

THE SWAMI AND THE SUB-TEXT

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When a well-respected civil servant came and requested that I give the first memorial Swami Gangadharaanandhaji lecture, I hesitated, but later agreed. What seemed in the beginning to be a simple gesture toward a very kind gentlemen was to end in an important process of critical self-evaluation.

The response to the lecture, as edited and reproduced in the *Sunday Times*, was overwhelming. I received praise and also stern condemnation. The response itself forced me to ponder many questions, which in the final analysis reflect the complex state of our national and ethnic ideologies and the intensity with which we take up positions and counter positions.

In preparing the lecture, I had two simple aims. Realizing that the audience would be primarily orthodox, Tamil Hindus, I thought I would confront religious fundamentalism and 'ethnic exclusivism' by using the language and discourse of Gandhi, Tagore as well as Swami Gangadharaanandhaji. I would use the heterodox, humanistic arguments of the Hindu faith against its own intolerant manifestations. I essentially saw the project as progressive and humanist, to attack attitudes towards other ethnic groups, sexual stereotypes and caste oppression by using the discourse of Hinduism itself; to fight Hindu intolerance with Hindu traditions of pluralism.

The second aim was to discuss philosophy through the art of story-telling and anecdotes rather than by positivist analysis of principles. This would show that many of the debates are produced and reproduced in the daily lives of every individual whether we live in Sri Lanka or New York. Some friends felt that the anecdotal style had a touch of narcissistic self-aggrandisement. But then so does every biographical moment. Positivist scholarship always attempts to erase the author from the text searching for detached universal principles. But in the area of ideology and religion, the author's experience and beliefs are as important as the text. The subject is always present even in objective analysis. To accept that subjectivity and to see that your life experience conditions your political analysis is an important part of recognising the limits and contours of self-perception. For religious people

who believe in secular ideals this self-examination is even more important.

The most interesting responses in support of the article's message came from two quarters. The first was from what I would call 'the independence generation', those who were old enough to remember the Indian nationalist movement. The quotations from Gandhi and Tagore evoked a political era when everything seemed possible; when South Asia was having her "tryst with destiny", when Hindus and Tamils were not the 'other' but actually brothers and sisters fighting the British. The extent of their praise and the emotion with which it was expressed conveyed their sense of historical betrayal.

Though drawn from the English educated elite, this elite for a short period in our history had a South Asian vision and identification. By 1956, that commonality was superseded by difference; South Asian unity by ethnic demarcation, and India would move from spiritual guru to regional power. The use of Gandhian rhetoric to overcome difference was a welcome nostalgic return to an era which can never really return to a strife-torn, class besieged, post-colonial Sri Lanka. Since my childhood was filled with images, speeches and ideals drawn from this pre-independence era, their emotions had a resonance in my own thoughts. I have to realize, that I too, was deeply influenced by this period. While my leftist colleagues see 1917 and the Bolshevik victory as an important turning point, while others see 1956 and Bandaranaike as the beginning of modern Sri Lankan politics and while others see Periyar and the Justice Movement in Tamil Nadu as the significant date, for me the victory of the Indian nationalist movement was the decisive post-colonial moment and the beginning of post-colonial history.

These dates are important, because their shadows continue to haunt their disciples. The perception of what is the important historical moment conditions not only the nostalgic response but also the emotional contours of our political ideologies. Many of us have 'knee-jerk' reactions to certain political statements. Perceptions of historical moments are very important indicators as to what discourse will produce which reaction.

The second group of people who made a special attempt to call and give positive comments came from other religions; Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, i.e. those who are fighting funda-

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mentalism within their own faith, using the discourse of religious humanity against the discourse of religious intolerance. They saw this as part of the common struggle against religious fundamentalism of any sort. In some sense it is this group which best understood my motives and had sympathy for my attempts.

