
UNIT 29 RELIGION AND CULTURE

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29.1 INTRODUCTION

The nationalist movement in colonial India led to an important reconstruction of the concept of history. History at the time was understood to be a history of the British state in India. The history of the pre-colonial period was understood to be a political narrative of the dynasties and their wars and alliances. For Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, this was a history of violence. There was no history of ‘soul-force’, or non-violence. He put the matter quite explicitly in *Hind Swaraj* (1909). Rabindranath Tagore made the same point somewhat differently. In his view, the true history of India was not a catalogue of its dynasties, warfare and the resultant bloodshed, but rather its inner history. It lay in the quest for the accommodation of differences, and in the synthesis of diverse elements, including clashing religious beliefs. The history of India’s unique culture, in his view, was evolution of harmony out of variety. Religious history was on this analysis central to the inner history of the country’s culture. It was a history of syncretism.

British Orientalism had also regarded religious history as the most important part of India’s cultural history. Nor was this a colonial view alone, for there was an earlier recognition of the importance of religion in the cultural heritage of the country. Badauni’s *Muntakha-ut-Tawarikh*, bearing upon the reign of Akbar, devoted considerable space to religious matters and Sufi doctrines.

There was also a recognition, however, that not all of India’s culture was religious culture. British Orientalism had a keen appreciation of secular Sanskrit poetry, and earlier, Badauni had devoted many pages of his history to Persian poetry in India, not all of which was religious. However, Indian historiography was quick to recognise that there was no hard and fast distinction between the religious and the secular in the history of India. Even in the modern period, it was recognised that the Indian awakening had an important component of religious reform / revival.

29.2 PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

What P.J. Marshall calls ‘the British discovery of Hinduism’ was preceded long ago by the Muslim discovery of Hindu sacred and secular learning. As early as C.1030, the Muslim scholar of Ghazni, Al Biruni, had written extensively and sufficiently on Hindu

beliefs in *Kitab-ul-Hind*. The Tibetan lama, Taranatha, wrote a history of the Buddhist faith in India, *rGya - gar - chos - 'Gyun* (The History of Buddhism in India), around 1608, by which time Hinduism had already triumphed over Buddhism. In the same century, the Mughal Prince, Dara Shikoh, sought to show that the monotheistic fundamentals of both Hinduism and Islam were capable of mingling together. His work, entitled *Majma - ul - Bahrain* (Mingling of Two Oceans), was based on inquiries into authoritative texts such as the *Upanishads* and the Sufi work *Gulshan Raz*. It was written in a philosophical vein, but yet another important work of the seventeenth century, the *Dabistan - l Mazahib* of Mushin Fani, clearly exhibited the historical and comparative method. This work, translated as *The Dabistan or School of Manners. The Religious Beliefs, Observances, Philosophical Opinions and Social Customs of the East* by David Shea and Anthony Troyer (Washington, 1901) treated the major faiths and sects of India comprehensively.

The work of the British Orientalists on the 'great traditions' of Hinduism and Islam resulted in the codification of 'Hindoo law' and 'Anglo Muhammadan law', but at least one major Orientalist, H.H. Wilson, pushed his researches into areas beyond the orthodox religious traditions. His 'Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus', published in *Asiatic Researches* (Vol. 16, 1828, Vol.17, 1832), recorded the history of various *bhakti* sects, including obscure ones. Following Wilson, the Brahma reformer Akshay Kumar Datta wrote in greater historical detail on a large number of unorthodox popular sects in his Bengali work, *Bharatbarshiya Upasak Sampraday* (2 parts, 1870 and 1883). It is the same popular cults, such as the Bauls, that Rabindranath Tagore brought into the limelight in his Hibbert lectures at Oxford, published as *The Religion of Man* (London, 1931). He drew upon the historical work of a colleague at Santiniketan whom he had asked to research the subject. The Santiniketan teacher, Kshitimohan Sen, wrote an important work in Bengali, entitled *Bharatiya Madhya Yuge Sadhanar Dhara* (1930), which he translated subsequently as *Medieval Mysticism in India* (London, c. 1935). Later on, Sashi Bhushan Dasgupta dwelt on the unorthodox sects of early colonial Bengal in *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta, 1946). The development of the Sufi cult in Bengal was treated in a thesis of the 1930s by Muhammad Enamul Huq, who subsequently published it in independent Bangladesh as *A History of Sufiism in Bengal* (Dacca, 1975). Yet another important work of the colonial period covering the history of an important sect was George Weston Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis* (Calcutta, 1838). The Jogis were an unorthodox sect and were found from Bengal right up to the Punjab. The works of Wilson, Datta, Tagore and other established that there was, at the popular level, a number of heterodox sects, both Hindu and Muslim, which represented a radical syncretistic religious tradition going back to late antiquity. In other words conflict between antagonistic religions was not all there was to the religious tradition of the subcontinent.

