Beyond binaries: sociological discourse on religion

The interface of religious identities, with state and politics is creating communal, ethnic and sectarian conflicts in South Asia. In spite of its geographical vastness and thousands of communities, the region remains conceived by sociologists in terms of religious identities. By continuing to discuss religious experiences, identities and conflicts in majority-minority terms, sociological discourse has become a tool of power and domination.

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Sociological discourse on South Asia has not grasped the complexities of religion as it faces modernity. Seminal assumptions of colonial modernity and knowledge created a matrix of binaries – West and East, modernity and tradition, materiality and religiosity – that represented the project of modernity and were a colonial means of domination. Anthropologists and sociologists accept these binaries, constructing theories of imminent and continuous religious traditions without realising that what they consider traditional is actually a modern process. Binary language prevents them from penetrating the opaqueness that binaries themselves construct (Patel 2006).

In India, the binary of majority and minority is not merely a discourse: creating group classifications highlights differences and structures power. Sociologists play into this: cultural differences are dissolved into a master narrative of majority and minority in order to empirically study groups. Such language associates the same groups with the politics of constructing a majority based on upper caste perceptions of religious practices. Since the late 19th century, attempts have been made to organise India's Hindu majority as a nation under upper caste, or *savarna*, hegemony. Today, in a context of global change, this project continues to define Indian society and politics.

Sociologist T.N. Madan has written the most on this topic, using descriptive and indological methods to understand India's religions, pluralism, diversity and secularism in terms of equality-hierarchy binaries. He questions the process of modernity, but his language does not reflect the distinction between its dominant forms, such as colonial modernity and non-western modernity. Thus, Madan uncritically integrates the binaries of West and East, materiality and religiosity. Such a position cannot differentiate cultural practices among *jatis* and ethnic groups, and fails to assess how these differences are subsumed under an upper caste perspective on Hinduism. His latest book, *India's Religions. Perspectives from Sociology and History* (2004), cites census statistics to suggest that Hindus form the largest religious community, followed by Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains. Two issues must be considered here: using numbers to determine the strength of religious communities, and using the census to identify religious groups.

The trouble with numbers

The census depends on individuals to identify their religious affiliation. G.S. Ghurye and M.N. Srinivas have commented on how the census in colonial and independent India was used to mobilise groups by defining identities. B.S. Cohn (1987) has suggested that the census was a tool not only for constructing self-identity but that self-identifica-

tion occurred in response to the colonial government's objectification of identities. British officials and anthropologists studied India as a pre-modern civilisational society. Their initial task was to classify groups and communities in order to rule over them. Cohn argues that British officials thought 'caste and religion were the sociological keys to understand the Indian people. If they were to be governed well then it was natural that information should be systematically collected about caste and religion' (1987:243). As a result, Nandini Sundar argues, census 'statistics on identities became important as communities demanded entitlements on the basis of numbers, in a politics which conflated representation (standing on behalf of) with representativeness (coming from a particular community)' (2000:113).

Dirks (1997:121) argues colonialism was sustained not only by superior arms, military organisation, political power and wealth, but also through 'printing and the standardisation of languages, self-regulating and autonomous legal systems, official histories of the state and people and the celebration of national shrines, symbols and pilgrim centres' that were part of the British colonial elite's larger political project of imposing the nation state. Colonial conquest enabled ways to construct what colonialism was all about: its own self-knowledge (2001:13).

Documenting community social behaviour, customs and mores became a major project for the British, who used not only enumeration but age-old scriptural and indological methods to naturalise indigenous complexities. Indologists built an extensive repertoire of knowledge on Vedic and post-Vedic scriptures and translated ancient Indian texts from Sanskrit into European languages. British officials relied on 'native informants', generally Brahmins, to codify practices and classify castes. The Brahmins had already elaborated the *varna* four-fold classification theory, but manipulated it to capitalise on new opportunities presented by the British.

