INTRODUCTION

Boundaries and Crossings: Religious Fluidity in Twenty-first Century India

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Abstract

Following Partition, newly independent India adopted a constitution based on secularism and rights for minorities. In recent years, under the Bharatiya Janata Party government, this model of society has been steadily eroded and supplanted by one favouring Hindu nationalism. This shift has changed the ways in which various religious communities relate to each other as well as their relationship with the state. In this special issue, we examine how these social and political shifts have impacted on the willingness of individuals to engage across religious boundaries and highlight instances of continuing religious cosmopolitanism.

Keywords

Indian Religions; Hindu Nationalism; Inter-Religious Worship; Sufism, Sikhism, Islam/Muslims

In April 2020, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom designated India as a 'country of particular concern' for the first time since 2004 (Klocek 2020). This followed rising religious and sectarian conflict in India in the last decade. These tensions have been exacerbated by the *Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)* passed in December 2019, which conflates a person's religion with their citizenship. Before the COVID-19 pandemic locked down the economy and created major upheavals among the poor, especially migrant workers, the *CAA* sparked widespread opposition and protest both within India and abroad. Subsequently, trade unions, opposition parties and activists came together across religious and

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caste divides to support the protests by farmers against the agricultural policy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Ghosh 2020). The policies and measures put into place by the BJP under Modi have undoubtedly led to an increase in religious discrimination and violence within India. These developments raise crucial questions for scholars, policy makers and activists.

Are there Indian versions of religious boundary crossings? Fazal Rizvi, for example, refers to the Kiski Kahani project in Pune, India, which brings together stories from the *Ramayana*, a South Asian epic, that subvert the grand discourse of Hindu nationalism by highlighting the liminal, fragmentary and improvised versions of the epic (Rizvi & Choo 2020). Such nuances are increasingly elided in modern India where the epic is invoked to destroy mosques supposedly built on Rama's birthplace. Amrita Basu, on the other hand, argues that there was never 'an ideal, golden age of unblemished democracy in India' and that 'although India describes itself as a secular, democratic nation, several constitutional provisions and laws, including anti-conversion and cow protection legislation, fuel anti-minority sentiment' (2018: 44). The nature of anti-minority violence has also changed, no longer instigated predominantly by political parties but by many different groups. Rumours that Christians are forcibly converting Hindus, or that Muslims are consuming beef, are often a pretext for violence which, although the result of long-term Hindu nationalist organizing and propaganda, presents itself as spontaneous and erratic (Basu 2018). Interfaith tensions in India have escalated to a point where the manifold dangers of politically motivated religious polarization are unmistakable.

Sudipta Kaviraj (2010) argued that in pre-census colonial India, communities identified themselves by region, caste, religion, or profession; that is, they were 'fuzzy,' contingent, contextual and flexible. The implementation of the census coded, categorized, compartmentalized, and constituted communities into 'enumerative' categories. The fundamental ideological proposition of Hindu Nationalism is to replace an inclusive republic of 'fuzzy communities' with the ideal of India as a Hindu Nation. India's famous propensity for joint worship and ritual engagement across religious boundaries thus appears increasingly imperiled. For many of India's communities, the range of permissible ritual practices had already been reduced by a century of religious reform—whether in the shape of Sanskritization, or by reformist movements such as the Arya Samaj, Tablighi Jama'at or newer movements with international backing. Tribal communities practicing animism have been pressured to redefine themselves as Hindu or simply recategorized as such by the Indian census, even when, through the development of organizational structures, they have taken pains to assert their distinctive ethnic religious identity. Since the landslide victories of the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014 and 2019, Hindu nationalist organizations have also promoted upper-caste sensibilities as a 'new normality' which construes even the slightest religious transgression as inappropriate, impermissible or even offensive. The general impression is that India's diverse population is increasingly apprehensive of venturing beyond 'their own' ritual spaces, practices and deities. Aviraj's 'fuzzy' identities appear to be disappearing before our eyes.

Simultaneously, however, there are contrasting reports about religious boundary crossings that recall past periods of communal harmony. The numerous stories that circulate on mainstream and digital media demonstrate that this complex country still exhibits a propensity for interreligious ritual engagement which complicates the countless reports that document a steady decline in interfaith relations. Recent research shows that ritual engagement across 'official' religious boundaries remains surprisingly common by flying under the radar. The analysis of this phenomenon, however, requires a broader methodological repertoire than the conventional methods of witnessing public festivals or doing fieldwork in shared religious shrines, such as the archetypical Sufi *dargah*s.

Ellwood-Lowe et al. in their fascinating article argue that Hindu children in their study showed a strong bias to equate being Indian with being Hindu while Muslim children of all ages strongly identified with both being Indian and their religion (2019: 1384). They found that children's friendship networks tended to be segregated on the basis of religion, and that the internalization of the association between religion

and nationalism was associated with social segregation of religious groups. However, they caution against pessimistic conclusions suggesting that 'even in a region with a history of religious conflicts, and among children who exhibit intergroup religious bias, it is possible for minority children to develop inclusive associations and beliefs of what it means to be a citizen of their country' (Ellwood-Lowe et al. 2019: 1391). The ongoing protests against the CAA have demonstrated that some issues are capable of bringing together people of different belief systems and faiths.

