

A Hindu critique of Hindutva

We need to rescue religion from zealots and rediscover the spirit of religiosity



AVIJIT PATHAK

The question I ask myself as we witness the assertion of the ideology of Hindutva and its resultant fear among minorities is this: Is it possible to have yet another reading of my religion or the experience of religiosity and take part in a collective movement for creating a society filled with love, empathy and pluralism? This is both a sociopolitical and an ethico-existential question. At a time when the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 has caused fear and existential insecurity among the minorities, there is a danger of the movement against the discriminatory nature of the CAA degenerating into violent communal politics. Therefore, it is important to introspect and redefine one's politics, culture and religiosity for a collective struggle.

Transcending limiting identities

Yes, there is a Left-Ambedkarite version of secularism, and many of us – university-educated/metropolitan intellectuals and civil society activists – are reasonably free from the burden of the conditioned mind that religious orthodoxy causes. Yet, a careful look at India's culture and society would indicate that religion is all-pervasive: it can be seen in beliefs, rituals as well as in the dangerous stereotypes we nurture about others. Hence, the mere act of debunking religion will not help. We need to rescue religion from zealots and rediscover the spirit of religiosity as, to use Rabindranath Tagore's language, our 'surplus'. It is in this context that as someone born in a Hindu family, I would like to critique Hindutva or, for that matter, any deterministic/one dimensional doctrine of religion. This critique emanates not from scientism or soulless secularity, but from deep religiosity, the urge to transcend limiting identities.

The kind of Hindutva we see today is against some of the finest aspects of my religiosity that I learned as a Hindu. While the discourse of Hindutva with its hypermasculine nationalism is essentially monolithic



"Even though it may appear impossible to imagine a world where Kabir and Rumi, Gandhi and Maulana Azad, and Tagore and Nizamuddin Auliya work with us, it is a task we ought to strive for." Gandhi and Azad in Bombay. • GETTY IMAGES

and centralising, I have learned about the beauty of the elasticity of human consciousness and merger of multiple faiths and paths from the likes of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. While the doctrine of militant Hindutva is recklessly engaged in an act of 'othering' and stigmatising Muslims, I have learned about love, empathy and listening from M.K. Gandhi's remarkably nuanced engagement with Hinduism. Likewise, while Hindutva intensifies aggression, Mira's bhajans teach me that love and religiosity are not separate. The character of 'Anandamayee' that Tagore created in his classic novel *Gora* makes me see the enchanting power of maternity, the current that absorbs everything. And hence, I begin to see the hollowness in the assertion of brute masculinity seen in instances of mob lynching by zealots, which ruthlessly denies the possibility of an evolutionary journey towards what Sri Aurobindo regarded as the 'divine consciousness'.

Yajnavalkya's conversation with Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad helps me conceive the depths of spirituality, the quest for the Eternal, and also helps me see the ugliness in a doctrine that reduces religion into mere identity politics, or a weapon for intensifying the narcissistic ego of the 'Hindu nation'. Engagement with the Bhagavad Gita acquires a different meaning. I see the ethos of *niskam karma* (or the spirit of work as an offering without selfish interests) in Gandhi's politico-

spiritual pilgrimage to Noakhali in 1946, not in the calculative Machiavellian urge to build a temple at Ayodhya at the demolished site of the Babri Masjid. Moreover, there is a culture of conversation and argumentation in the broad tradition of Hinduism. While Nachiketa dared to converse with Yama, the proponents of Lokayata did argue with the followers of Vedanta. In a way, it is possible to be a Hindu with the spirit of pluralism and dialogue in our consciousness. Paradoxically, it is possible to be a Hindu, yet be a non-Hindu. This is why the ideology of Hindutva is not in conformity with religiosity as people's inner quest for moving towards a world of love and togetherness.

We are passing through difficult times. First, as the CAA and the National Register of Citizens together indicate, the minority community has further been stigmatised. And in a society with a long history of the tension-ridden relationship between the two communities, the ghettoisation of space and mind has further erected a huge wall of separation. Hence, the danger is that the anger against the CAA might take a communal turn, and it is not impossible for the 'nationalist' media to project it as a conflict between 'patriotic' Hindus and 'problematic' Muslims. From Seelampur in Delhi to Aligarh Muslim University in Uttar Pradesh, these 'Muslim sites' might be immediately projected as 'war zones'. And in a vicious cycle of humiliation and

provocation, the minorities could feel more and more lonely.

A culture of communion

Majoritarian Hindutva is not merely against Muslims; it is no less hostile to those Hindus who think and live differently – while some would be castigated as 'leftists', 'pseudo secularists' and 'urban Naxals', the rest would be regarded as 'effeminate idealists' or 'Gandhian fools'. Therefore, in such a situation, it is important to try to evolve a culture of communion between the two communities, and fight together for a better world. However, the discourse of communalism or a politics based on exclusivist religious identity (and even though majority communalism is immensely destructive, minority communalism is no answer to it) is essentially against this spirit of communion. Likewise, a soulless secularity which fails to deal with the religious/spiritual quest doesn't succeed much in touching people's hearts for inspiring them to create a new moral politics for collective redemption.

In troubled and directionless times, Gandhi could tap the therapeutic power of religiosity and move towards this communion. He could be a Hindu; yet, dialogic, experimental and elastic. In a way, as Nathuram Godse might have thought, he was also a non-Hindu. Likewise, I would imagine that a Muslim with true religiosity is equally eager to resist the attempt by the orthodox clergy or the fundamentalist elements to hijack the religious sphere. He/she ought to be inherently against the Talibanisation of consciousness. Because true religiosity is the art of using the 'form' in order to be formless. Imagine a world where Kabir and Rumi, Gandhi and Maulana Azad, and Tagore and Nizamuddin Auliya work with us, become our educators, and inspire us to heal the world through the power of love and understanding. Even though in the age of dystopia it may appear to be impossible, it is a challenging task we ought to strive for. This is precisely the most important *sadhana*, or the meaning of being a 'Hindu' – a seeker who seeks to break the iron cage of Hindutva or, for that matter, any other fundamentalist doctrine.