The census also created spatial-cultural differences, which implied two assumptions: group distinction based on the West's spatial-cultural structures and the creation of spatial-cultural zones; and the boundedness of these groups defined by numbers and now called castes and tribes, which were placed in a structured hierarchy and identified by a cultural attribute of 'spirituality' emanating from Hindu civilisation. Hinduism became organically linked to the caste system in the new language of hierarchy devised by colonial census officials. A religion came to define a territory: India and Hinduism became one, establishing Hindus as the majority and all other groups as the minority.

Cohn shows that the first census, in 1871-72, classified castes within each

religious community. Subsequently, British officials tried to place *jatis* among the four *varnas* or in 'categories of outcastes and aborigines'. These officials recognised the difficulties and, Cohn adds, the 'absence of a uniform system of classification', but 'it was widely assumed that an all-India system of classification of castes could be developed' (1987:243). As this system assumed the point of view of Brahmins and other *savarnas*, it codified their privileged perspective.

Finding religion

Madan's position reflects this perspective and remains etched in the discourse of binaries. For example, he considers 'four out of five Indians' Hindus, using numerical superiority to define the majority (2004:1). Like earlier indologists, he consults the scriptures and *Manusmriti* to identify religious constituents. Later he collapses all Indians into being Hindu when he states that 'many components of culture and aspects of social structure of the non-Hindu communities...have either been borrowed from the Hindus or are survivals from their pre-conversion Hindu past...' (2004:1).

Madan was profoundly influenced by Louis Dumont, who reconstructed binaries in an elaborate theory of hierarchy in the East and contrasted it with the theme of equality in the West. While sociologists like Srinivas (2002) used the empirical method to debunk received assumptions and distinguished between *varna* and *jati*, Dumont criticised this empirical position, insisting not only that 'a sociology of India lies at a point of confluence of sociology and indology' (1957:7), but that '[t]he very existence and influence of the traditional higher Sanskrit civilisation demonstrates without question the unity of India' (1957:10). Madan echoes this: 'South Asia's major religious traditions...are totalising in character, claiming all of a follower's life so that religion is constitutive of society' (2004:399). Thus he argues that 'the religious domain is not distinguished from the secular, but rather the secular is regarded as being encompassed' (2004:2).

What is this holistic notion that unifies all religious activity in India? For Madan, it's Dharma, which to him connotes the sustenance of moral virtue. This self-sustaining cosmo-moral order runs through all India's religions, especially Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, which incorporate subtly nuanced Hindu principles. Thus he asserts a long tradition of Hinduism that was never a source of conflict, because its 'scope of inter-religious understanding is...immense and it is in no way contradicted by the holism of the religious traditions of mankind' (2004:385). Hinduism's internal differences are part of this long history.

In *India's Religions*, Madan characterises Hinduism as inherently plural and uses 'pluralism', as defined in the

American tradition, to assess Hinduism. In America, religious pluralism is loosely defined as being peaceful relations between religions and the negotiated accommodation of differences. This process of conflict and dialogue, it is hoped, leads to a common good and implies it is not given as an a priori; the common good's scope and content is found only through negotiation (a posterior) and does not, according to pluralists, coincide with any one entity's position.

Madan's position, then, only makes sense if it interrogates the binaries and abandons theories of power that construct the majority and minority as instruments of objectification. How can common good be negotiated between groups who are objects of the politics of knowledge construction? And those who have formed their self-identities as a majority? Whose identities have been defined by the colonial state and savarnas who benefit from these definitions? When self-identities accept the hierarchy?

Madan and many of his contemporaries who uphold 'traditions' don't seem to recognise that 'traditions' are a construct of modernity. In their logic, South Asia is a world steeped in 'native' resources that mitigate religious conflicts. By being critical of secularism, Madan questions modernity and how secularism interfaces with politics to create religious conflicts. As he states, '...it is the marginalisation of religious faith, which is what secularisation is, that permits the perversion of religion' (1991:396).

