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Religion, Gender and the Postcolonial Crisis of the Present: Reflections on and from India

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The paper explores the crisis in modernity's incapacity to address the Other in various overlapping domains, those of 'religion', 'woman', 'tradition' and 'non-western societies'. It argues that this incapacity, intrinsic to the very construction of modernity, has seriously weakened secular modern emancipatory projects not only in the west, but within countries like India. In India, projects strong among Indian intellectuals, such as feminism, secularism and socialism, face a crisis in their capacity to oppose the rise of Hindu religious nationalism. The paper explores the weaknesses in these projects particularly in their understanding of human agency, through a detailed examination of the way religion has been constructed in modern understandings of belief, ritual, choice and tradition.

This paper is dedicated to addressing an ongoing crisis in modernity in its inability to converse with the Other, let alone develop a way of living with the Other. In this paper I will discuss this crisis as one that is intrinsic to the way in which modernity has constructed its own identity, in a series of interconnected distinctions and forms of difference. I will deal with three of these overlapping constructions, which are central to modernity: religion, women, and non-western societies. All three have formed part of the discursive archive through which modernity has defined itself against the so-called traditional. Through a series of overlapping oppositions, modernity comes to view itself as primarily rational, owing little to societies outside a self sufficient Europe, effecting a definitive break from a universe governed by religion. Reason, although covertly embodied in the male body, is understood as the cultivation of a mental faculty, as above the body.

The traditional, by default, comes to be understood not only as the opposite of rationality, but by extension, of human agency itself – as that which must be repeatedly superseded in acts of innovation. Instead of being recognised as an attribute of all human existence, agency comes to be defined in ways that are unique to a European heritage. This is Charles Taylor, reflecting on what he describes as the modern construction of agency.

What is striking about persons, therefore, is their ability to conceive different possibilities, to calculate how to get them, to choose between them, and thus

to plan their lives.... Choice is properly choice in the light of clear evaluation. To the human capacities thus conceived, the power of clear and distinct representation is obviously central... what makes an agent a person, a fully human respondent, is this power to plan. (1985:105).

Taylor describes the ideal of freedom as one of *disengagement*, one that valorises the ability to act on one's own, without outside interference. While this view is by no means the only tradition that has shaped modern views of agency, I have highlighted it because of its prominence in colonising Europe's detection of 'un-freedom' in 'traditional' societies such as India.

Religion, as that which is palpably *not* about disengagement, and which cannot necessarily be understood in terms of 'choice' and 'innovation', comes to be understood as the very opposite of freedom and even of agency. Yet modernity's constructions cannot be understood within its own terms. For all the revolutionary fervour and self-representation of its ideals as pure innovation, modernity's ideals owe much to traditions that are inherited rather than constructed entirely anew and afresh. Paradoxically, some of these traditions necessarily include the very religious traditions that are ostensibly being broken with. As Taylor points out, the ideal of the modern free subject is itself implicitly sustained by deep religious traditions in the west. The aspiration for disengagement is one which harks back to Greek and Christian roots, older desires 'to rise above the merely human, to step outside the prison of the peculiarly human emotions, and to be free of the cares and the demands they make on us.' (1985:112). As Louis Dumont explored over a lifetime of reflexive meditations, ideals such as western individualism stretch all the way back to early Christian ideals of adult individual choice, enacted in adult baptism (Dumont, 1986).

Charles Taylor goes on to add that the aspiration to rise above the merely human is 'an aspiration which also has analogous forms in Indian culture, and perhaps, indeed, in all human cultures.' (1985:112). The analogy can only be sustained by abstracting from the politics of colonialism. While India certainly has ascetic and metaphysical traditions that aspire to the transcendence of *moksha* (salvation), they have only entered into Indian modernity in the context of complex negotiations and contestations between colonial and nationalist constructions of Indian tradition. What is lost in this process is the very possibility of describing Indian modernity in the terms Taylor employs to describe western modernity, namely, as 'a novel variant of [a] very old aspiration' (Taylor 1985:113). Instead, the colonial basis for modernity was instituted on the construction of a *lack* or deficiency in the existing native society. The perception that native society was based on fundamentally religious principles was not simply an Orientalist construction of India, it was also, as Said's critique has elaborated, the basis for constructing 'the native' as fundamentally backward.

