



Meera Nanda

Rush hour of the gods

Today's generation of middle class Indians are discarding the secular-humanist version of Hinduism that appealed to an earlier generation of elites and opting for a more overt religiosity. Meera Nanda asks what lies behind the Hinduisation of the Indian public sphere.

"The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was. [...] Experiments with secularized religions have generally failed; religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalism have widely succeeded."

Peter Berger, *Desecularization of the World*

Those looking for evidence to back Peter Berger's conclusion can do no better than take a closer look at the religious landscape of India, the "crouching tiger" of 21st-century global capitalism.

India today is teeming with millions of educated, relatively well-to-do men and women who enthusiastically participate in global networks of science and technology. The Indian economy is betting its fortunes on advanced research in biotechnology and the drug industry, whose very existence is a testament to the naturalistic and disenchanting understanding of the natural world. And yet a vast majority of these middle-class beneficiaries of modern science and technology continue to believe in supernatural powers supposedly embodied in idols, "god-men" or "god-women," stars and planets, rivers, trees and sacred animals. By all indications, they treat supernatural beings and powers with utmost earnestness and reverence and go to great lengths to please them in the hopes of achieving their desires.

According to the 2007 State of the Nation survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies among Indians, the level of religiosity has gone up considerably in the past five years. A mere five per cent of respondents said that their religious belief had declined, while 30 per cent said they had become more religious. The same poll found that education and exposure to modern urban life seem to make Indians more, not less, religious: "Urban educated Indians are more religious than their rural and illiterate counterparts [...] religiosity has increased more in small towns and cities than in villages."

Another measurable indicator of rising religiosity is the tremendous rise in pilgrimages or religious tourism. According to a recent study by the National Council for Applied Economic Research, "religious trips account for more than 50 per cent of all package tours, much higher than leisure tour packages at 28 per cent." The most recent figures show that in 2004, more than 23 million people visited the Lord Balaji temple at Tirpuati, while 17.25 million trekked

to the mountain shrine of Vaishno Devi. Here I will focus on Hindus, who make up nearly 85 per cent of India's population. But they are not the only ones who are becoming more religious: indicators of popular religiosity are rising among Indian Muslims, Christians and Sikhs as well.

Today's generation of Indian upper and middle classes are not content with the de-ritualised, slimmed-down, philosophised or secular-humanist version of Hinduism that appealed to the earlier generation of elites. They are instead looking for "jagrit" or awake gods who respond to their prayers and who fulfill their wishes — the kind of gods that sociologists Rodney Starke and Roger Finke, authors of *Acts of Faith*, describe as "personal, caring, loving, merciful, close, accessible [...] all of which can be summed up in a belief that 'there is someone up there who cares'." The textual or philosophical aspects of Sanskritic Hinduism have by no means diminished in cultural prestige: they continue to serve as the backdrop of "Vedic sciences" (as Hindu metaphysics is sold these days), and continue to attract a loyal following of spiritual seekers from India and abroad. But what is changing is simply that it is becoming fashionable to be religious and to be seen as being religious. The new elites are shedding their earlier reticence about openly participating in religious rituals in temples and in public ceremonies like kathas and yagnas. If anything, the ritual dimension is becoming more public and more ostentatious.

Not only are rituals getting more elaborate but many village and working-class gods and goddesses are being adopted by the middle classes, business elites and non-resident Indians — a process of Sanskritisation that has been called a "gentrification of gods". Worship of local gods and goddesses that until recently were associated with the poor, illiterate and lower castes is finding a new home in swank new suburbs with malls and multiplexes. The enormous growth in the popularity of the goddess called Mariamman or Amma in the south and Devi or Mata in the rest of the country is a case in point.

The natural question is why? What is fuelling this middle-class devotion to "lesser" gods, traditionally associated with the unlettered? Devotees themselves provide a fairly cogent explanation: they see these local gods as being far more intimately familiar with, and responsive to, the needs of ordinary people than the "great gods" who live up there in the celestial sphere.

Rather than retiring their gods, as secularisation theory expected, the emerging middle classes in India are remaking them. The local deities who were once considered guardians of the village, and protected against scourges like smallpox, are now being beseeched for blessings for success in an increasingly competitive urban environment.

How to explain this phenomenon? What motivates educated, well-to-do urban sophisticates to continue to believe in miracles and supernatural beings? Social theory has only two standard answers, neither of which fits the Indian data very well.