But is secularism the source of religious conflict? Or is the source the processes by which religion and religious affiliation have become part of the politics of identity construction? Surely, we possess the sociological language to assess these processes and explain how knowledge construction helped build the identities articulated through them. Andre Betille (1994) appraises Madan's use of the concept of secularisation as related to secularism and indicates the need to dissociate these two terms. On Madan's use of scriptures to develop a position on India's religions, Betille reminds us that theology alone is not enough to assess religion in sociological terms.

Madan's ideas on India's religions exemplify how colonial binaries were imposed on the language of the sociologist, who naturalised not only the concepts of majority and minority but also various theories that homogenised them. Knowledge alone cannot play a role in hegemonisation; social movements and intellectuals must mobilise the populace through ideas. This was how the Hindu majority was created.

Sanghathanas, seva and gurus

Hinduism as an ideology formed during colonialism. Its contemporary aggres-

sion, and legitimation, can be traced back a hundred years, when it emerged as the voice of the majority. Today it is being reconceived, but its core principles remain the same as those conceived in the late 19th century.

Historian Romila Thapar (1996:3-4) has argued that Hinduism was 'a juxtaposition of flexible religious sects' before colonialism attempted to homogenise them. Hinduism does not affirm a single God, prophet, founder, church, holy book, religious symbol or centre; faith is difficult to apply to its inherent diversity of beliefs, deities, schools of thought, practices, rituals and organic cultural links. Hinduism has no fewer than six schools of philosophy, an idea of God that ranges from monism to dualism to polytheism, and rituals from the individual Dhyana to the social 'yagna'. Denominations like Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism and Smartism try to organise Hinduism around a specific deity or philosophy.

This diversity was reorganised in the colonial period. Religious organisations called *sanghathanas* (literally, 'organisations' or 'associations') formed around gurus, who framed a group's objective within the national narrative. *Sanghathanas* aimed to mobilise a new majority of believers in Hinduism against the colonial state and its religion, Christianity. Mobilisation entailed proselytising through a set of practices, called seva, combined with allegiance to a guru.

Sanghathanas, seva and gurus all had a pre-colonial existence, when they formed around sects and temple towns, but their late 19th century form was radically different, attempting to reflect and replicate the structure and culture of organisations established by the colonial state in the western tradition (Copley 2000, 2003). Thus *sanghathanas* emulated the Christian tradition of building a congregation around a church – some were even named missions, such as one of the first, the Ramakrishna Mission – but they were instead built around gurus, who were considered the authentic interpreters of Hindu religion. At first, *sanghathanas* were revivalist, seeking to either defend one particular Hindu tradition or denounce parts of it in order to posit a less recondite but socially oriented religion. Eventually they were organised around *seva*, which included guru discourses (*pravachanas*), prayers (*satsangs*) and work as *sevaks* (volunteers), for instance, teaching in schools and helping in disaster relief. Some *sanghathanas* also established medical help centres, hospitals, colleges and universities.

The guru has been defined as a spiritual teacher, 'one who brings light out of darkness' (Copley 2000:5). Colonial period gurus whose *sanghathanas* endured were distinctive. Most were English-educated, from savarna upper castes and experienced teachers. Their writings were mainly in English and

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oriented toward the emerging upper and middle classes. Copley argues that dominance rather than friendship and equality defined the relationship between the guru and his disciples, as gurus encouraged obedience and loyalty and were considered elitist and authoritarian (2000:6).

While the tradition of seva is as old as Hinduism itself, its traditional notions of performing service to oneself, family and god in the fours stages of life incorporated new, socio-political dimensions during the colonial period. Earlier texts defined seva in terms of life's personal aspects and gave it religious overtones. It belonged to the private sphere, within the figurative walls of *karmic* isolation. In the late 19th century, seva was redefined as the individual *sevak*'s pride in a new religio-political identity born of an imagined Hindu nation defined by gurus. At the time, Hinduism was threatened by Christian missionaries converting lower castes, and the colonial state's new western ideas. Hinduism confronted them by developing a new public identity through mobilisation of the populace as a Hindu nation. The ideas of seva, the guru and the *sanghathana* incorporated non *savarna* groups into a majority Hindu community.