And yet, neither of these two supportive groupings could pacify those who saw my article as a terrible betrayal to the cause of democracy and pluralism. *How could I betray secularism with such ease? How could I be so comfortable with religious language, religious imagery and religious inspiration?* One friend actually wrote to me "From today you are a stranger. I have read your articles on law and politics, but here you have betrayed your essence...you are not a secularist, not emotionally and not in the real sense of the word. You are in fact, a part of the problem."

The critique was delivered in angry, harsh tones. But it was the truth. Religious impulse has always been second nature to me as it is to most South Asians. I never thought it was in necessary contradiction with secularism. And yet, the moment one uses the discourse of religion, even for humanistic purposes, one is ultimately compromising with secularism. Gandhi was so profoundly Hindu that despite his rhetoric of oneness, at some point, his mere being, his emotive language, must have alienated Muslims. The principles behind the Sarvodaya movement are beautiful but in the end they are so very Buddhist that other religions cannot feel completely at ease. In the case of Jatika Chintanaya, there is not even an attempt to make the other groups feel at home. Liberation theology may be progressive, but at some point the non-Christian feels the difference, the separation, the 'otherness'.

And so the Catch 22 of South Asian society. We are profoundly religious, whether we are Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Christian; that religiosity transforms itself into becoming part of our culture, our discourse, our imagery without even our recognition or awareness. When we fight intolerance using religious language, we strengthen religious importance and lessen secular values. And so we have a society of concentric circles; Buddhists speaking to Buddhists; Hindus speaking to Hindus; Muslims to Muslims and Christians to Christians. The only language and political institutions that cross this frontier are the post-enlightenment Western traditions of secularism, rooted in liberal and Marxist theory. It is the 'colonial' which finally offers us the bridges. But the mere illegitimacy of the 'colonial' makes this an unappetising enterprise. And so we

revert back to our concentric circles, searching for humanism within but at the same time strengthening the boundaries without, those which separate Buddhist from Hindu, Hindu from Christian, Christian from Muslim.

As Romila Thapar said at a recent seminar, South Asians are truly trapped. If we speak the language of secularism, we become marginalised, a cosmopolitan elite incapable of communicating with the vast majority of our people on an emotional, cultural level. If we speak the language of religion, we fragment our continent, create divisions, and separate worlds. We become unwilling accessories of the fundamentalist project.

Having said that I think back at my audience. If I had spoken to them in secular terms, if I had quoted Locke on democracy, Sadaavi on feminism and Fanon on caste, "if I had spoken of Michelangelo", they would have absorbed my speech as an "Intellectual exercise. But because I used the words of Gandhi, of a beloved Swami, of Tagore, I knew I have reached them

emotionally. Since our most chauvinist nationalist movements rest on emotion, the alternative emotional language of religious humanism is a very powerful antidote.

This cannot be underscored in these troubled times. For Sri Lankan Tamils this is especially true. The triumph of a military-nationalist culture in recent years requires or even mandates that intellectuals de-

liberately rediscover, nurture and develop the humanistic aspects of our religious and cultural tradition. It is central to the exercise of defeating ethnic intolerance and the rule of the gun.

For Tamils, there is of course another option, the secularism of linguistic nationalism of the early DMK as opposed to religious nationalism. Periyar did say "God is dead". But we cannot forget that linguistic nationalism is the direct precursor to present-day militant Tamil nationalism and their so-called "Tamil Speaking World of Goodness" has led to strident forms of ethnic chauvinism.

A call to religious humanism is therefore **not only one important antidote against Hindu fundamentalism of the BJP variety but also a voice against the narrow ethnic chauvinism coming out of Tamil linguistic nationalism.** But while appealing to this religious humanity to help us at this moment, we will perhaps see the shadows of Goethe and Dr Faustus hovering nearby, reminding us of the price we may still have to pay.

I intended to use the heterodox, humanistic arguments of the Hindu faith against its own intolerant manifestations. Members of the 'independence generation' and those who are fighting fundamentalism within their own faiths best understood my motives. But others accused me of betraying the cause of secularism and humanism.