of venom. No account is taken of Muslim arguments against the Goel thesis. Although not as openly abrasive as Elst and Goel, Shrinivas Tilak, too, sees India’s only hope in Hindutva. His essay is more scholarly though not less unenlightening than Elst’s, and but for the elegance of its style, differs little from the standard arguments to be found in the columns of Organiser, the official mouthpiece of the RSS.

The contributions included in this volume thus present a variety of understandings of the interplay between religion, religious communities and the state in post-1992 India. All, except for Narayanan’s piece, work with the faulty premise of Muslims and Hindus being two well-defined homogenous communities, something that sociologists and social historians have for long been challenging. Nor do any of the contributors take serious cognisance of the caste question. If Hinduism, as is well known, is predicated on the caste system, surely no analysis that purports to speak of “Hinduism and secularism” can afford to ignore the crucial issue of caste. For instance, the very notion of Hinduism that all the contributors work with is itself problematic from the Dalit point of view. Radical Dalits would find Hinduism and its latest avatar, Hindutva, as thinly disguised forms of Brahminism. In their reading of the current situation in India, Hindutva is seen as the latest weapon in the hands of the “upper caste” minority to continue to keep the vast majority of Indians, particularly dispossessed groups like the Dalits and tribals, in the thraldowm and servitude that they have been subjected to for
centuries. Its prohibitive price, besides the very general treatment of complex issues in most of the essays that give little information that a regular newspaper reader would not already possess, makes this a safely avoidable book.

Yoginder Sikand

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