Even as research into the obscure aspects of Indian religion made important advances in the colonial period, religious and social reform was changing the tradition in several aspects. This was a new area of investigation, and a pioneer in this field was J.N. Farquhar. A sympathetic Christian Missionary, he wrote a work entitled *Modern Religious Movements in India*. First published in 1919, it still remains an important reference work with first hand information. After 1947, the subject would become a major topic of research, but Farquhar's sympathetic account still retains its fresh quality.

29.3 POST-COLONIAL RESEARCH IN RELIGION

Research in both the orthodox and unorthodox aspects of the religions of the subcontinent made major advances after Partition, and there was a new focus on Islam in its specific

South Asian context. Comprehensive surveys of Islam in India emerged from different perspectives: S.M. Ikram's *History of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan* (Lahore, 1961) and Muhammad Mujeeb's *The Indian Muslims* (London, 1967) presented the Pakistani and Indian perspectives respectively, while Anne-Marie Schimmel's *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (London, 1980) presented an external perspective on the subject. On the Sikh community, W.H. McLeod, a sympathetic historian from New Zealand, wrote the widely accepted and objective work, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (Delhi, 1975). The southern peninsula was the focus of new community studies such as Stephen Frederic Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922: Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier* (Oxford, 1980) and Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900* (Cambridge, 1989). These works showed the distinctive regional forms of Islam and Christianity. The syncretic local forms imported to Islam by popular Fakirs were imaginatively explored by Richard M. Eaton in *The Sufis of Bijapur: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, 1978), and by Asim Roy in *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983).

The Research in the esoteric and popular forms of Hinduism made a major advance with Mircea Eliade's classic study for Yoga in French : *Le Yoga: Immortalité et Liberté* (Paris, 1954). Other important books that explored forms of Hinduism outside the orthodox Brahmanical mould included : Edward C. Dimock, *The Place of Hidden Moon : Erotic Mysticism in the Sahajiya Vaishnva Cult of Bengal* (Chicago, 1966); Wendy Doniger O'Flahery, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva* (Oxford, 1973); Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens and Teun Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantrism* (Leiden, 1979); and Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir: Selected Verses with a Detailed Biographical and Historical Introduction* (Delhi, 1993).

The religious and social movements of reform in colonial India emerged as an important focus of research after independence. The movement of Islamic revival went back to the eighteenth century and was studied by S.A.A. Rizvi in *Shah Wali-allah and His Times* (Canberra, 1980). The Brahma movement in Bengal, one of the most important reform movements in the nineteenth century, was treated by David Kopf in *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, 1979). The movement of reform in Islam in the nineteenth century was treated by Christian W. Trall in *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: a Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi, 1978). More generally, themes of religious reform were treated in synthetic general works such as Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton, 1966), and Kenneth W. Jones *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India: The New Cambridge History of India 3.1.* (Cambridge, 1994). The movements of revival and reform fostered a new kind of politics of religious identity. In Pakistan, Ishtiaq Husain Qureishi claimed, in *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent 610-1947: A Brief Analysis* (The Hague, 1962), that the Muslims had always constituted a separate nation in the subcontinent. Religion tended to become a matter of politics in the twentieth century historiography.

