JNANADEEPA : Pune Journal of Religious Studies
PJRS P-ISSN 0972-3331
23/2 Jul-Dec 2019: 129-148

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.4060677
Stable URL: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4060677

God in the Religious Other and the Experience of the Divine in Shared Religious Spaces

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the meaning of 'the other' encountered in situations of shared religious spaces and to understand them as potential venues of divine encounter. Focusing upon such instances in the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nations of South Asia, the essay draws the reader's attention not only to the kinds and contexts of shared religious spaces but also to the characteristics of divine encounter in the shared religious spaces. In our world wherein fundamentalism, religious bigotry and communal violence are steadily on the increase, the other is seen as a threat. Thus the hope for a peaceful and harmonious human life in our world seems very bleak. To restore humanity's hope, we need to identify and acknowledge existing sites of optimism in contemporary times. This article on shared religious spaces has drawn our attention to one such site wherein the others' religious spaces are accepted, and their divinities are worshipped, venerated and celebrated.

Keywords: Shared experience, shared religious space, institutional space, the other, sacredness of space.

Introduction

Most of the philosophical or theological works have deliberated upon the question of 'the other' with the help of sources such as scriptural, philosophical or theological traditions. Departing from such approaches, this paper seeks to examine the meaning of 'the other' encountered in situations of shared religious spaces and to understand them as potential venues of divine encounter. Focusing upon such instances in the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nations of South Asia, the essay draws the reader's attention not only to the kinds and contexts of shared religious spaces but also to the characteristics of divine encounter in the shared religious spaces.

What is a shared religious space?

More than ever before, our contemporary era is marked by the co-existence of a multiplicity of cultures, faiths and ethnicities. While western scholars call this multiculturalism in the context of the globalized world, scholars of South Asia and Asia contend that diversity, plurality and heterogeneity have always been the constituent characteristics of South Asian ethos and culture. A fund of beliefs, customs and practices have been held in common by the people of different faith traditions living in a given geographical location. These religious overlaps which transcend religious boundaries set by the organized and institutionalized religions have given rise to the emergence of shared religious spaces. These shared religious spaces include not only the sites and locales, but also the occasions and situations that make it possible for the people of one faith to participate in the religious events and experiences of another faith tradition. What makes some sacred places

different from others is that people, irrespective of gender, caste and religious affiliation, can gain access to the divine energies and sacred powers in these places through certain customs, events and religious practices.

Kinds and Contexts of Shared Religious Spaces

One witnesses different kinds of shared religious spaces in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nations of South Asia. These spaces can be either public or domestic; permanent or transient; institutional or popular. While public shared spaces refer to famous shrines and pilgrimage sites, domestic shared spaces are those homes that accommodate divinities from different faith traditions. While both these spaces are more or less permanent in nature, transient or temporary shared spaces refer to public roads and streets that are temporarily turned into a sacred space when religious events like processions take place and make available a particular deity's power to the people of other faiths. Institutional sacred spaces refer to the interfaith sacred spaces produced in Indian Christian ashrams by the religious elites, namely, the clerical class, while the popular sacred spaces refer to those produced by the lay people in shrines and homes. That said, the following pages will describe each of these categories at length.

Shrines as Shared Spaces

To the category of public shared spaces belong numerous shrines or holy sites in South Asia like temples, churches and Dargahs, either well-renowned or locally known to the people in a given area, which attract people of different faith traditions. The works of Selva J. Raj (2002, 2004, 2006, 2017), Vasudha Narayanan (2004, 2006), Paul

Younger (1999), Joanne Punzo Waghorne (2002), Margaret Meibohm (2002), Brigitte Luchesi (2008), Damaris Luthi (2008), to name a few, have discussed how the rituals performed by the people of different religions in a given shrine render it as a shared religious space which is open to common public. People of other faiths visit these shared spaces to access the supernatural divine power to overcome their limit situations.

