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The Nasadiya Temper: The Road To Genuine Pluralism

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The recent controversy over Islamic cartoons in Europe is once again testing the boundaries of religious tolerance. Most Hindus, of course, believe that they are tolerant and trace their broadmindedness to their many gods. Some even insistently ask: how did our tolerant pluralism turn into the intolerance of Hindutva? Wendy Doniger's perceptive essay may not answer that question but it does point us in the right direction; it teaches that Hindu pluralism is complex, layered and there may not be a direct connection between intellectual and social pluralism.

Hindu pluralism is grounded in the Rig Veda, Prof. Doniger tells us, and it may well have originated in the charming humility of the Nasadiya verse (10.129). By the time that this unassuming outlook is enshrined in the famous "Neti, neti" ("Not this, not that") of the Upanishads, the seeds of monistic certainty have been firmly planted. And the modest openness of neti becomes a "submerged form of intellectual imperialism" when we come to Shankara. A belief in the unity of brahman and atman may lead to a belief in the unity of all persons but it does not necessarily lead to a respect for all viewpoints, as the argumentative followers of Shankara and Ramanuja will testify. Thus, social pluralism doesn't always follow from intellectual pluralism.

The most tolerant person I knew was my grandmother. She used to visit the Sikh gurdwara on Mondays and Wednesdays, a Hindu temple on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She saved Saturdays and Sundays for discourses of holy men, including Muslim faqirs, who were forever visiting our town in pre-partition Punjab. In between these stops she had lots of time for Arya Samaj ceremonies when anyone was born, married, or died. Since I was four and unemployed, I became her constant companion in her religious adventures. My practical uncle explained that she was merely taking out insurance, in the manner of Blaise Pascal, hoping that someone up there would take note.

Was she a social, intellectual or an eclectic pluralist in Prof. Doniger's helpful classification? She was certainly an intellectual pluralist--she was comfortable with plural deities and multiform truths. This did not automatically make her a social pluralist, however, because she thought that my mother's Muslim and Christian college friends were "unclean", and she didn't dare allow them into her kitchen. She would qualify as an eclectic pluralist as well--she held diverse beliefs of several religions in her head simultaneously and conjured them when needed from her "tool box".

Another example will show that intellectual and social pluralism are not necessarily related. When studying to be an engineer, my father was drawn to a kindly guru, who taught him the power and glory of direct union with God through meditation. The guru was a Radhasoami sant in the syncretic, bhakti tradition, and he used to quote liberally from Kabir, Nanak, Rumi, and Mirabai. Thus, my father abandoned the polytheism of santana dharma, joined the guru and became a monotheist. He believed, like Gandhi, that there was only one God who went under different names, and who could be reached through different paths which were equally valid. Yet, when pushed, he would have claimed that his mystical path of bhakti meditation was superior to the polytheism

of his ancestors. In this sense he was less intellectually plural than my eclectically plural grandmother. But socially he was more plural since he lacked any feeling for hierarchy or caste.

The problem, as Wendy Doniger has ably pointed out, is that when I speak with certainty about my beliefs, I cannot help but suggest that what I believe in is superior. I secretly want you to renounce your opposing view and accept mine. Hence, all such statements are attempts at conversion. Here lies the leap from tolerance to intolerance. What stops one from trying to convert others is good manners. Fundamentalists lack these and take the further leap and threaten death.

The source of Hindutva's intolerance, or for that matter any fundamentalist's bigotry, lies in politics and it is futile to seek answers in belief. All fundamentalists are insecure, and seem to take an excessive interest in others. They would do well to see Wendy's favorite film, Bambi. In it is a rabbit named Thumper, whose mother asks him, "Thumper, what did your father say?" Thumper replies, "If you can't say something good about a person, don't say anything at all." Islamic, Hindu and Christian fundamentalists ought to consider joining Thumper's School of Social Harmony. They might also consider following Albert Camus' sensible advice: "To be happy one must not be too concerned with others."

It seems to me that the answer to genuine social pluralism lies in the unassuming Nasadiya temper of the open-minded seeker in the Rig Veda. It is close to the temper of an agnostic, a luxury that being Hindu allows me.

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Many Gods,Many Paths:Hinduism and Religious Diversity

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I am a Hindu, but a non-practicing one. I am not too sure of my belief in the Deity, yet a few months back I had a "Sakshatkar" a mystic realization of a sort. This was it: God is the "Unconscious". This happened while I was examining one of my successful stories, how it came to be written and so on. I found it was almost as if it was pre-written. "In the beginning was its end"; something on those lines. I can't express it any better. I also believe in working of "I Ching", I have found it uncanny as an oracle and most wise in its advice. (I Ching-Richard Wilhelm translation from the Mandarin, English rendering by Cary F. Bayens with C.G. Jung's forward). I have a very great regard for the Kabbalah too. Now coming however to the religious clap-traps, I have always felt that instead of following chimeras evoked by high flying swamis, mullahs, prelates and such, if the basic teachings of the Buddha, Christ, Freud, Marx and Darwin or at least of one of them i.e the Buddha are grasped and followed to whatever extent one can the world could be a bit better place. The Buddha teaches Karuna, Pradnya and Sheel i.e Compassion, Understanding, and Character, almost the same as in the Fable of the Thunder in Bhrihad-Aranyaka Upanishad; Da!Da! Da! Datta, Damayata, Dayadhvam, i.e give, control, and empathize. Now coming to Dr. Doniger's article, I find it a most complete one. Let me take up a point she has made, about Golwalkar. India is a fast changing and Golwalkars are fading pictures. People are much more aware than ever before. After the Babri Masjid fiasco both BJP and the RSS got a bashing of their lives. Remember that in all the states where the BJP ruled, their governments were dismissed and in the fresh elections that took place they lost and Congress came to power! The Babri episode will haunt the BJP for ever! For in India, no political can reach to Delhi unless it accepts India's multi-culture and plural reality. Sometime back I had told a few friends in the BJP that unless they admit more Muslims and Dalits they can never reach the center, and this is already happening! The BJP is already distancing it self from the Rss it self is now speaking of taking the Muslims in their fold! A few days back a Rss stalwart openly praised Sonia Gandhi and suggested a central government of Congress-BJP combine. Coming to Dr. Doniger's main thesis I feel she has taken greater cognizance of what I shall call the Hieratic Hinduism i.e Vedanta etc, the Scholastic part of Hinduism rather than the demotic one followed by over 95% of Hindus. This Hinduism means polytheism with capital P, animism with capital A. A reading of late Arun Kolatkar's remarkable English poem, "Jejury" will make this clear to Western readers. This is people's Hinduism

of day to day. Every born Hindu has a family deity, the Kuldevata which is of greater significance to her/him than the regular big Gods- the Trimurti. So also Shri Ganesha, Vittal, Hanuman, Tirupati Balaji, Rama, Gopal Krishna, Vaisnav Devi have very great general following. Every deity including the Kuldevatas have their festivals which are observed with great fervor. They Utsavs, there are jatras. Among them The Durga Puja, The Ganesh Chaturthi, Diwali, Shiv Ratri, Gokul Ashtami and Holi. I would invite Dr. Doniger and the whole Divinity School to join us in some of them. Let's start with Holi!

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