

OXFORD INDIA PAPERBACKS

# India's Religions

Perspectives from  
Sociology and History

SECOND EDITION



*edited by*

T.N. Madan

**Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology**

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## INDIA'S RELIGIONS

'Professor T.N. Madan has mastered the voluminous literature on this subject by social scientists. In this book, he brings together selections from the most accomplished modern research on South Asia. It is both an introduction to the sociology of religion and a rich survey of Indian religions pluralism.'

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*For Cenu*

I bring what you much need, yet always have ...  
It is not to be put in a book, it is not in this book,  
it is no further from you than  
your hearing and sight ...

WALT WHITMAN

India is supposed to be a religious country above everything else ... I have frequently condemned [religion] and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation, and the presentation of vested interests. And yet I knew that there was something else in it, something which supplied a deeper inner craving of human beings.

Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (1936)

Too much dependence on supernatural factors may lead, and has often led, to a loss of self-reliance in man and to a blunting of his capacity and creative ability. And yet some faith seems necessary in things of the spirit which are beyond the scope of our physical world, some reliance on moral, spiritual and idealistic conceptions, or else we have no anchorage, no objectives or purpose in life.

Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (1946)

When the Indian progressive youth dismisses religion as opium, he is not only ignoring social facts, but [also] the historical process itself by which these have assumed the attached values.

Dhurjati Prasad Mukerji, *Modern Indian Culture* (1948)

A thoroughly post-Durkheimian society would be one in which our religious belonging would be unconnected to our national identity. It will almost certainly be one in which the gamut of such religious allegiances will be wide and varied.

Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (2003)

## Preface to the Second Edition

**I**t is now twenty years since the first of the two readers on religion which I have edited for the Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology (OIRISSA) series, *Religion in India* (1991), was published. Around that time, the USSR finally, although somewhat unexpectedly, collapsed; with it, the Marxist *belief* that religion was only an illusion, needed as a justificatory ideology by 'brutally exploitative' economic regimes (such as feudalism and capitalism in Europe) also received a mortal blow. The prophecy in ringing, almost biblical tones, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), that all that was considered 'holy' would be 'profaned', and all that seemed 'solid' would 'melt into air', has not quite been fulfilled. Capitalism has reinvented itself, and does not depend upon a particular kind of religiosity (such as the Protestant ethic) for its survival. Religion too, for good or evil, survives in the secular city, and secularism earlier regarded as the 'destiny' of modernizing societies everywhere, has come under critical scrutiny.

This new consciousness found expression in such path-breaking studies as José Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago University Press, 1994). New perspectives that explored the mutual entailment of secularism and religious fundamentalism made their appearance (see, for example, my book *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India*, OUP, New Delhi, 1997; Second Edition, 2009). *Secularism and its Critics*, edited by the political theorist Rajeev Bhargava (OUP, New Delhi, 1998), brought together some significant contributions to the debate on secularism with particular reference to India, focusing on both the limitations

and the possibilities of the concept. And the debate continues (see, for example, 'Secularism revisited: Doctrine of destiny or political ideology' in *Images of the World: Essays on Religion, Secularism, and Culture*, by T.N. Madan, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, pp.113–46).

Before the close of the century, scholars such as Peter Berger, who had in the 1960s led the way in anticipating the expanding patterns of secularization, were revising their forecasts of the futures of modernizing societies. Berger himself wrote that 'the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever' (See *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion in World Politics*, edited by Peter Berger, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 2).

In the light of the breakdown of old sociological certitudes, new perspectives on the sociology of religion and secularization have emerged in the opening years of the twenty-first century. Thus, Grace Davie rightly observes: 'The task of the sociologist shifts accordingly: for he or she is required to explain the absence of rather than the presence of religion in the modern world. *This amounts to nothing less than a paradigm shift in the sociology of religion*' (*The Sociology of Religion*, Sage Publications, London and New Delhi, 2007, p. 64, emphasis added). While the dangers of religious fundamentalism call for unremitting and rational vigilance, religious traditions are also being recognized as significant sources in combating the many contemporary threats to the very survival of humanity and the planet that is its home, such as, very notably, ecological degradation (see, for example, R.S. Gottlieb's *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006).