We can glimpse the difference made by the colonial construction of 'tradition' in the term 'communalism'. In Australia the term communal is innocuous, meaning community, and studies of inter-communal relations in this

university are understood to be a study of relations between communities. The fact that these communities are defined in Australia as relations between ethnic groupings (as in the Centre for Inter-communal studies at University of Western Sydney) itself calls for deconstruction. But in India the term is used for *religion*, and for what is understood as a fundamental pathology in Indian social structure. Communalism refers to inter-religious relations, and is always already infused with a dangerous pathology. Community is understood as fundamentally religious in structure, and communities defined by a religious essence are understood to be entirely unable to do anything but periodically come into violent conflict with one another. In his work on the colonial construction of communalism, Gyan Pandey (1992) explores a whole elaborate discourse that emerged as the pretext for surveillance on native propensities for communal conflict. As community was understood as religious, so all conflict became understood as religious.

As a result of this orientalist construction of India, at least one Indian intellectual response has been to seek alternative explanations for violence in economic and class conflict. The secular Left has tended to point to the many instances where peasants, whether Hindu or Muslim, rose up against landlords. In the post-Independence era, a consistent antidote to Orientalist understandings of communalism has been sought in economic and class conflicts as the real root of religious violence (cf. Engineer, 1995). Yet a casualty of this understandable response on the part of left, secular and socialist intellectuals in India has been the lack of resources with which to understand the participation of subaltern groups in religious movements. Within the perspective just outlined, these forms of participation can only be understood as misguided forms of action, blinded by ideology as to the nature of their true class interests.

The dilemma I refer to is not confined only to socialists in India, but also extends to the closely related politics of the women's movement in India – a movement Penny Magee was particularly interested in and followed keenly. Feminism in India – and India is one of the few countries where the term has traveled well (cf. John, 1996, Ram and Kauanui, 1998) and not been rejected by all as a purely western term – has understood itself to have a monopoly on mobilising female agency. The underlying assumption at some very fundamental level that was seldom made explicit until recently, is that the traditional social structure can only victimise women, requiring the intervention of modern forces such as feminist analysis and action, to introduce female agency into the picture. The assumption has a long history, going back to the way in which colonial agendas in India framed the un-freedom of women as the mark of a lesser civilisation, one not yet ready to exercise self government. This representation of the liberation of female agency from indigenous patriarchy as requiring the intervention of the (post) colonial state is a widespread one in the postcolonial world, whether in state programs of family planning and population control (Jolly, 2001:21, Ram, 2001), western interventions in the politics of countries such as Afghanistan, or in activist

programs of empowerment, although there are many distinctions to be drawn between such initiatives.

The involvement of women in the Hindu nationalist initiatives has proved a resounding challenge to this fundamental assumption in the Indian women's movement. There have been large numbers of women actively defending and marching on behalf of *sati* in the 1980s (Kumar, 1993), helping to demolish the Muslim mosque Babri Masjid in 1991, and participating as active members of militant Hindu organisations. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Bhutalia introduce one of the first explorations of *Women and the Hindu Right* (1995) with reflection on the intimate dimensions of the crisis:

Politically and methodologically this assertive participation in right wing campaigns, pulled many of our assumptions into a state of crisis for we have always seen women as victims of violence rather than its perpetrators and we have always perceived their public, political activity and interest as a positive liberating force. For we need to understand what we are faced with. For we do have before us a large-scale movement among women of the right who bring with them an informed consent and agency, a militant activism. If they are imbued with false consciousness then that is something that includes their men as well and if they are complicit with a movement that will ultimately constrain themselves as women, then history is replete with examples of women's movements that foreground issues other than or even antithetical to women's interests. (Sarkar and Bhutalia, 1995: 3-4)

The most frequent diagnosis of this crisis is that the key categories of modernity have been taken over and appropriated by the Hindu Right (cf. Kapur and Cossman, 1996, Kumar, 1993). Categories such as majoritarian democracy are used by the Hindu nationalists as a justification for Hindu electoral supremacy, in a manner closely resembling the mobilisation of white supremacy in Australia by the One Nation party. Similarly in India, the phenomenon of female public activism has been appropriated as a feature of Hindu militancy.

