

THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND IDEOLOGY IN THE INDIAN HISTORY: CONTRIBUTION TO DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOCIETY

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Abstract:

Both religion and ideologies are both systems of beliefs and built on a dual interpretation of the World and the existence of an elsewhere heavenly or terrestrial. Both give a sense to life salvation in the Next World for religions, happiness and human fulfillment here below for ideologies. At the same time, they deeply differ. Religions generally rely on a dual conception of human nature, when ideologies stress its unity and its materiality. For religions and ideologies, the existence, beyond or below observable realities of a more real world, serve as a model for the people living here and now. They also introduce norms and objectives in individual and collective life. Because of these similarities and differences, religions and ideologies are at the same time complementary and competitive. The analysis of their competition and interaction explains their contemporary evolution.

Keywords: religion and ideology, Hinduism and caste relations, religion and values,

Introduction:

Hinduism and caste relations must be situated within some general social context to provide them with useful ideological content rather than an undefined and vague global explanatory privilege. Caste, religion and values were defined by and to a degree fell under the custodianship of India's massive petty bourgeoisie, and caste and Hinduism were adopted by the colonial regime as a useful sociological analysis to support their subjugation of India. Eventually this handy structure of meaning was passed intact to the successor regime of independent India as well as to the normal social science of our own era.

State ideology during the eighteenth century

State ideology during the eighteenth century was in most cases not very different from what it had been in medieval times. In the states ruled by Hindus, the state was the monarch, and his duty (*rajadharma*) was to maintain something called *varnashramadharma*; that is, the proper order of castes and the protection of the places in which Vishnu and Shiva were worshipped. Hindu rulers continued to celebrate their sovereignty with rituals dating from earlier times, such as the *mahanavami* in south India and *dasara* elsewhere. On the other hand, the militarized rule of Muslims, which was founded on patrimonial forms of sultanism developed in northern India from the fourteenth century, proliferated over most the subcontinent. Muslim rulers bothered less than Hindus about locating the source of their legitimacy; they did not even seek any sort of legitimating installation from whoever stood as Caliph in the Islamic world. The ideological poverty of eighteenth-century Indian states partly accounts for their fragility before the modest military threat of Europeans, including the English East India Company.

However, ideology flourished below the state level. In both Muslim and Hindu communities of the time, there were vigorous cultural movements of reform, synthesis and ideological reconstitution, and the main purveyors and foci of these movements were priests and mullahs, the intellectual guides of bazaar men, middle peasants and other refined and less-refined sections of both urban and rural society.

The cultural politics

The cultural politics in which they engaged was reflected in the urban disorder fomented in south India by the dual division of left and right castes and the proliferation of goddess shrines representing the tutelary deities of countrymen and townsmen in southern India, and it seems not to have been otherwise in the north as well.

Communitarian self-consciousness

Transformation and competition in localistic, communitarian groups during the colonial period continue to await investigation, especially the link between eighteenth-century communitarian self-consciousness, or ‘communalism’, and what are seen as ‘communist’ mobilizations of later times. From the early decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial regime was determined to displace all foci of political loyalty that might endanger or merely limit the Raj; many institutions and individuals within community structures that refused subordination by the East India Company were laid waste. This included most of the ‘poligars’ in southern India and numerous ‘recalcitrant’ chiefs and rajas elsewhere.

During the early nineteenth century, colonial ‘founders’

During the early nineteenth century, colonial ‘founders’ such as John Malcolm and Thomas Munro attended with care the way in which regional Indian authorities based their rule upon a variety of local authorities and hierarchies whose legitimacy, in turn, arose from linkages with dominant landed castes and important cultural institutions like temples, mosques, schools and seminaries.

History is often used as a weapon in ideological struggles and identity-contestations. This is especially true in critical issues involving politics of religion. In agenda-driven histories deployed in public debates, the question of truth is set aside in favour of requirements of the time. In such debates, history is not so much about the evidence regarding what exactly happened in the past, but a matter of opinion or perspective. This is the case both in vernacular histories circulated in the public domain and in the assumptions of professional academic history. Even though the primary functions of both are different, they converge in terms of offering different vantage points in popular politics and struggles.

Academia, religion and political culture

Within academia, religion and political culture profoundly impact the writing of history, leading to arguments, quarrels and formation of groups or schools of historiography. Thus, history of history-writing in India in the past couple of centuries has witnessed assumptions

and formulations advanced from a number of standpoints. For instance, in colonial historiography – some strands of which have continued even till recent decades – colonialism was projected as something that was for the benefit of the colonised people; else, they would have remained savage barbarians with no or little sense of history. This false assertion was in conformity with the view that conquerors write history on the body of those they seek to dominate or decimate.