What makes a shrine a shared religious space are its seven-fold characteristics. 1. It is not static but dynamic. What transforms this space into a shared religious space is that it is a site of dynamism and activity wherein religious subjects from multiple religious backgrounds come to worship the deity and perform rituals in search of supernatural power for varying purposes. 2. Shared religious space is an open, inclusive and democratic space. Its frontiers are open to all as everyone can gain access to the divine energies and sacred powers through certain customs, events and religious practices. It is inclusive as it remains accessible to people of different faiths, castes and classes. It is also democratic in the sense it is produced by ordinary people's investment of religious sensibilities. This investment process does not discriminate people on the basis of gender, caste or class. Nor does it privilege one set of people over others. It is also more democratic as it is least controlled by the religious elites, the clergy 3. It is fluid and less structured. In contrast to the rigid structures either of the official liturgy in Churches or of prescribed *agamic poojas* in temples, shared religious spaces are characterized by religious and ritual activities that are fluid and less structured. People enjoy more freedom here to chart the course of their ritual activities and follow their own sequence. It is not that there are no customs and traditions specific to a particular site.

But they are less rigid and remain open for improvisation by the practitioners. One of the important properties of fluidity is that it renders boundaries porous, admitting the influx of different traditions that intermingle and overlap with one another resulting in what some theologians would term as syncretism while scholars of religion call it hybridity. 4. It is a site of common ritual system. Various forms of ritual vows offered at shrines like Our Lady of Health at Vailankannie or Mount Mary Church at Bandra or Shaul Hamid Dargah at Nagore such as offering of facsimile (imitation of various bodily parts) or coconut saplings or shaving of head etc., show that Christians, Hindus and Muslims not only share a common ritual system. Selva Raj's works mentioned above draw our attention to the fact of not only the Hindus who come to Catholic shrines such as Vailankannie or Oriyur to perform rituals and fulfil their vows (in fact he notes that some of the Catholic shrines are frequented more by the Hindus than by Christians) but also the Christian devotees of St. John De Britto who visit famous Hindu deities like Karupasami in the neighboring village. Thus, just as the fulfilling of vows draws Hindus to Christian site and Christians to a Hindu place, such vow-related practices serve as important intersections "for the dialogue not only of rituals and devotees but of sites and deities as well." (Raj 2006: 62) 5. The shared space is fundamentally a liminal space to borrow Victor Turner's idea. In the context of a shared shrine or a religious procession that takes place on a public road, what happens is the temporary suspension of the regular identity of places and peoples. For instance, when the devotees in Vailankannie perform Hindu-like vow rituals of shaving the head and offering coconut saplings, the religious boundaries of what is Christian and what is Hindu is temporarily suspended, transcended or at times violated and as a result, the religious places in question or

the people therein are neither this nor that. A Christian, rolling himself/herself on the ground in the fulfilment of a vow or a Hindu, joining the recitation of the Rosary and partaking in the central Catholic liturgy of the Eucharist is neither strictly Christian nor Hindu. Nor the Christian shrine which receives the offering of a basket of coconuts or/and flowers and gives it back to the devotees as *prasad i*s strictly Christian. What prevails over such places and occasions is the loss of homogenous identity. 6. It represents the common heritage and cultural landscape of a given region. Shared religious spaces are characterized by local flavours that manifest themselves in beliefs, practices, performances, rituals, myths, arts and architecture. When we observe the way people discharge their religious beliefs, fulfill their vows, decorate their religious places, adorn their deities and carry out their religious processions, there is hardly any difference among Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Susan Bayly (1989) shows that the Hindu temples, Christian Churches and Muslim dargahs across South India imagine their deities as warriors who would protect them against any impending dangers. Accordingly, temples, churches and dargahs share a common form and structure of public religious processions that display a deity's protective power over a territory. David Mosse (2012), Susan Visvanathan (1993) and Rowena Robison (1998) have also confirmed the prevalence of such situations in Goa, Kerala and in other parts of Tamilnadu. Nathan Katz (2000), too, has shown how the synagogue in Cochin has drawn upon the customs and traditions of the temple for its architecture and ritual repertoire. More often than not, the local traditions and myths consider the local Hindu folk deities and the Christian divinities like Mother Mary as kinsmen and kinswomen as they fulfil a similar function. Hence the common folk among the Christians and Hindus visit each other's sacred sites and

worship the deities of the religious other. Their appreciation and celebration of these deities are also recorded in folk songs prevalent among both Christians and Hindus. The above-mentioned instances point to the existence of a common cultural universe in which religious traditions are embedded, and it is this cultural universe which provides the substratum for the emergence and continuation of shared religious spaces. 7. It is a site of exigencies of human life. What drives the common people to these shared spaces is their existential predicaments of limit or crisis situations. Faced with stalemates in personal lives like the loss of job or a mysterious illness or financial crisis the common people are compelled to seek supernatural interventions and find solution to their life-threatening issue. In such an impasse, contemporary religious subjects make all efforts to overcome their problems by transcending their traditional religious boundaries. Under such circumstances, as Selva Raj notes "the devotee deems cross-religious rituals and pilgrimages as necessary and salutary in the quest for a solution to a human or spiritual crisis or problem" (Raj 2006: 63).

