
THE WORD OF GUEST EDITOR

When Dr. Miroljub Jevtic, the Editor-in-Chief of the prestigious journal *Politics and Religion* published by the Centre for Study of Religion and Religious Tolerance, Belgrade, Serbia invited me to guest edit its special issue of the journal focusing on "Politics and Religion in India", my initial reaction to accepting this challenging responsibility was not favorable since I never though I had the requisite specialized expertise either in political sociology or in sociology of religion or else in the interface and interplay of politics and religion. However, friendly persuasion and persistence of Dr. Jevtic and his reminding me that I have already put in the word of guest editor to their issue on "Secularism versus Religion" way back in 2009, I was hardly left with any other option but to accept his invitation. To begin with, I was reluctant to accept this prestigious offer knowing well that in spite of the continuous play and interface between politics and religion in India where all sorts of political parties exist with very different ideological orientations having no inhibition in justifying the use of religion for their political benefits and fortunes, it would not be easy to have a good number of contributions for this special issue since at this moment not many senior sociologists are engaged in these areas of research in spite of their utmost importance. However, quite a few very senior and other scholars of sociology who had been engaged and are still working on these issues, accepted my invitation to contribute papers in order to help me realize this invitation. I am thankful to all of them.

It is a matter of great pleasure and honor for me that this particular issue of *Politics and Religion* is entirely devoted to some of the important aspects of society, polity and religion in India. The aspects covered in this special issue are important not only historically but also in the contemporary context. Whatever has been included in this volume will certainly provide a window to the world, and more so to the European particularly to the East European and Balkan sociologists to have a glimpse of the contemporary Indian scenario mainly in the context of politics and religion, their interplay and particularly the construction of varied identities based on religion and other social factors such as caste, community and gender.

C.N. Venugopal in his paper "Polity, Religion and Secularism in India: A Study of Interrelationships" observes that the Indian political systems have been traditionally guided by two types of juridical texts. I. The *dharmashastras* (composed by Manu and others). II. The *nitishastras* (such as Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Shukra's *Nitisara* and Bhishma's address to the princes in *Mahabharata* which is known as *Shantiparva*). The texts of the first type laid down rules for conducting sacred duties, codes of conduct, punishment for transgression. The texts of the second type deal with more mundane matters related to agriculture, irrigation, imports and exports and military organization. It is here that Indian secularism originated. In other words,

the rulers protected both sacred and secular pursuits of their subjects. The Indian rulers (Hindu, Buddhists and Jaina) followed the same texts in administering justice, conducting warfare against the invaders and maintaining internal peace. Venugopal further observes that the two ancient systems of Indian philosophy – *Vaisheshika* and *Samkhya* were highly ratiocinative. They laid the foundations for developments in Indian science. Alburini, the Persian scholar, described in detail India's developments in science, mathematics and astronomy in the 10th century AD. This clearly shows that Indian religions have not opposed science which is a secular activity. The Indian constitution (1951) has not seen any contradiction between religion and secularism. Both types of activities are legitimate in India. All people of India have freedom of worship; only condition is that one religious group should not interfere in the religious life of another group. However, in the recent years the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim militant groups have not only arisen but have also disturbed the social harmony. It has led to the politicization of religion. These tensions and problems have been more fully analyzed in his paper.

Taking this debate to a higher level Ananta Kumar Giri in his paper "The Politics of Religion and the Complex Spirituality of Religious Encounters and Co-Realizations: The Multiverse of Hindu Engagement with Christianity in India" discusses the complexity of spiritual quest and border-crossing dialogues in India. It discusses the multiverse of engagement between Hindus and Christians and the plural streams of co-walking, contradictions and confrontations. It discusses the complex histories of encounters between Hindus and Christians and also discusses the inter-religious dialogues undertaken by religious leaders, reformers and common people from both the traditions.

While Hindu-Muslim encounters and interrelationships and also the questions of Muslim identity have almost continuously been talked about and examined by the social scientists in India, much less attention has been paid to the construction of Sikh identity. Paramjit S. Judge in his paper "Community within Community: Politics of Exclusion in the Construction of Sikh Identity" examines the construction of religious identity among the Sikhs from the socio-historical perspective. It has been argued that the Sikh identity was constructed as a result of the colonial intervention in which the emphasis turned to the appearance instead of faith as such. The new identity was a product of the politics of the times and it was perpetuated in order to maintain the hegemonic domination. Sikhism, despite its egalitarian ideology, failed to create a casteless community. Discrimination and exclusion of lower castes continued. An empirical investigation into the conditions and perceptions of the lowest caste, namely Mazhabi clearly demonstrated their exclusion, whereas discourse of equality among the Sikhs is used to create a moral community. Despite the equality of worship among the Sikhs, the Mazhabis at the local level are denied the equal religious rights in the *gurdwaras* (Sikh temple) owned and controlled by the upper dominant castes. Judge suggests that the roots of the exclusion have to be located in the history of

the making of the religious community and the way a few castes after benefiting from religious conversion perpetuated the caste-based exclusions.