The Swami and Hindu chauvinism

Swami Vivekananda standardised Hindu principles by excavating 'traditions' and explicating a *savarna* reading of Hinduism. In the late 19th century, his ideas became the fountainhead of majoritarian Hinduism. Driven by his quest to understand the reasons for India's colonial subjugation, Vivekananda declared the concept of seva as 'organised service to humankind' (Beckerlegge 2000:60). Unlike his own guru Ramakrishna, who attempted to synthesise and universalise Hinduism's many popular traditions (Sarkar 1997), Vivekananda was unique in that his project remained simultaneously social – to reform Hinduism – and political – to displace colonial suppression – by mobilising new groups into an institutionalised structure of Hinduism. To create this constituency, he reconstructed Hinduism's defining principles by blending two distinct traditions: orthodox Hinduism, incorporated in the earliest Hindu religious texts called the Vedas and the religion's contemporary socially sensitive and reformist aspects, with its principles of charity and service as embodied in Christianity.

Vivekananda did not stray from vedantic metaphysics. Of the four yogas, he emphasised Karma, which he redefined as 'traditional caste-based rituals and obligations with humanitarian service. The jnana of Vedantic monism was sought to be transformed...into a message of strength and strenuous help to others' (Sarkar 1997:347). This fusion influenced a generation of religious and political thinkers and continues within Hindu *sanghathanas*. He applied traditional Hindu concepts of *seva*,

selfless service, and *sadhana*, 'spiritual penance', and insisted on the material poverty of *sevaks*.

Vivekananda's dominant principles were humanitarianism and physical morality. In the Ramakrishna Mission, *seva* represented humane and ethical religiosity that would forge a new Hindu community united around the principle of selfless social duty. The community's strength would be its spiritual and physical fitness; its objective was to help the downtrodden by improving their material condition and social position, and by spreading the social awareness and spiritual enlightenment that encouraged the wealthy to aid the less fortunate.

Most scholars see Vivekananda's ideas as radical and revolutionary, arguing that by focusing on the masses – the deprived, under-privileged, weak, exploited and diseased – Vivekananda modernised a very old religion steeped in fatalist traditions and empowered Hindu society to be confident, self-sufficient, strong and fair. Some interpret his focus on individual human joy, suffering, achievement and failure as Hinduism made 'human-centric', and his dislike of contemporary Hindu revivalism as reformist. Others consider his ideas universal, given his stance that Hinduism is what the world needs to solve its social, economic and spiritual crises.

Indeed, his sensitivity to the 'masses', inclusion of 'untouchables' in mission activities and criticism of mindless ritualism in *sanatana dharma* (orthodox Hinduism) makes Vivekananda a radical, democratic social thinker in some eyes. But he advocated that his *sevak* disciples train themselves to be pure, noble and discerning souls who rise above superstitions and appreciate Hinduism's true character. He emphasised physical strength and endurance to withstand any challenge, as a nation comprised of weak people would be controlled by outsiders, both spiritually and physically. Through *seva* and *sadhana*, sevaks were to overcome the ignorance that impoverished and subjugated Hindus (Sarkar 1997), and to appreciate the Vedas in order to understand Hindu principles, what Hinduism represents and cleanse it of its ritualism.

In reality, Vivekananda is interested in the salvation of the *sevaks*, not of the masses. His ideas are not radical. He merely reiterates the early meaning of *seva* as practices performed by the individual. I agree with Sarkar (1997): Vivekananda not only distilled Hinduism's diverse traditions, but also diluted his personal appeal to society's underprivileged. By asserting Hinduism's vedantic orientation mainly to a literate English-educated upper caste audience, Vivekananda distinguished upper castes from the rest of Hindu society in new and subtle ways and yet preached for their reform. Today, communal organisations, such as the Rash-

triya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), trace their ideologies to Vivekananda's notion of seva and his dream of making Hinduism a world religion (Beckerlegge 2003, 2004; Copley 2000, 2003; Sarkar 1997). As Sarkar states, 'More relevant today, ominously so, is the image of the Swami as one of the founders of 20th century "Hindutva", of a unified and chauvinistic Hinduism' (1997:291).