29.4 THE STUDY OF INDIAN CULTURE

The colonial period produced important studies of Indian culture, beginning with the Orientalists. Sir William Jones discovered the Indo-European language group and thus transformed notions of Indian culture. There was a keen Orientalist interest in Indian art, evident in such works as James Ferguson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876). The Orientalists were sometimes unjustly critical of early Indian

historiographical efforts in this direction, as is evident in Ferguson's criticisms of Rajendralal Mitra's highly original study of the temples of Orissa in *The Antiquities of Orissa* (1868-69). This did not stop Indian intellectuals and in due course Ghulam Yazdani wrote a wonderful account of Ajanta paintings entitled *Ajanta* (1930). Around this time Indian historians exhibited an interest in the culture of people as distinct from the chronicles of the Kings. Muhammad Habib wrote *Hazrat Amir Khusrau of Delhi* in 1927, and K.M. Ashraf wrote an account of popular culture during the Delhi Sultanate in *Life and Condition of the People of Hindustan* (1935).

By this time English education had brought about an important change in the mentality of the middle class, a theme explored by the American intellectual B.T. McCully in *English Education and the Origins of Indian Nationalism* (1940). Indian intellectuals themselves studied the impact of the West on the new vernacular literatures, for instance, Sushil Kumar De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1919), and Sayyid Abdul Latif, *The Influence of English Literature on Urdu Literature* (1924). One of the intellectual achievements of this time was Surendranath Dasgupta's *History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols. (1922).

Independence and Partition brought a renewed interest in the subcontinent. The synthetic surveys of the time deserve mention: A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India: A Survey of the History and Culture of the Indian Subcontinent before the Coming of the Muslims* (1954), and S.M. Ikram, *History of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan* (Lahore, 1961). In recent years, the Western cultural impact has been studied in new and sophisticated ways, for instance, Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (New Delhi, 1985), and Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1994). Such works explore the emergence of modern Indian culture from fresh perspectives and have broadened our understanding of the process dubbed the Indian Awakening. The phenomenon is now studied from a more critical angle of vision and culture is now more closely related to the emerging forms of consciousness and society.

29.5 CULTURE STUDIES AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Post-modernism, colonial discourse analysis and culture studies have focused attention on the question of religious and cultural identities in Indian history. Post-colonial theory questions such identities and argues that they are 'constructed' by colonialism, nationalism and other motivated forces. The validity of religious identities, especially Hinduism, has been doubted by the post-colonial deconstructionists. Poststructuralist literary criticism, deriving from such intellectuals as Jacques Derrida and Edward Said, has been a key factor in such deconstructionism.

The deconstructionists contend that the British Orientalists constructed Hinduism out of diverse religious practices, and that even Islam in British India was too diverse to be the basis of one Muslim community across the subcontinent. As an instance of Orientalism and the fictitious identities it created, the post-colonial critics point to such works as Sir Monier Monier-Williams's *Hinduism* (1877). He spoke of Hinduism as one religion despite its many sects because of the fact that there was 'only one sacred language and only one sacred literature, accepted and revered by all adherents of Hinduism alike.' Indian nationalists, too, as for instance K.M. Sen, who wrote the standard work *Hinduism* (Penguin, 1961), are thought to have followed in the footsteps of the Orientalists in relating the history of a non-existent single religion.

In a typically post-modernist vein, Brian Smith contended in *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion* (New York, 1989): 'Just who invented "Hinduism" first is a matter of scholarly debate. Almost everyone agrees that it was not the Hindus.' In his opinion it was the British who did this in the early part of the nineteenth century, 'to create and control' a diverse body of people. This made it possible to speak of 'a religion when before there was none or, at best, many.' Among other works which have dwelt on the constructed nature of religious boundaries in India may be mentioned Harjot S. Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago, 1994); and Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (eds.), *Representing Hinduism: the Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi, 1995). Barbara Metcalf has argued, for her part, that identities such as the 'Indian Muslims' are neither primary, nor of long standing, and are, in fact, the products of colonial history (Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Jhanawi's Bihishti Zewar* (Delhi, 1992). In an article entitled 'Imagining Community: Polemical Debates in Colonial India', she goes so far as to say that 'India', 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' are not just imagined communities, they are, in her view, 'imaginary communities' (in Kenneth W. Jones, ed., *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, Albany, NY, 1992).