Domestic Space as a Shared Religious Space

People's allegiance to such deities in the shrines is likely to continue when people install in their homes the statues or pictures of these deities which they have brought from the shrines and add them to the pantheon of domestic deities making a Christian deity become part of the Hindu household or vice versa. The deity that has come into this shared religious space is easily accessible to the veneration of the relatives and visitors to the Hindu household. Shared domestic religious spaces are brought about by default in the context of interfaith marriages. Homes of

such marriages, in most cases, as my study has indicated (James Ponniah, forthcoming), often have interfaith altars invariably transforming their home into inter-religious spaces. Such homes are bound to accommodate beliefs and practices from two different traditions. Such developments become more pronounced and conspicuous at the time of the celebration of the life cycle and other rituals, such as birth, christening, puberty, marriage, death etc., Practice of two faith traditions within a home on such occasions is not always possible without conflicts. However, such conflictual situations in most cases, lead to conversations and consensus among the couples making inter-faith homes more democratic and less structured.

The Procession as a Shared Religious Event

While the above-mentioned spaces, be they public or domestic, enjoy the status of permanent shared religious space, there are other locales that are turned into shared religious spaces temporarily. The public roads during the time of religious procession of famous deities belong to this category. Religious processions are particular displays of religion that lay claim to public space. Just as processions move towards a sacred space of a temple or church or dargah, they make the public spaces en-route sacred as they progress. Transportation of gods through the streets makes public road a sacred ground, though temporarily. When a deity is taken around in procession on a public road, people of different faith traditions not only display deference towards the gods and goddesses of another faith tradition but also go to worship the deity to get blessings. When this takes place, a public road, though temporally, is turned into a shared religious space which functions for a while as an epicentre of multi-faith religious experiences

wherein a Hindu places himself or herself for the *darshan* of a Christian God and vice versa. Religious processions on public roads can invoke both positive and negative reactions from the religious other. In a positive reaction, the religious others place the significance of religious processions within their personal narratives of a deity's benevolence towards them and their family. In a negative reaction the religious others fail to share the rationale of the religious subjects in holding a religious procession. The latter takes place when the state is seen to act in favour of a tradition. For instance, when religious processions take place, the traffic on certain key roads get suspended and the vehicle-routes are diverted to facilitate processions. While such developments point to the state's policy of religious accommodation, they equally help unravel the soft power of religion to turn public places into liminal spaces in which the normal activities of the traffic and other behaviours are suspended in deference to a religious event. When this occurs, negative reactions can come from three camps: i) Internal religious other: opposition to the public religious events or process need not always come from the external religious other. i.e, (i.e., to a Hindu event from Christian groups or to a Muslim event from the Hindus) but from internal religious other, i.e,, to a Catholic Christian procession from protestants or to a Pentecostal event from Catholic/Protestant Christians, or to a Sunni Muslim event of Muharram from Shias or to a Saivite religious celebration from Vaishnavites. ii) From communists/atheists/ rationalists: Celebration of religious events in public places and State government's support for the events can also face opposition from such people as communists, atheists and some rationalists who reject God and the influence of religion on society iii) From religious fundamentalists: opposition to such events can also come from religious fanatics who deny the legitimacy of any

religion other than their own to exist in this world. While the third group and their supporters tend to locate the narrative about the religious other within a larger political framework of pseudo-secularism, the second camp indicts the state for its failure to maintain neutrality. While the minorities tend to name this stance of the nation towards the majority as anti-secular, the majority would label the pro-minority stance of the state as pseudo-secular. Such attempts of politicisation of religion which are on the increase in recent years do impact the way the deity of the religious other is perceived and experienced as a source of divine experience.