Like colonial officials, Vivekananda used indological sources to reconstruct a codified Hindu set of principles, operated within the caste hierarchy and presented a Brahminical upper caste male view of Hinduism. Thus his *sanghathana*, organised through principles of hierarchy, made the guru Hinduism's main interpreter and demanded the congregation's complete loyalty. His mission became a model for other gurus.

But there is a caveat. Given Indian public life's richness and diversity, and the continuous reorganisation of traditions in diverse forms, it's incorrect to argue that Hinduism constructed one uniform narrative and model. *Seva*, *sanghathanas* and gurus simply became the means through which Hindu communities mobilised, which is not a process of Hindu revivalism or reform but rather an upper caste intervention to create a Hindu nation based on religion. It was a political process reflecting many of the assumptions colonial modernity had articulated regarding 'Hindu traditions'.

An alternate language

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), mentioned above, formed in 1925 as 'an organisation of the self-motivated' and its *parivar* (family). RSS founder Dr Keshav Hedgewar, like Vivekananda, believed in the *seva* of education, discipline, organisation and instilling pride in Hinduism to create a band of (celibate) male *sevaks* who undertake humanitarian service. After Hedgewar's death in 1940, new RSS leader Madhav Sadashiv Gowalkar integrated his predecessor's notion. At the time, the RSS had 500 *shakhas* and a structure whose leader had absolute decision-making power. Gowalkar's message 'to worship God through serving society' became the motto that still unites the RSS and its *parivar*. He created many small *sanghathanas* for special *seva* activities; by 1997, RSS operated 2,866 such units in India and the world (Beckerlegge 2004:116). These units have exacerbated religious and communal conflicts because for the RSS *seva* activities are meant to help Hindus alone. Schools, medical centres and hospitals are established under various *sanghathanas* but serve only Hindus. This divides the populace according to religious identities. The RSS argues it is forced to do this because state education and health programmes mainly benefit minorities. Generations of Hindus have grown up to believe this falsehood; *sanghathanas* even mobilise vigilantes to prevent minorities from using state resources. The RSS justifies

these actions by its belief that India is a Hindu, not a secular, state.

The discourse of colonial modernity and the creation of the Hindu majoritarian movement are organically linked. Both elided the different cultural practices of *jatis* and ethnic groups and subsumed them under an upper caste perspective of Hinduism. Brahminical and *savarna* male interests were consolidated and their authority legitimised. Thus, majoritarianism fuels aggressive integration of Hindu identity, reclassifies group distinctions into religious majority and minorities, and legitimises daily caste- and gender-related violence based on its justification of overt and covert religious discrimination. Hindus are encouraged to interact with each other and avoid minorities. Hindu authorities deprive minorities of services and mobilise Hindu citizens to do the same. This attitude leads to violence where employment, services and infrastructure are limited. Majoritarianism subtly divides communities, who are then mobilised during communal clashes to burn, loot and kill each other.

Sanghathanas not only legitimised colonial modernity's project, they codified and systematised Hinduism in terms of a *savarna* reading of tradition and provided a model of maintaining *savarna* and patriarchal domination that the RSS still follows. Sociologists must recognise how colonial modernity's institutions, processes and structures were renewed after independence and are reflected in the way majority-minority binaries continue to be reconstituted.

Religiosity, ethnicity and communalism define everyday South Asian life. Religion provides ideological legitimacy for extreme social and economic exclusion. While communal violence is an overt manifestation, covert communalism is bred by converting everyday practices into majoritarian projects through integration with the language of caste. Social science language must not become part of this language. To study the religious fault lines governing today's South Asia, sociological discourse on religion must understand the discourse that created the majority-minority binary. Liberation from the language of domination inherited from colonial modernity, and the creation of an alternate language, are required to accomplish this daunting but necessary task. ❮

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