The point of the foregoing, necessarily brief remarks is that, while new areas of sociological research are emerging all the time, sociology of religion remains an area of the very greatest significance. In fact, developments spanning the second half of the twentieth century (including the 'counter-culture' movement in the West, Liberation Theology in Latin America, and the Iranian Revolution) have made sociological studies of religion as piety and as politics more important than ever before. Regrettably, this realization is not yet reflected in the university syllabi in India, nor in the contents of the sociology journals here. A steady output of significant research monographs by sociologists and social anthropologists keeps the interest alive, but one would like to see many more of these than what comes out.

A welcome sign of the times though is the increasing appeal of interdisciplinary research, with sociologists, cultural anthropologists, historians, and political scientists joining their minds, as it were. A most noteworthy product of such collaboration was the historian Kunal

Chakrabarati's *Religious Process: The Purāṇas and the Making of a Religious Tradition* (OUP, New Delhi, 2001). He employed the theoretical perspectives of anthropologists like McKim Marriott, Robert Redfield, Milton Singer, and M.N. Srinivas to explore the nature and consequences of the interplay of an expansive Brahmanical cultural tradition and the folkways of localized communities. There are, of course, other interdisciplinary studies covering other domains (see *Historical Anthropology* edited by Saurabh Dube, an OIRISSA volume, OUP, New Delhi, 2007). I have tried to underline the value of the interdisciplinary approach in the present reader (note the subtitle). Some more useful published material has become available since its publication in 2004 to warrant a third volume, but that will have to await another editor! I may also note in passing that contradictions inherent in evolving religious traditions as well as tensions arising from the passage of time have received some attention. For example, C.J. Fuller in *The Renewal of the Priesthood: Modernity and Traditionalism in a South Indian Temple* (OUP, New Delhi, 2003), insightfully examines the interplay of economic betterment, religious revivalism, and secular politics (Indian style).

Also noticeable is an interest in taking up epistemological and methodological issues. In a radical departure from established notions of 'reality' and their implications for the study of religious beliefs and rituals. Frédérique Apffel Marglin's book of essays, *Rhythms of Life: Enacting the World with the Goddesses of Orissa* (OUP, New Delhi, 2008), underlines the importance of questioning dominating, Western ontologies and epistemologies in clearing the cobwebs that are spread over the 'orthodox' approaches to the study of the 'religions' of the 'marginalized' communities of the world. Within the framework of the established approaches also, there is scope for promoting more nuanced methods of interpretation (see, for example, the chapters on the study of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh religious traditions in *Sociological Traditions: Methods and Perspectives in the Sociology of India*, by T.N. Madan, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2011).

I believe I should conclude these prefatory remarks to the paperback second edition of *India's Religions: Perspectives from Sociology and History*, by drawing the reader's attention to a monumental work that is at once philosophical and historical and sociological, namely Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Taylor says nothing directly about India's religious traditions or Indian secularism. The book is explicitly concerned with the Euro-Atlantic West, with the emergence of 'a secular age' there within the ambit of Latin Christianity. He is concerned with what actually happened over the *longue durée*, and not with a defence or critique of Catholicism or of Western secularism. He examines in very great detail the religious mainsprings of different phases

of the secular age in the West, and shows how it has evolved new perspectives on religiosity, and fashioned new attitudes to the relationship of the sacred and the secular: God is not dead, but resituated.

*A Secular Age* is not an easy book to read. Not only is it a very long and complex narrative ('a master narrative'), it also demands a high level of scholarship in the religious history and philosophical traditions of the West. But we must engage with it in India, for it illumines many dark areas of our assumed modern (post-religious or post-secular?) consciousness. Thus, Taylor may be said to challenge us to consider the possibility that the future in India, as in West, will not so much be marked by any large scale reversal of the general though gradual narrowing of orthodox religious belief, and of the abandonment or abridgement of religious practice, as by multiple definitions of what it means to be religious or secular (see, for example, 'Indian secularism in a post-secular age' in *Sociological Traditions* by T.N. Madan, 2011).