Indian Christian Ashrams as Institutional Shared Spaces

In addition to the publicly shared spaces, India also has a relatively new phenomenon called institutional shared spaces, namely Indian Christian Ashrams, produced by the mainline churches when they wanted to inculturate or indigenise Christianity in India. The movement of Indian Christian ashrams talked about and experimented with by Indian Christian leaders like K.T. Paul and N.V. Tilak in the 1910s, acquired a more permanent stature with the founding of Christukula (Family of Christ) Ashram by two Protestant Christians, Dr S. Jesudason and Dr E. Forrester-Patón in Tirupattur, about 140 miles southwest of then Madras city 1921. The first Catholic ashram was founded by Brahmachari Rewachand Animananda, also known as Swami Animananda, in Ranchi around 1940. Richard W. Taylor (1977) in his analysis of Indian Christian Ashrams classifies Protestant and Catholic ashrams in India as *khadi* and *kavi* ashrams, respectively. In his view, Protestant ashrams are more oriented toward social service and social transformation, following the Hindu ideal of *karma marga,* whereas Catholic ashrams are dedicated to contemplative and devotional spirituality enjoined in the Hindu ideal of *jnana-bhakti* yoga. However, both ashrams developed "within the

established churches, rather than in opposition to them," as Helen Ralston (1989: 114) noted. Be that as it may, the practices such as vegetarianism, celibacy, adoption of Hindu symbols, wearing of saffron saris by woman, dhotis, *kurtas* and shawls by men, squatting on the floor during Mass and the chanting of Sanskrit *slokas*, and the incorporation of Hindu rituals, symbols, images, architecture, customs, and other institutional practices into their religious life etc., make these Christian ashrams become visible signs of indigenized Christianity, resembling Hindu monasteries known as Mutts. A more detailed description of the Catholic ashrams will prove this point.

To begin with, the chapels in these ashrams are built in the style of a typical Indian Hindu temple. Statues of Jesus, Mary, and other saints like Benedict, Francis of Assisi, etc., would adorn the chapel *gopuram* (towers). The inner sanctum of the chapel would be darkened to resemble the *mula sthanan* (inner sanctum) of a Hindu temple. One of the popular Hindu symbols like an inverted lotus may serve as the altar on which Eucharist can be offered. The Eucharistic liturgy is consciously crafted to incorporate various Hindu symbols and gestures. The sanctuary walls or pillars in the chapels are often dotted with dark triangular niches for little oil lamps *(deepa).* The tabernacle in the sanctuary is likely to be built in the shape of a *linga* or of a miniature temple. In the chapel, there would be a prominent stone cross in an enclosed circle with the symbol "OM" inscribed in the middle. Sanskrit *slokas* from the Vedas and the Upanishads, as well as readings from other Hindu scriptures and the Bible, would be part of their morning, noon, and evening prayers. These prayer services also include popular Hindu rituals such as prostrations or the *arati* (waving of the lamp in front of the tabernacle). In some places like Shantivanam at Thannirpalli near Trichy or Anjali Ashram in Mysore sandal paste is distributed in the morning as the symbol of grace and divinity, *kumkum* (auspicious red powder) at noon as the symbol of the third eye of wisdom, and ashes in the evening as the symbol of the impurities burnt away. *Bhajans* on Jesus – often sung in Sanskrit or Hindi – are

a regular feature in the liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations. The above-mentioned description of an ashram clearly shows that these Catholic Christian Ashrams, while preserving their Catholic identity, have Hindu forms in their art, architecture, inmates' style of life, dietary practices, worship and rituals. Thus they have become both Hindu and Christians spaces with a goal to facilitate Indian Christians to have Christ or God experiences through Hindu forms and frames.

The Characteristics of Divine Encounter in Shared Religious Spaces

1. Experience of the Divine Other through Darshan: One of the important characteristics of the divine encounter in South Asia is the act of beholding and touching the deity's image. Known as *darshan*, this mode of encountering the divine power is not only central to South Asian religious life, but it also constitutes the shared religious spaces at the same time. *Darshan* is a reciprocal act, i.e., it involves not only seeing and touching the deity but also being seen and touched by the divine, which results in receiving a blessing from the deity. Thus ringing the bell in the temples or clapping the hands in front of the deity or approaching the deity's image as close as possible in religious processions or establishing contact with the deity's image through physical touch etc.. are all meant to ensure not only that the devotees get the maximum attention of the deity but also that the power of the deity imparted to a devotee is felt as powerfully as possible. It is the possibility of this aspect of the *darshan* that attracts the religious other towards a deity either in a religious site or in procession. The more powerful a deity is in the people's perception, the more diverse constituency of devotees it draws to itself, which in turn makes a religious site a better shared religious space.