The first answer has to do with economic well-being. As has been recently shown with great sophistication and care by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in their book *Sacred and Secular*, the level of belief in modern, post-industrial societies bears a strong correlation with the level of "existential insecurity". On mapping religiosity against income data from societies in North America, Europe and Japan, Norris and Inglehart found that the higher the income level, the lower the religiosity as measured by frequency of prayer: in aggregate terms, the poor turn out to be twice as religious as the rich. The data from the

United States, for example, shows that two-thirds of the least well-off prayed, compared with 47 per cent of the highest income group. According to this view, religiosity does fall off and people do become more secular in modern industrial economies, except when they are caught on the lower rungs of the economy in those societies that do not provide public welfare.

This explanation does not adequately explain the Indian data. Here we have the case of rising religiosity among the already wealthy and the upwardly mobile, whose level of material well-being is fairly decent even by Western standards.

The second explanation is that the growing religiosity is a defensive reaction to modernisation and Westernisation. Pavan Varma, the author of the much-cited *The Great Indian Middle Class*, treats religion as a refuge for the alienated and lonely urbanites, uprooted from the old, warm little communities they left behind in villages. Varma simply assumes that the transition to modern life in the cities must be traumatic and drive the new middle classes to seek out the consolation of God in the company of fellow believers.

But insecurity and anomie do not appear to be the most salient aspects of what is going on. There is anxiety and insecurity among the newly well-to-do as they face an increasingly competitive economy with declining job security. But there is also a sense of expanding horizons and multiplying opportunities. The upwardly mobile in urban India have, in the words of researcher Maya Warrier, "done well for themselves by seizing the educational and career opportunities that came their way. Their experience of the unprecedented pace and scale of change had resulted not so much in a sense of despair and alienation as in a sense of optimism about multiple opportunities in most spheres of life."

It is not despair or alienation, but rather ambivalence over their new-found wealth that seems a more plausible explanation of the growing religiosity.

Modern gurus seem to ease this ambivalence by giving new wealth a divine stamp of approval. "To be rich is divine" is the message coming from modern gurus who minister to the upper crust. Swami Dayananda, the guru of successful businessmen and women in Chennai, for example, teaches a business-friendly version of Gita which he sells as "a program for living" or a "plan for life". Rather than renounce all desire, as Lord Krishna teaches in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Dayananda's version of the Gita teaches that "desires are a manifestation of divinity that actuate people to do things." "Practical moksha" does not mean renunciation of these divine gifts but only that they be brought under control of the will. Thus, while claiming to teach the "eternal" message of moksha which aimed at identification with the Godhead, modern gurus dish out advice on how to succeed in business.

Blessing the hyper-consumption of their middle-class followers is only half the story. Modern gurus also seem to help to take the edge off guilt by teaching how to "balance" all that consumerism with spiritual pursuits. Gurus like Mata Amritanandamayi teach that "Western" consumerism creates bad "karmic burden" which can be negated, or at least "balanced", by performing some of the rituals and pujas she prescribes. To put it a bit flippantly, the cure for shopping is more shopping — this time for spiritual products and the services of gurus and priests. Surely a win-win situation for all involved!

There is, however, another factor that is making public expressions of religiosity fashionable, namely the rising levels of triumphalism and

nationalism among the upwardly mobile. Polling data from a Pew Global Attitude Survey revealed that as many as 93 per cent of Indian respondents — the highest in the world — agreed with the statement "our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others". In comparison, Chinese, Japanese and even American public opinion was far more self-critical and ambiguous over the superiority of their cultures.

For educated Indians brought up on a steady diet of religious, media and other cultural discourses that constantly package Hindu signs and symbols as the essence of Indian culture, it has become almost second nature to conflate the two. Now that India is becoming an important player in the global market many are beginning to ascribe the country's success to the superiority of "Hindu values". This sentiment is being aggressively promoted by gurus and tele-yogis like Swami Ramdev, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Sai Baba and a host of others. Indeed, the public sphere is replete with these messages of becoming more Hindu in order to become more successful in the global race for money and power.

On the face of it, contemporary popular Hinduism appears to be the very epitome of a dynamic and inventive religious tradition which is changing to keep pace with the changing time. Clearly, all the new gods, god-men/god-women, new temples and rituals add up to an impressive inventory of creative innovations that are allowing men and women to take their gods with them as they step into the heady, though unsettling, world dominated by global corporate capitalism. But there is an underside: the same innovations in religious ritual and dogmas that are enabling the "Great Indian Middle Class" to adjust to global capitalism are also deepening a sense of Hindu chauvinism, and widening the chasm between Hindus and non-Hindu minorities. The banal, everyday Hindu religiosity is simultaneously breeding a banal, everyday kind of Hindu ultra-nationalism. This kind of nationalism is not openly proclaimed in fatwas, nor does it appear on the election manifestos of political parties. Its power lies in structuring the common sense of ordinary people.