That such appropriation has occurred is true – however, the responses to the crisis necessarily need to be varied and far ranging. Within India, the responses from feminists have been critical of the categories of modernity to varying degrees (see for example Sarkar and Bhutalia, 1995, Kapur and Cossman, 1996, but also Joseph, 1998). In what follows I will argue that the categories of the Enlightenment stand in the way of a more genuine understanding not only of Indian experience, but of human experience more generally. I focus on a reconstruction of what we mean by 'agency'. In the colonial and post-colonial context, where agency has been constructed in opposition to religion, and where religion is assumed to be at the core of tradition itself, a reconstruction of agency necessarily takes us into the domain of reconstructing our understandings of religion. In taking this approach I differ somewhat from the critiques of Orientalism, which have concentrated on showing that tradition does not necessarily consist simply of religion but of state power and politics as well (see for example Dirks, 1987). These critiques have sought to show that the Indian past

is not static, but dynamic and changing. However, they tend to leave intact the construction of religion as static, looking instead to the pre-colonial states as the motor and engine of change and dynamism. Applied to the present, this stance does little to shed light on the mass participation of subaltern groups in religious nationalism except by once again reducing the phenomenon to the state as the principal actor. By contrast, I wish to argue that weaknesses of the secular-left and its construction of religion as its Other need to be addressed in order to understand why other political forces are more successful at mobilising millions in the name of religion.

Religion as lived experience, and the categories inherited from the Enlightenment: ‘beliefs’ versus ‘customs, rituals and practices’.

In the rest of this lecture I will be concerned particularly with the way that the Enlightenment-based constructions of religion have contributed to a thorough going misrepresentation of the way human beings fundamentally *live* religion. In particular I am concerned with the carving up of religion into components that replicate the more fundamental division between mind and body: the category of ‘beliefs’ against which are clustered ‘customs, rituals, practices’.

In his *Genealogy of Religion* (1993), Talal Asad is particularly concerned with the de-legitimisation of religion as a public, *shared* phenomenon. In this context he argues that it was on the basis of a privatised representation of religion that eighteenth century Europe was able to dismiss religion as inadequate and unable to provide for a common morality or a public language of rational criticism. Central to this privatised representation of religion, is the category of ‘*belief*’.

Once again, this privatisation is not entirely the work of modernity. Rodney Needham points to the centrality of the category of belief in the Christian tradition:

The opening words of the Christian confession of faith, the Creed, define the ‘interior state’ of the adherent by the declaration ‘I believe in God’.
(1972:20)

However, pre-Enlightenment Christianity also included theological traditions of faith which actually worked in favour of the unprovable. In the context where the object of belief is not the world but God and his miracles, notably the miracle of Resurrection, then the very absence of conventional forms of justification in terms of truth criteria works as a marker of the uniqueness of religious belief – it enters the realm of *faith*:

Aquinas argued that belief (or faith) is superior to reason because it is an assent to a transcendental truth, and that by definition to believe (*credere*) is to believe in what is true; if its object is not true, it cannot be faith. (Lopez, 1998:23).

By contrast, the Enlightenment brings with it a version of 'beliefs' as so many constructs held in the mind of the believer, and further, as constructs that have been *consented* to by the believer. In a study of the English Enlightenment, Harrison (1990) traces the transformations wrought by Calvin and the Protestants fighting against the 'Popishness' and paganism of Catholicism. In this context, the emphasis on belief becomes translated into Christianity as a *core of belief statements* entertained and agreed to by the believing and consenting subjects:

In the highly charged atmosphere of post-Reformation controversy, creeds were statements in which expression was given not only to what was thought to be central to Christian belief, but also to those beliefs which distinguished this or that branch of Christianity from other heretical or erroneous forms. The perceived need for explicit knowledge together with the reframing of articles of belief led to the publication of numerous summaries and catechisms based on the Protestant confessions. These were essentially pedagogical tools designed to instil into the believer the essence of the Christian Religion. (Harrison, 1990:20).