In a similar vein, religious processions are meant to take the deity out of the temple or a church into the neighbourhood territories so that the deity's blessings and benevolence are made available to people of all faiths through the act of *darshan*. Thus *darshan* becomes an effective means of encountering the deities of the religious others, deities who reach out to people of other faith traditions and present themselves as kind, benevolent and powerful.

2. Experience of the Divine through the Material and the Tangible: It is through the embodied cultural practices that people experience the divine of the religious other. It is true of religious sites both public and domestic, permanent and temporary, the institutional and the popular. For instance, Paul Younger, Selva Raj, Vasudha Narayanan and others in their works on Catholic and other shrines detail how embodied practices and material objects in shared religious sites such as taking a cleansing bath in the sea or tank, rolling around the church, walking on the knees, tying pieces of cloth around tree branches or the flagpole as token of individual wishes, offering of hair at the shrine, offering of baskets with incense sticks, candles and coconuts and the presentation of flower garlands (which are touched to the feet of the image before being returned) etc., are found very commonly not only in Christian shrines as in a Hindu Temple but also in Muslims Dargahs. Many of these characteristic elements of the Christian veneration of Mary and other saints in Catholic churches and shrines play a central role also in Muslim Dargahs as in South Asian Hindu worship. In this regard, Selva Raj observes that "the Catholic system retains the basic principles, idioms, vocabulary, content, and the rubric of the Hindu system" (Raj 2006: 60). These common South Asian or Tamil cultural practices become very powerful means through

which the Tamil Hindus and Christians experience the divine power. It is through the world of material objects and the tangible ritual-based bodily expressions that a Hindu, an otherwise a disinterested outsider to the Christian world of ordered liturgy in the church, becomes an insider and a devotee of a Christian shrine. Luchesi (2008) and others have also discussed how the Catholic churches in Germany, Norway and Switzerland first allowed, then encouraged and facilitated the practice of vernacular Catholicism for the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora. By bringing in Tamil priests and creating Tamil chaplaincy in different places, they not only made the Christian Tamil diaspora feel welcome and took care of their religious needs, but also provided world of hope to the Tamil Hindus as well who regained their access to the divine power through the mediation of Mary and other saints who were part and parcel of their religious life back in their home country. Luchesi (2008) in her work has shown how practices such as going to have a glimpse of the miraculous picture, touching it, lighting candles inside and outside the churches in Kevelaer, are the same both for the Hindus and the Christians as these practices were followed back in their homeland. These religious possibilities provide a new sign of hope for the Tamil Christians and Hindus who were in a state of anxiety, uncertainty and fear in a foreign land as refugees.

3. *Experience of the Divine Other through Ritual Hospitality:* One of the common practices in shared religious space, be it shrine or home or ashram, is providing communal meal to the religious visitors and guests. The practice of the age-old Indian saying 'Atithi Devo Bhava' ('The guest is equivalent to God') is very evident in shared religious space. In the context of shrines, the climax of fulfillment of a vow often culminates in a communal meal served first to the poor, the beggars and the destitutes who are believed to take the place of the deity to whom the

cooked food is offered. This ritual hospitality assumes a special significance in the case of *asanam*. *Asanam* tradition requires that the vow-taker himself/ herself serves the food on banana leaves to a group of thirteen honoured "ritual guests," who are basically beggars. The climax of this *asanam* is the act of reverse begging. Having served the meal to the "ritual guests" on banana leaves, the principal vow-taker goes on his/her knees in front of each of the thirteen invited beggar guests and begs for a handful of food from each. With the food collected through reverse begging, s/ he sits beside the thirteen beggars and eats the ritual meal. Only after the "ritual guests" have been fed to their satisfaction, can family members partake of the "ritual meal." What interests us in this tradition is that this ritual hospitality not only enables us to treat and encounter the divine in the vulnerable other, but also makes the host to totally identify himself/herself with the poor and the marginal people.