In this special issue, we have called on a group of scholars who draw on a broad array of research methods to study interfaith ritual engagement in present day India. We seek to answer such questions as what explains the persisting appeal of religious spaces and practices associated with religious communities other than one's own? Which religious communities and social segments remain conducive to religious fluidity, and which ones require concealment, if not erasure of 'other' practices and beliefs? Finally, how do we analyze the long-standing coexistence between everyday religious fluidity and religio-political tension?

Given that the active promotion by the BJP of a political agenda linking national unity with a narrowly defined version of Hinduism is the primary force driving the deepening of religious divisions in modern India, we begin our special issue with Naomi Goldenberg's examination of the relationship between religion and the state. Goldenberg argues that, through the process of colonization, subjected societies may find their cultures consigned to the category of religion, where they may yet persist as something like vestigial states, or perhaps more accurately as 'once and future states.' It is this colonial construction of Hinduism which Modi draws upon in the service of his nationalist objective.

The following papers present case studies of religious engagement across sectarian lines, an engagement that has long been customary in India, but which is now under threat from the hardening of boundaries promoted by the political program of the BJP. Ronie Parciack and Rita Brara examine religious mixing at *mazaars* in New Delhi. These are roadside shrines marking the graves of generally anonymous Sufi holy men. The shrines invariably feature a large tree for shade and are tended by a guardian. In stark contrast to the patriarchal organization of the large Muslim shrines, some of which even deny women access to the inner sanctum, some *mazaars* have female guardians and some even have Hindu guardians, while the devotees span the full spectrum of religious faiths. The *mazaars* are also notable for their success in resisting the power of the state, whose legislation and urban planning projects persistently seek their destruction.

One reason for the popularity of *mazaars* across religious groups is the widespread belief that the entombed saint, being still spiritually present at the shrine, is more inclined to provide help with mundane problems than a more distant deity. As Kathinka Frøystad explains, Modi's very project of associating a normalized Hinduism with an economically and technologically progressive nationalism generates inevitable tensions and contradictions. Individuals find themselves beset by the conflicting pressures arising from rapid social change, frustrated by the inevitable failure of unrealizable expectations and deprived of increasingly marginalized traditional ritual remedies. In seeking relief from their problems, Frøystad's subjects find themselves constrained to move outside their accepted religious sphere into that of the transgressive other. In so doing, they must implicitly accept the power of the other, whether it be a Muslim healer's ability to counter the sorcery of Hindu in-laws, or a Hindu ghost's possession of a Muslim girl.

While the Hindu and Muslim communities are the largest of India's various religious groupings, and the ones most obviously and directly destabilized by Modi's politics, they are far from being the only ones. The problematic nature of Sikhism's relationship with the Indian state became painfully clear in 1984 when the Indian army attacked Sikh separatists occupying the Darbar Sahib, one of the most sacred of Sikh shrines. Radhika Chopra's analysis of the presentation, or rather curation, of exhibits in the Central Sikh Museum and of souvenirs for sale in the bazaar around the Darbar Sahib reveals continuing competing discourses on the relationship of Sikhism to the Indian state. The shopkeepers carefully curate their wares to maintain a religious hierarchy, placing the images of the Gurus above the worldly ideals of popular singers

and sportsmen and plump boy babies. Within this hierarchy the positioning of Sikh martyrs, and especially of the more recent, is necessarily controversial. Whereas one shop may choose to display portraits of the martyred leader of the 1984 insurrection, across the street another shop will prefer a Sikh executed by the colonizing British during the Indian nationalist struggle.

That Modi's politics have hardened religious boundaries and widened the gulf between religious communities seems obvious. What is the meaning, and indeed the future, of religious crossings in such an environment? Devleena Ghosh has followed the impact of these political shifts on the religiously heterogenous worshippers at the shrine of the Holy Infant Jesus in the rapidly expanding IT city of Bangalore. The Holy Infant Jesus is so popular with non-Christian devotees seeking the granting of boons that a separate shrine has been set aside for them next to the Roman Catholic church. The religious practices at the shrine present a syncretic aspect, greatly resembling those at Hindu temples. The shrine is predominantly attended by Christians and Hindus but is also frequented by Muslims, particularly women. During the fieldwork period, the priest changed from welcoming all comers to becoming defensive about the possibility of conversions. Some Hindu worshippers began to worry that excessive syncretism might risk their religion being corrupted by Christianity and Muslim women started to conceal their religious identity as they came under pressure from their menfolk to abandon the shrine.

The conflation of standardized Hinduism and Indian nationalism promoted by the BJP has not succeeded in suppressing the tradition of cosmopolitanism which has long characterized the Indian approach to religion. At the ground roots, resistance continues but the strains are increasingly making themselves felt. The future remains, necessarily, uncertain.

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