The net result is a new kind of political and nationalistic Hinduism which is invented out of old customs and traditions that people are fond of and familiar with. Because it builds upon deeply felt religiosity, it sucks in even those who are not particularly anti-Muslim or anti-Christian. Religious festivals, temple rituals and religious discourses become so many ways of "flagging" India as a Hindu nation, and India's cultural superiority as due to its Hindu spirituality.

The best way to describe the banality of Hindu nationalism and the role of religion in it is to show how it works.

The example comes from the recent inauguration of Shri Hari Mandir, a new temple that opened in Porbandar in Gujarat in February 2006. The grand sandstone temple and the priest-training school called Sandipani Vidyaniketan attached to it are a joint venture of the Gujarat government, the business house of the Ambanis and the charismatic guru Rameshbhai Oza. The inauguration ceremony of this temple-gurukul complex provides a good example of how Hindu gods end up serving as props for Hindu nationalism and Hindu supremacy.

According to the description provided by the organisers themselves, the temple was inaugurated by Bharion Singh Shekhawat, the vice-president of the country, with the infamous chief minister Narendra Modi in attendance. Also

in attendance were the widow of Dhirubhai Ambani and the rest of the Ambani clan whose generous financial donations had built the temple. Some 50,000 well-heeled devotees of Oza from India and abroad crowded into the temple precincts to watch the event.

The elected representatives of "secular" India, in their official capacity, prayed before the temple idols — something so routine that it hardly evokes a response from anyone any more. The prayer was followed by the national anthem sung before the gods, followed by recital of the Vedas by the student-priests, followed by a Gujarati folk dance. This was followed by speeches that liberally mixed up the gods and the nation, with quite a bit of rhetoric about the greatness of Hindu "science" thrown in for good measure. Modi, the chief instigator of the 2002 Godhara riots between Hindus and Muslims, spoke glowingly of the "tolerance" and "secularism" of Hinduism. He went on to recommend that yagnas and religious recitals be held all over the country before undertaking any new construction because Hinduism is "inherently ecological". Next came Mrs Ambani, who urged mixing spirituality with industry. The vice-president, in his turn, spoke of how modern and scientific Hindu traditions were, comparing the gods' weapons with modern missiles and their vehicles with modern-day helicopters.

The theme of the superiority of ancient Hindu science was taken up a week later when the president of India, Abdus Kalam, came down to the temple-ashram complex to inaugurate its "science museum", which highlights ancient Hindu discoveries in astronomy/astrology, medicine (ayurveda), architecture (vastu) and such. Without ever questioning what validity the Earth-at-the-centre astronomy/astrology of Aryabhata has in the modern world, the nuclear physicist president went on to claim not only the greatness of antiquity but also the continued relevance of the ancients for "enriching" modern astronomy. The ancients were smoothly turned into the guiding lights of modern science — regardless of the fact that their cosmology has been falsified by it.

This is representative of how India's state-temple-industrial complex works: the gods become the backdrop, and the traditional puja the medium, for asserting the Hindu-ness of India and the greatness of both. Worship of the gods becomes indistinguishable from the worship of Hindu culture and the Indian nation. Devotees come to listen to hymns sung to gods, but end up worshipping a political ideology — and cannot tell the difference. The cult of nation, furthermore, is simultaneously turned into a cult of "reason" and "science", without the critical and empirical spirit of science.

Once the beloved and popular gods become identified with the land and its culture, Hindu nationalism becomes an everyday affair. No one has to pass fatwas and there is no need to launch a militant battle against the West. Hindu nationalists have no use for such crude tools. They would rather turn the worship of gods into the worship of the nation and they would rather beat the West by appropriating the West's strengths in empirical sciences for their own gods. The tragedy is that the religiosity of ordinary believers provides the building blocks for this banal, but far from benign, Hindu nationalism.

Economic globalisation and neo-liberal reforms have created the material and ideological conditions in which a popular and ritualistic Hindu religiosity is growing. Popular religiosity, in turn, is being directed into a mass ideology of Hindu supremacy and Hindu nationalism.

This trend is a symptom of a deeper, more fundamental malaise, namely the failure of secularism. For all its professions of secularism, the Indian state has not developed a stance of either equal indifference to or equal respect for all the many religions of India. It has instead treated the religion of the majority as the civic religion of the Indian nation itself. The result is a deep and widespread Hinduisation of the public sphere, which is only growing under the conditions of globalisation.

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