The countries of South Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal—are today witness to a number of experiments in working out viable arrangements which accommodate common equalitarian citizenship rights and diverse religious identities within the framework of democratic states. The universal significance of these experiments is much too obvious to require special emphasis. Although *Religion in India* does include essays on communalism, fundamentalism, and secularism, I did not include readings on these themes in the present book, primarily because of the manner in which I structured it. The concluding section did, however, bring up the issue of the interplay of religion and politics. In the second edition that is now being offered to readers, the Appendix is a recent contribution of great importance by Rajeev Bhargava on the role of religion in the evolution of the political ideologies of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' in South Asia. This essay as also the recent bibliographical references in the Preface bring this book, I hope, closer to the present time. Between them, *Religion in India* and *India's Religions* now cover scholarship spread over more than half a century (1912–2007).

May 2011

T.N. Madan

## Preface

This is a book of readings about India's major religions from the perspectives of ethnography and history. It is not concerned with general theories of any kind, whether of the psychological origin or the sociological significance of religion, except indirectly, insofar as the authors whose work is included here may have had such interests. I have not even attempted to engage with questions such as how best to define religion, or whether a universal definition is at all possible. It may not be denied that social science theories of religion (including the Marxian) are marked in a variety of ways (in some cases in contrary ways) by presuppositions about the nature and significance of religion derived from Abrahamic religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity. This need not however prove a serious handicap so long as we do not allow such presuppositions (for example, the critical importance of the idea of the godhead to the conception of religion) to predetermine what beliefs, rites, and symbols will qualify as elements of religion.

Religion in this book is not a *defining* but an *identifying* term. Essentialism is largely eschewed, and the idea of a family resemblance (in the sense that a range of common concerns are randomly present) among religious traditions is preferred. Keywords derived from one tradition may be used as cues to explore the scope of another in respect of its repertoire of beliefs and rituals, which, going by ethnographic and historical evidence, are present everywhere although not identically related. The cultural traditions represented in this volume (including Christianity and Islam in the Indian environment) allow us to suggest that there is a discourse present in each about the place of the

human being in a holistic framework that transcends but does not deny or exclude the mundane and the social. It is all a matter of relations and, at a higher (less concrete) level, of relations between relations.

A book about India's religions must obviously begin with the given dimensions of plurality as well as the ideologies of pluralism. This has been attempted in the introductory essay. In the following six parts, each beginning with prefatory remarks and comprising three readings, a number of key ideas and themes are explored. Each rubric after the first one is presented as an elaboration of those that precede it. In other words, the volume is not just a miscellany but has a structure. The epilogue returns to the themes of inter-religious understandings and syncretism.

Beginning with the concept of the sacred defined by its otherness (sacred places and performances), the book proceeds to explore how the hiatus that otherness creates may be overcome by bonding *via* piety and passion. The process of overcoming separation, or bonding, is universally facilitated by mediators of one kind or another, such as magicians, spiritual masters, or martyrs. These various aspects of the religious life are significant components of cultural traditions everywhere, which of course include other elements too. Traditions are constructed, preserved, and transmitted in a number of ways, that include the oral narrative and the literary text. This does not mean, however, that religious traditions are static. They in fact grow gradually and sometimes change radically (are transformed). This is understandable, even inevitable, because the category religious is not *sui generis*. The sacred and the secular (or profane) are, as was noted above, intertwined in principle. The manner in which these inter connections are made is the work of history. To repeat what was said earlier, it is all a matter of relations.

In an earlier book of readings, *Religion in India* (1991), which is still in print, and hopefully will remain available for some more years, I had focused on the idea of the sacred as the organizing principle. In this volume, a more comprehensive framework (described above) has been employed. Apart from the broader conceptual scope, *India's Religions* presents to readers selections from more recently published work: eleven of the eighteen readings are excerpted from books published between 1992 and 2001; three are from the 1980s and four from the 1970s. The two volumes together represent half a century of scholarly study of Indian religions by over three and a half dozen scholars, mostly social anthropologists or sociologists but including historians. Only three authors, besides myself, are common to both books.