In this Protestant version, religion becomes entirely a matter of interiorised mental states, whether as beliefs or as systematic creeds that can be held in the mind and agreed to or dissented from. Such a version of religion was contrasted favorably with the outward formalistic ritual bound nature of Catholicism. Yet it also counted for *less* than knowledge:

In philosophical literature, belief has often been portrayed as a mental state of assent to a proposition already contained in the mind, although the nature of this assent has been much debated. For Hume, belief is 'nothing but a more vivid and intense conception of any idea.' Belief is often portrayed as weaker than knowledge, since one may believe something that is either factually true or false, whereas knowledge only knows what is true. In Kant's terms in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, belief is a judgement that is subjectively sufficient but objectively insufficient. Thus, knowledge has sometimes been defined as 'justified true belief'. (Lopez, 1998:22)

A central core of religion thus comes to be equated with ideational content in the mind of the believer which is either supported or not supported by evidence. In anthropology, according to Needham, belief plays an unchallenged and central role in the characterisation of religion:

In social anthropology, the definition of religion conventionally includes belief as an indispensable component: eg. Durkheim defines it as a 'unified system of beliefs and practices'; Radcliffe-Brown thinks that the most satisfactory definition of religion is that it consists of 'a belief in a great moral force of power' and Geertz in an elaborate redefinition of religion, even has it that religious performances are 'not only models of what they [the participants] believe, but also models for the believing of it.' (1972:21)

I have come to describe this as the *mentalist* conception of religion. Mentalism is as troubling as biologism, indeed it forms the other part of what is

really a doublet. Yet it has received far less attention in contemporary critique than the biologism of the body. In popular critiques of medicalisation, “belief” plays the automatic part of the preferred alternative to biologism. Followers of ‘alternative’ therapies have little alternative but to frame their allegiance in terms of mentalism. Yet beliefs, with their reliance on a subject who is framed entirely by his or her state of consciousness, locks the believer into mental states that are quite separate from the world about which the believer entertains beliefs. In a world where science has rendered the world knowable in terms of reliable ‘evidence’, the believer who entertains non-scientific beliefs is doubly isolated from the world.

I have already stated that mentalism forms one part of a doublet, the other half of which refers entirely to the body. We do not need to go outside of religion to encounter this bifurcation. The other categories through which religions came to be classified – customs, rituals and practices, - all bear the mark of being the inferior remainder of the valued half of mentalism. The remainder emerges drained of a mental dimension, as well as of the most highly valued mental state of all, that of consent. Instead, it is understood primarily as the domain of bodily practices, performed in conformity to an authority that is not internal like the mind, but external, located in the rules and prescribed authority of institutional religious authority and tradition.

In his examination of the concept of ‘ritual’, Asad (1993:55ff) finds the following successive understandings:

- 1771 Encyclopaedia Britannica: refers to a book that directs the order and manner to be observed in celebrating religious ceremonies;
- 1797 (third edition): adds ancient heathens to those who possess rituals
- 1910 (eleventh edition): a much more elaborated definition drawing in references to the work of anthropologists such as Tylor, Lang, Frazer etc.; includes evolutionist assumptions. Asad finds a shift from the notion of a script to ritual as a type of behaviour that symbolizes or expresses something.

Applied to colonised societies like India, such representations were even more elaborated and consequential, forming part of the scientific and administrative understanding of India. The Ethnographic Survey of India was incorporated as part of the census operations from 1901 onwards (Robb, 1995). The ‘27 point format’ drawn up in 1885 by HH Risley for the ethnographic survey of India bifurcates the investigation of India along the lines of the bodily and the cultural. The body to be investigated was the racialised body of anthropometry while the ‘cultural’ component investigates customs, manners, beliefs, habitation and so on. *Both* components shared the racialist premises of evolutionary science. Anthropometry brings to a climax the transposition of the physical sciences on to the social world with measurements of the ‘nasal index’ used by Risley to distinguish between ‘Aryan’ and ‘Dravidian’ physiques, and in turn relate them to social status in the caste hierarchy (‘...it is scarcely a paradox to lay down as a law that a man’s social