Not all historians accept these arguments, and they have continued to write religious, cultural and social history in terms that imply the real existence of such communities from pre-colonial times. As instances of this contrary view may be cited: C.A. Bayly, 'The Pre-history of "Communalism"? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860' (*Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.19, 1985); Cynthia Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other, Inscripting the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-colonial India' (*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 37, 1995); Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: a Quest for Identity* (Oxford, 1981); Stephen Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922: Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier* (Oxford, 1986); Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1706* (Delhi, 1994); David Lorenzon (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action* (Albany, NY, 1995). Not surprisingly, the disagreements among the scholars have given rise to a wide-ranging controversy on the nature of identities in colonial and pre-colonial India, and on the question whether patriotism and communalism have deep roots in Indian history. The development of the controversy may be followed through the following works: Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi, 1990); C.A. Bayly, *The Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (Delhi, 1998); Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other? Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims* (New Delhi, 1998); Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi, 1003). Whereas Pandey and Chattopadhyaya have emphasised the construed nature of the identities in Indian Society, Bayly and Ray have seen religious and patriotic loyalties in old India as more real.

A solid body of research in religious and cultural history has emphasised that identities and loyalties in Indian society must not be seen as hostile and monolithic blocs. Richard Eaton's work on the Sufis of Bijapur and Asim Roy's work on the Islamic syncretistic tradition in medieval Bengal, referred to earlier, have brought out the very large extent to which Islam in the subcontinent was shaped by syncretic interaction with the Hindu religion. The Bhakti movement, which also made an extremely significant contribution to the syncretic tradition, has been studied, among other works, in Karine Schoemer and W.H. McLeod (eds.), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*

(Delhi, 1987) and Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: the Early History of Krishna Devotion in South India* (Delhi, 1983). Apart from the spiritual Sufi and Bhakti movements, there was a persistent *Lokayata* tradition, with a materialistic and popular orientation, which worked against the hardening of religious identities into antagonistic blocs. This significant tradition is explored in D.P. Chattopadhyaya, *Lokayata: a Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* (New Delhi, 1959). The continuation of this materialistic tradition among the Bauls of Bengal, who set aside the Hindu-Muslim divide as false spiritualism, has been traced to recent times by Jeanne Openshaw in *Seeking Bauls of Bengal* (Cambridge, 2002). Such movements were more radical in nature than the Sufi and Bhakti movements and they undermined gender, religious, caste and class distinctions even more thoroughly. Miranda Shaw, in her *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton, 1994), has dwelt on this radical strand, too. The atheistic strand in the Indian religious tradition, it has been demonstrated, has tended to subvert the existing distinctions in Indian society.

Notwithstanding all this, modern India has experienced a distinct tendency towards religious polarisation. Peter van der Veer has dwelt on this theme in *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, 1994). The public life of the emerging nation(s) has been influenced to a large extent by religious controversy.

29.6 MENTALITY AND HISTORY OF CULTURE

Cultural history has been enriched by the study of *mentalite* or mentality, a term coined by the *Annales* School of Historians in France. This goes beyond conventional intellectual history and explores the popular attitudes and subconscious categories of thought. A related area of research, also exploring the mind, is psycho-history, which seeks to uncover the unconscious level of the mind with the help of Sigmund Freud's technique of psycho-analysis. This kind of history is not concerned with the conscious emotions of the individual or the group. Psycho-history probes repressed impulses rather than open sentiments. The study of emotion in cultural history, including conscious sentiment, is a wider field that may be called emotional history. Historical studies of mentality in India's culture and civilisation have come to embrace these different strands of history. They include popular attitudes and symbols of thought, unconscious mental processes, and the history of culturally shaped sentiments and emotions.