Countering the colonial position

Countering the colonial position and showing that the conquered people eventually survive to tell their own story also, various strands of secular nationalist historiography have blamed the British colonial policies of 19th and the first half of 20th centuries for the mess the British left behind. Hindu-Muslim conflict, caste-system, economic degradation and a host of other issues are shown as constructed under the British rule. This set of scholarship also plays down the significance of religion in public life, even though it provides fodder for communal hatred and abuse. This is something which is aptly characterised by Professor Neeladri Bhattacharya – a much-respected JNU historian – as ‘predicament of secular history’.

On the other hand, Hindu communal propaganda as history continues to take ugly turns. Even serious historians belonging to the rightist camp – few as they are – come up with outlandish propositions. The best example that comes to mind is the projection of medieval India as a dark age in the right-wing historiography. It is asserted that medieval India was shrouded in darkness because there was no electricity in medieval India; this was because bigoted Muslim rulers followed Islam, which was against science!

By contrast, and yet supplementing communal Hindu narratives, is an equally bizarre Muslim separatist scholarship, which glorifies the Islamic past in the subcontinent. It traces separate Hindu-Muslim identities back to the Arab conquest of Sindh early in the 8th century. Also, important historical figures such as Sant Kabir and Mughal emperor Akbar are treated as agents of Hinduism who sought to destroy the cause of Islam in the medieval period.

Thus, what we are generally confronted with is political propaganda peddled as history. Does it mean history-writing cannot be free from ideological control? Happily, more empirically sensitive and theoretically sophisticated researchers in recent times have led to fresh thinking. This is sought to be blocked or resisted both by secularists and right-wing political propagandists, but scholarship has continued to grow in institutions both within India and the West – especially in the United States.

New research takes head-on communally sensitive issues such as temple desecration and the question of conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. The nature of the state is being discussed with reference to rulers’ concern for law and justice for all, peace and tranquillity, welfare mechanism as well as looking for India’s own political theory based on secular principles, as in concerns of political theorists such as Rajeev Bhargava.

New studies on Akbar and Aurangzeb analyse broad-based political framework, theory and policies, which are contrasted with narrow and exclusive political strategies abusing religion for the purpose. Historical examples and philosophical insights on governing principles are used to assert that when religious beliefs run into problems with secular principles of the state

in multi-cultural or multi-religious contexts, the secular principles and progressive laws must be privileged, as shown recently by an analytical philosopher, Akeel Bilgrami.

Further, questions are being raised about the need to reconsider the conventional periodisation of Indian history in ancient (Sanskrit), medieval (Persian) and modern (English) times (with the specific language of sources to be utilised). The older and simple formulations are being broken through richer source base, including judicious use of literature in the writing of history. For instance, Sufi premakhayan, or poetry of love, of which Malik Muhammad Jaisi's Padmavat is one of the best examples, are being studied by historians and literary scholars in recent years. However, they are perhaps still not in a position to handle the muddle created in the name of artistic freedom or in the service of communal politics – as we have witnessed recently.

In popular devotional fields, the shared and disputed terrains of Sufi-Bhakti complex reveal faultlines fraught with possibilities for shrewd cultural negotiations and brutal political violence. Two examples which may be given here are of Yogi Gorakhnath's favourable attitude towards Sufis, who were perceived as belonging to the caste of Allah, and of Kabir's aggressive support to the newly found fad for vegetarianism in medieval India.

Role history and religion play in modern Indian politics

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Within academia, religion and political culture profoundly impact the writing of history, leading to arguments, quarrels and formation of groups or schools of historiography. Thus, history of history-writing in India in the past couple of centuries has witnessed assumptions and formulations advanced from a number of standpoints. For instance, in colonial historiography – some strands of which have continued even till recent decades – colonialism was projected as something that was for the benefit of the colonised people; else, they would have remained savage barbarians with no or little sense of history. This false assertion was in conformity with the view that conquerors write history on the body of those they seek to dominate or decimate.

In conclusion, history is a hot topic in popular politics of the public domain. Medieval Indian history is an especially contested field. Pressures from different kinds of ideological positions and politics of identities of various kinds together put serious constraints on the practice and writing of history. As indicated above, despite the challenges, scholarship has continued to grow. Current historiographical thrusts illustrate how a whole range of themes and issues are dealt with by professional historians from a variety of perspectives with reference to sources

and evidence. Critical issues relating to the complex interactions between religion and political culture are no longer being swept under the carpet.

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