I am pleased to have been able to include in this volume an oral narrative by an unlettered Tamil woman, presented here in English translation by an Indian and a French scholar. The study of Indian religions from social science perspectives is truly and happily a collective endeavour, and I have attempted to give recognition to this fact. The authors whose work has been included in *Religion in India* and *India's Religions* are from England, France, Germany,

India, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the USA. Limitation of space has precluded presentation of the work of many other scholars who have made valuable contributions to the field. Also regretted is the inadequate attention, for the same reason, given to folk and tribal religious traditions. I would further like to point out that the materials included in the two volumes have been drawn in all but five cases from books. The fruits of research that appear as articles in journals are inadequately represented in them.

Also absent in the volume—as stated at the very outset—is any discussion of sociological and social anthropological theories of religion. The reader will find a brief discussion of these in the introductory essay in *Religion in India*. Besides, there are many excellent books on the subject in print, ranging from older textbooks such as Brian Morris's *Anthropological Studies of Religion* (CUP, 1988) or Bryan Turner's *Religion and Social Theory* (Sage, New Delhi, 1991) to Malcolm Hamilton's *The Sociology of Religion* (Routledge, London, 1995).

This volume bears testimony to the wide appeal and richness of the study of Indian religions from the perspectives of ethnography and history. I trust readers will find it as interesting to read as I have found it to compile and edit, and extend to it the same patronage as they have done to *Religion in India*. I would like to conclude by expressing my deep gratitude to all the scholars (many of them personal friends), and their publishers, who have readily granted permission for the inclusion of their work (in edited form) in this book. I regret it is not possible to convey my thanks to A.K. Ramanujan, who did so much to bring new information and precious insights into the study of Indian folklore and religious poetry, and who sadly left us prematurely. The summer he died (in 1993), Raman was to have come to India, and we were to talk about his first translations of the *vakh* (sayings) of the fourteenth century Kashmiri Shaiva mystic poetess Lalla (via Grierson's Sanskrit renderings). Alas, that was not to be.

Finally, a word about editorial procedure. Although the readings are excerpted from book chapters or journal articles, I have made a serious effort not to interfere too much with the authors' texts unless it seemed absolutely necessary to do so. Deletions of more than a word or two have been indicated by ellipses. The omission of references or footnotes has not been noted. Additions to fill gaps in the text, and references and footnotes supplied by me, have been placed in square brackets and/or marked by asterisks. Each author's preferences in respect of italicization of words and the use of diacritics have been generally respected.

T.N. Madan

Delhi  
May 2004

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## Introduction

# India's Religions: Plurality and Pluralism

T.N. MADAN

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS. DISTRIBUTIONAL PATTERNS

If the term 'religion' may be used to refer to particular aspects of India's cultural traditions (see below), the country can be said to have long been the home of all religions that today have a worldwide presence. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, called the Indic religions, were born here. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and the Bahai faith arrived here from abroad at different points of time during the last two millennia.

The plurality of religions in India is often obscured by the fact that Hinduism is generally regarded both as the demographically dominant and the culturally characteristic, even hegemonic, religion of the country, not only in popular imagination but also by official reckoning. According to the census, four out of five Indians are Hindus, and they inhabit the length and breadth of the land. From the cultural perspective, anthropologists and sociologists have provided details of the many components of culture and aspects of the social structure of the non-Hindu communities that have either been borrowed from the Hindus, or are survivals from their pre-conversion Hindu past, with or without significant alterations.

The foregoing popular view of the cultural scene in India, buttressed by official statistics, needs to be qualified in several respects. Unlike the other religions of India, Hinduism is a federation of faiths, which has a horizontal as well as vertical distribution, rather than a single homogeneous religion. Not only do the religious beliefs and practices of Hindus vary from one