status varies in inverse ratio to the width of his nose'). The ethnographic questionnaire and its categories drawn up by a committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1874 was heavily influenced by EB Tylor who had just published *Primitive Culture* in 1871. The questionnaire method of bureaucratically inspired questions was soon found to be inadequate if theorists were to 'reach the theological stratum in the savage mind' – inquirers were urged rather to watch 'religious rites actually performed, and then to ascertain what they mean' (cited Stocking, 1992). The traditions of scientific field work in turn shaped traditions of anthropology undertaken by Indians, which also began very early, as with the work of AK Iyer who conducted ethnographic surveys of the princely states of Cochin, Mysore and Travancore (Ram forthcoming).

Ethnographic surveys divide along the mentalist and bodily components, not once but repeatedly. We have anthropometry as the bodily component juxtaposed to religion as cultural component. In turn, religion breaks down into mentalist and bodily components. If beliefs reduce social practice to the entirely *mindful* subject, then the notion of rituals and customs denotes a *mindless* submission to an externally directed, prescribed form of practice. In Durkheim, rituals and rites are not devoid of agency – indeed, they are the very core of the creation of a shared and emotionally charged sense of collective belonging. Nevertheless, the division between the interior and privatised world of beliefs and the shared, bodily and emotional world of rites continues to shape the discourse.

Ritual practice is thus reduced to routines that are as public as beliefs are interior, as bodily as beliefs are mental, as directed from without as beliefs are a matter residing within the subject. These antinomies between bodily submission and mindful attention, between stabilising functions and conscious change, between body and mind, are not evenly balanced – the former is in each case the lesser term in the construction of modernity.

This hierarchy is made clear in the evolutionary classification in which ritual is more primitive than myth, sacred lore, and doctrine. The 1910 entry of the Encyclopaedia Britannica states that in primitive religion it is ritual that generates and sustains myth. The rigidity associated with ritual continues to be posited even within the highest religions, designated as the component that signifies the dogmatism of doctrine (cited Asad, 1993:59.)

These meanings enter into the reform and critique of tradition within India as well as its defence and valorisation. Attempts at defending 'Hinduism' strengthened this understanding rather than departing from it. For example, groups such as the Theosophists, particularly popular among Brahmin circles in Madras in the late nineteenth century because of their Sanskritised understanding of Hinduism, defended a universal brotherhood of religions on the basis of affinities they found between Theosophy on the one hand, and a Sanskritised Hinduism and Buddhism on the other. These affinities were discovered, however, by proceeding from Christian formulations of Hinduism and Buddhism. For instance, Colonel Olcott, one of the founders of the Theosophical movement made an influential

effort at representing Buddhism as a catechism. *The Buddhist Catechism*, based on English translations of the Buddhist texts, is based on several key assumptions: that there is a core canon of basic beliefs (four noble truths, eightfold path); second, that these beliefs are a moral philosophical core corrupted by the accretions of popular superstitions (*Catechism Question 186: "Are charms, incantations, the observance of lucky hours and devil dance a part of Buddhism? Answer: They are positively repugnant to its fundamental principles. They are surviving relics of fetishism and pantheistic and other foreign religions."*). (Lopez, 1998:30-31).

An influential review of the anthropology of ritual by Catherine Bell (1992) attempts to resolve a pervasive association of ritual with the devalued category of action (as against thought) by referring to ritual as practice rather than as action. She argues for shifting our attention to strategies of ritualisation rather than focussing on ritual as an independent existing object. Ritualisation, in her view, produces 'practical knowledge' and 'the ability to deploy, play and manipulate basic schemes in ways that appropriate and condition experience effectively.' (1992:221). I have much sympathy with this view. However, unless the dilemmas posed by representing ritual are resolved, the same problems will haunt the way we conceive of 'practice'. Both ritual and practice are linked as the other side of the doublet that gives us mentalism. This is made even clearer by the 1910 entry of the Encyclopaedia Britannica which likens ritual to *habit*:

Ritual is to religion what habit is to life, and its rationale is similar, namely that by bringing subordinate functions under an effortless rule it permits undivided attention in regard to vital issues...Just as the main business of habit is to secure bodily equilibrium...so the chief task of routine in religion is to organize the activities necessary to its stability and continuance as a social institution. (cited Asad, 1993:57)

The comparison is significant. Not only ritual, but habit, has been reduced in the process of the comparison. Habit is represented as that zone of daily life where the body takes over from the mind, where rules take over from the choosing subject. It is no coincidence that this is also the one zone of existence where the role of the past in shaping the present is not to be denied. The choice of habit as the closest comparison to ritual in religion is therefore telling. It is as if this opening on to the past can only be understood in terms of a servitude to the past, a point where the choosing mindful subject ceases to be.

At the heart of the failure to characterise both ritual and habit is the exclusivity of the inter-related choices we are offered: either the past or the present, either the mind or the body, either consent or submission. If we are to rescue the construction of the past from these forms of reductionism, the categories have to be re-formulated not in isolation, but as part of an inter-related complex. Re-inserting or re-interpreting one category will not suffice. A recent stimulating attempt by Gauri Viswanathan (1998) to rescue the agency of Indians converting to Christianity in the colonial period, concentrates its efforts on restoring the inner convictions and beliefs of converts in order to balance existing explanations that

reduce conversion in India to various material and 'external' non-religious group considerations such as upward mobility for lower caste groups. Such a focus on belief is particularly salient in the context of representations of conversion from the Hindu Right, where conversion as a response to external inducements is easily dismissed as a mere veneer for an unchanged Hindu interior. Yet unless we resist the reduction of religion to inner mental states, and seek to simultaneously reformulate allied terms such as what is 'external' and 'material', we will not have an adequate vision of religion.

Conclusion: agency and the lived present

I have concentrated in this presentation on religion, and its misconstructions. The practical effects of these misconstructions are constantly felt – as when secularism is understood to mean signs of religion should not erupt in the public sphere, even if it be a head scarf on a Muslim girl's head at a state school. Evidently, such a version of religion could only be maintained by reducing religion to the sphere of purely internal beliefs, where the body bears no visible mark of membership in a religious community.

However, the stake is ultimately higher than a correct understanding of religion. A notion of the past either as something to be consented to and mentally entertained ('beliefs'), or as something which, to the extent that we do *not* consent to it, *dominates* us as an externally imposed set of rules and bodily practices ('habits', 'rituals'), denies us the tools with which to build either a satisfactory explanation of the present or a vision of the future. To the extent, then, that we move more closely into the phenomenology of experiences such as ritual and habit, I suggest we come a little closer to illuminating the wider domain of subjectivity. For modern reductionisms are not conjured up out of thin air. Both ritual and habit *do* involve a certain surrender of choice. Ritual is not interested in the flux of individual subjectivity. It requires a submission on the part of the subject. The transformative power of the ritual in life cycle ceremonies is a prime example of a social transformation of status that is achieved without any necessary element of choice being involved. The idea of acquiescence to a socially stipulated order being a *positive* act is itself a challenge to our received notions of agency. But what makes ritual even more of a challenge is that this relinquishing of authorship is not accompanied by a lack of conscious awareness. As Humphrey and Laidlor put it:

... actors in ritual are of course conscious and normally voluntary agents, and it is in this situation that ritualized acts may be apprehended and meanings may be attributed to them. The peculiar fascination of ritual lies in the fact that here, as in few other human activities, *the actors both are, and are not, the authors of their acts.* (Humphrey and Laidlor, 1994:6)

A situation where 'actors both are and are not, the authors of their act' is not unique to ritual. Trying to 'get it right' for ritual and religion can therefore help to

'get it right' for a whole range of situations that are at present confined by the categories of consent and authorship. It has direct implications for the feminist crisis that finds it near impossible to speak of the agency of women who are interpellated by identities of religion, community and ethnicity, except as victims.

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