While the paper by Judge focused on the construction of Sikh identity, the paper by Ashish Saxena and Vijaylaxmi Saxena on "Religious Landscape, Low Caste Hindus and the Identity Politics: Configuration of Socio-Religious Space for Weaker Sections in Jammu City, J&K (India)" focuses on low caste Hindus and the identity politics. Their paper explores the spatial expansion of subaltern groups in urban setting; socio-religious mobility among lower caste Hindus and the creation of sacred and secular space vis-à-vis higher Hindu caste groups in a sacred traditional Indian city. The broader findings of their paper reflect the creation of religious spaces and also the lower caste Hindu identity assertion through these places. The modern forces and the pace of urbanization had diluted the air-tight compartmentalized segregation of the weaker section and paved them way for secular living with the other high caste groups. They hold that it had not only brought democratic dwelling space but also provided them dignity with the new level of assertion.

It can hardly be overemphasized that the questions of identity of the various groups of people based on religion, caste, community, and even gender have become a focal point of many sociologists and other social scientists while dealing with the questions of politics and religion in contemporary India. Ajay Choudhary in his paper "Buddhist Identity: A Case Study of Buddhist Women's Narratives in Nagpur City" focuses on a much less examined and explored area of research. He has examined Buddhist women's identity in the broader context of Buddhist identity. Chaudhary holds that Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism had succeeded to a great extent in providing a new respectable identity to many. Yet the status of Buddhist women, among the Buddhist community, remained the most unexamined part of this conversion. His paper tries to examine whether the Buddhist identity succeeded to provide a sense of self respect and equal status to Buddhist women or what extent the Buddhist identity stood able to replace their stigmatized identity in public sphere by investigating the narrative provided by the Buddhist women about their own identity.

Going beyond the complex interface between politics and religion, the paper by Ramanuj Ganguly "Social Dynamics in a Religious Milieu: The *Sevayats* of the Jagannath Temple at Puri" mainly focuses on the *Sevayats* of one of the oldest and most prominent temple i.e. Jagannath temple at Puri, who are the ritual functionaries of the temple. Ganguly informs us that the *Sevayats* have survived and emerged as the most faithful and the truest upholders of this enigmatic religious tradition for around nine centuries in the face of social, economic and political ups and downs. His paper tries to describe in today's context, their socio-economic status, their view about themselves and the temple, and their position in the temple and the society. His paper is not intended to provide a historical account of the temple, nor does it try to analyse the temple as a whole. Looking at the

broader society the paper tries to establish the linkages between the *Sevayats* and the greater society, and how the *Sevayats* are responding to the broader forces of change. The focus is on the nature of the changing organisation and functioning of the *Sevayats*, where the past has been used only as a point of reference.

The paper by Susan Visvanathan “Sacred Rivers: Energy Resources and People’s Power” is a good mix of how several important aspects of life – the socio-religious, the secular and the economic, as well as the legal and political – can merge and interplay with each other in the broader context of a sacred river which can meet people’s energy requirements. Her paper is primarily concerned with the way energy requirements in the last three decades have seen a response from local communities who wish to express their love and longing for traditional occupations. Agriculture is a multi-faceted representation, and riverine civilizations have epitomized the relation between land, labor and production not just as a relation with technology and culture, but also in terms of the symbols of the sacred. With large scale over utilization of resources and a lack of vision, the rivers are polluted. People’s movements draw on the work of scientists and those working in the Arts, including the Humanities and the Social Sciences to draw attention to the way in which petitions and protests communicate that politics is not merely about imposing ‘the good vision from above’ but is an interplay between the political, the legal, the socio-religious, the secular and the economic. In a democracy, politics is essentially about dialogue, and the rate of industrialization may well be mediated by the power of the greens and environment movements, which have learnt their lessons from genocide of peasantry and tribals, and the mass exploitation of the resources of nature. Susan Visvanathan has attempted to document some of the shifts and evolving positions in this ongoing debate in India.

It is not only a matter of honor for me to be associated with *Politics and Religion* but also a matter of satisfaction and pride that India is drawing renewed attention of the international community of sociologists and other scholars. I do hope that this special issue of the journal will provide better understanding of society, polity and religion and their interface in India, and also generate further interest among overseas scholars to study Indian society.

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