4. *Experience of God as a Consoler of the Afflicted*: One of the important reasons why hundreds and thousands of people go to the shared religious space of the shrines is to get rid of their sorrows and distress. This shared sacred space of shrines provides the afflicted devotees with comfort, motherly care, healing and hope. The experience of the divine power as a solace in these sites is equally shared by Christians, Hindus and Muslims. As South Asian scholars have noted, these shrine-based interreligious experiences point to how the common people see in the image of the divine other the reflection of their own deity's divine attributes. For instance, they argue that just as Christians consider Blessed Mary as the Mother of God, Hindus understand her as the Divine Mother, which for the common people is unproblematic. 'The Mother of God' in Catholicism becomes 'The Divine Mother' in Hinduism. According to Annette Wilke (2013), this difference is expressed in two different Tamil words Christians and Hindus use to address Mary. Christians use

mata (Mother), whereas Hindus prefer *taye*, a Tamil word meaning 'divine mother' which is reserved for goddesses. It is this perception of Mary as *taye* (divine mother) that drives them to the shrines of Mother Mary whom they approach without any hesitation as she cares for those who suffer various forms of ills in life.

5. *Experience of the Divine in the Ordinariness of Life:* Another important characteristic of shared religious space, especially the one produced by religious processions is that it makes it possible to experience God on the streets. It is this availability of the divine presence on the road and in the hustle and bustle of the streets and markets that automatically elicits veneration and deference on the part of the religious others. What is significant about this sacred space is that it produces the experience of the divine other outside the deity's regular abode (church or temple), namely, in the sacredness of the secular and the ordinary. Religious minded as they are, South Asians spontaneously tend to worship the divine figure who has come out of his/her regular abode on to the streets to visit them in their localities. As the deity on procession is believed to possess enormous power, it enlists the veneration of the onlookers and bystanders who, irrespective of religious traditions, welcome the deity into their area to obtain the blessings.

6. *Encountering the Divine in the 'Sacredness of the Other'*: Shared religious spaces provide new possibilities to believers to encounter God by inviting them to partake in other's ideas of the sacred. They make the believers respect and honour the religious sensibilities of the religious others, thereby enabling them to participate in the metaphysics of the religious other's transcendence. Sharing other's way of seeing involves sharing other's way of knowing.

In doing so, shared religious spaces make people accept the differences in religious others. In other words, such developments are capable of mapping out new terrains of interfaith epistemologies and metaphysics.

7. *The Divine in the Intersectional Space:* In the globalised and digitalized world of today, no religious tradition can claim to be totally a sanitized religious space and to remain completely disconnected from the religious world of the other. Whether or not desired or intended, religions are faced with the situations of interactions, exchanges and at times of conversations between them. Religious sensibilities in today's world inform us that there are no religious 'heterotopias,' to borrow from Foucault's views, an autonomous religious space of a tradition that exists totally outside all other religious spaces. It means that today's world is an intersectional space between various religious traditions which are inter-related if not inter-dependent. Religions will do well by realizing their inter-relatedness to serve humanity by synergizing their resources and energies to tackle the issues of poverty, ecology and lack of human dignity in the world. That said, shared religious spaces illustrate an optimism that is predicative of intersectional space in that they embody appreciation, respect and positive outlook the people have towards the religious others and their scared locales. Tapping the opportunities provided by shared religious spaces, religion can take the optimism of the intersectional space to the next level by addressing the issues and concerns of the people who frequent the shared religious spaces to enhance their well-being.

Conclusion

In a world like ours wherein fundamentalism, religious bigotry and communal violence are steadily on the increase, the other is seen as a threat. Thus the hope for a peaceful and harmonious human life in our world seems very bleak. To restore humanity's hope we need to identify and acknowledge existing sites of optimism in contemporary times. This article on shared religious spaces has drawn our attention to one such site wherein the others' religious spaces are accepted and their divinities are worshipped, venerated and celebrated. This essay written in honour of Prof. Kurien Kunnumpuram whose life and works had profound respect and appreciation for others, their views and ethos is also my humble tribute to an intellectual who stood strongly for peace and harmony between religious traditions of India.

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Article Received: Jan 23, 2019
Article Accepted: March 24, 2019
No of Words: 5770