At the same time, intellectual history continues to flourish. An important study of the interaction of European and Indian thought from the pre-colonial period onwards is Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: an Essay in Understanding* (Albany, New York, 1988). There is also a huge literature on how the West affected the mind and thought of India in the colonial period. This keen interest among scholars is reflected in such works as Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi, 1986). This is a Subalternist work by a political scientist. Another work is Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (New Delhi, 1988). This is a study of the thought of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda by an eminent liberal historian.

Studies of mentality going beyond strict intellectual history began to appear from around the 1970s. The wide range of works include: David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, 1979); Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj* (New York, 1980); Judith Walsh, *Growing up in British India* (New York 1983); Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*

(Philadelphia, 1983); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: the 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995); Rajat Kanta Ray (ed.), *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal* (Calcutta, 1996); Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi, 1997); and Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of a Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi, 1998). What these works have done is to bring out some of the tensions embedded in the emerging mental formation during the colonial period.

Psycho-history, with its use of insights from Freudian psycho-analysis, is a more technical and closely focused exercise. In relation to India, it may be said to have started off with the famous psycho-analyst Erik Erikson's *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Non-violence* (New York, 1968). In India, Sudhir Kakkar, a practising psycho-analyst, has specialised in this kind of history, and has written such works as *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Chicago, 1989). Another writer who has made psycho-history his field and has demonstrated its relevance to Indian culture is Ashis Nandy. He has explored the colonial impact on the unconscious mind in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi, 1983). The discipline of psycho-history, established by Erikson, is now applied to specific subjects by non-specialists. This is especially notable in the subjects of religion, eros and sexuality. For instance, here are two highly controversial psycho-analytical studies of Ramakrishna Paramhansa's mind and life: Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago, 1995); and Narasingha P. Sil, *Ramakrishna Revisited: A New Biography* (Lanham, Md, USA, 1998). In their studies of religion and culture, they have focused on the psycho-sexuality of the saint. Psycho-analysis is so well-established in India from the time of Freud himself that there are now histories of it. The Austrian author Christiane Hartnack has written *Psychoanalysis in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2001), where she examines the birth and growth of psycho-analysis in India from the angle of culture theory.

As opposed to the psycho-analysts and psycho-historians, there is a group who call themselves 'social constructionists' (of post-modernist persuasion), who approach emotion from the angle of poststructural anthropology, critical theory and culture studies. They hold that emotion is totally relative to culture and have rejected Freud. In relation to Indian society, we may mention here Owen M. Lynch (ed.), *Divine Passions: the Social Construction of Emotion in India* (Delhi, 1990). Lynch argues that in India the conception of emotions and emotional life itself differ so radically from what prevails in the West that Westerners may never understand 'an Other, such as India.' This position has been rejected by some historians who, while locating emotion in primary impulses, trace its impact on culture as a real factor. Their treatment of emotion in history is broader than that of the psycho-historians in the sense that they explore not merely unconscious emotion, but also conscious sentiment. This newly emerging emotional history may be seen in Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities: Essays on India's Colonial and Post-Colonial Experiences* (New Delhi, 1999); and Rajat Kanta Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (New Delhi, 2001).

29.7 SUMMARY

Contending schools, such as psycho-history, social constructionism, history of *mentelite*, emotional history, and so on, have added many strands to the historical explorations of religion, culture and mentality in India. The history of the mind is no longer simply the old intellectual history. The study of culture, religion and the mind, relating them to their

broader contemporaneous societal context, has enriched Indian history. This has broadened it out beyond the sort of historiography that at one time equated general history with the history of the state alone. In the process, intellectual history itself has been transformed. It is no longer confined simply to the ideas of the elite. The perceived identities and unconscious symbols of the mass of the population, and the emotional drives in whole societies, are being taken into consideration by historians.

29.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss recent trend of using the history of mentality for the study of Indian culture.
- 2) Write a detailed note on the historical writings on Indian religion and culture.