

FUGITIVE FROM FAITHS



The opening verses of the *Rigveda* do not preach any religion, nor do they threaten the infidel. What comes across in the first few stanzas of the earliest of the Hindu texts is a people's quest for warmth, awed as they are by the overwhelmingly dark, capricious night.

*To you, dispeller of the night, Agni, day by day with prayer
Bringing you reverence, we come.*

The uncertainty of a people amidst unfamiliar circumstances seeking a little comfort and assurance from their god is poetry of unmatched quality. A while later the mood changes – the spell of fear, misgivings of the unknown replaced by cheerfulness, conviviality of tipsiness:

*Beautiful Vayu, come, for you these soma drops have been prepared:
Drink of them, listen well to our call.*

Significantly, all through the *Vedas* there are no references to temples. For the composers of such elegant lines almost betraying a modern sensibility, fire was the only means of communion with the gods above. Terrified by tyrannical dark nights, hostile forces all around, the community was still some distance away from the stability and rootedness required to raise structures of faith. The intoxicating drink of soma bringing them cheer was accorded divine status. Neither the *Vedas* nor the later texts of Hinduism acknowledge a single, male, dominant figure as the articulator of the faith, extolling him as divine. Rather, all across the scriptures we see remarkable instances of gender equality: Sita-Ram, Uma-Shankar, Radha-Krishna... Always the female deity ahead of her man. This refinement, among the texts of all religions, is unparalleled.

In Hindu iconography women have been placed in the same row as men. In the Hindu pantheon the goddesses have a rare grandeur, a spectacular presence that has not been conceded by any other religion. The hymns to Devi Chandi, borrowed largely from the *Markandeya Purana*, have a dazzling account of the goddess out to slay Mahishasura, the demon. She has been deputed by the gods to account for the Asura. In the heat of the battle, smashing the rocks hurled by the savage with her arrows, the Devi, her face flushed from intoxication, warns the monster: "Villain, you can keep roaring until I finish my drink. The moment I slaughter you, Indra and the other gods will rush here to celebrate your fall."

The sheer assertion of female prowess in this account is indicative of women's freedom. Sanskrit literature reflects a society where women were resplendent in power and glory. Those glowing characters, incandescent in their physical attributes and intelligence, would not have been possible in the absence of corroboration by social reality. Uninhibited, emancipated, unencumbered, they represented the Indian civilization at its zenith. Kalidasa's immortal creations, *Meghaduta* and *Kumarsambhavam* epitomise the adulation of feminine beauty. Some of the passages in the two masterpieces are sheer adoration of the fever and sweat of the skin, eroticism distilled to the point of art. As the messenger of the distraught lover, the cloud flies low over the city of Ujjain watching the prostitutes in a temple fanning themselves with yak tails. In an amorous mood, Shiva steals Parvathi's raiment, and scandalized, she clamps her hand on her consort's face to block his view, not knowing about his unobstructed third eye. Sage Vatsyayan's *Kama sutra* is an epiphany of love, both carnal and sublime. And Draupadi's determined assertion of her right to justice has a subtext of sexuality.

All this is our heritage, this fabled melange of solemn incantations, sublime hymns, adoration of passion and exuberant desire. This is too extravagant a text to be bowdlerized. Experts would point to the essential liberalism of Indian culture as the reason for its amazing durability. Had the Indian social mores been more restrictive, impeding spontaneous human responses to situations, Hinduism, non-militarised and without a definite structure, would have collapsed long ago, like many other ancient faiths. Within its ambience, lines are not drawn in unsparing black and white, yes and no; This tentative inchoateness has actually been its strength.

The benign face of Hinduism seems to have come in the shadow of a malignant cancer with the voices of intolerance attempting to turn the ancient religion into something it has never been. Fringe groups of ersatz Hinduism, perhaps influenced by expressions of intolerance elsewhere, have taken upon themselves the role of policing the faith. What is at stake is not just our liberal, exuberant way of life, but the very future of this ancient religion. The religious militia of dubious credentials now draw borders deciding what is good or otherwise for the faith. If we look around there will be very little doubt that the consequences of such policing could only be terrible. In Pakistan, Islamic fundamentalists have systematically targeted every expression carrying the slightest hint of diversity. The Sufi way of life, their mode of worship has come under attack from the puritanic forces. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the Islamic hardliners harassed and assaulted the Baul community denouncing their peripatetic way, censoring their communion with God through dance and music as deviation.

India which has always accommodated the diverse viewpoint, celebrated pluralism and flagged its social mosaic as the mantra for survival, is now witness to arbitrary interventions by the self-appointed guardians of the faith. They target artists, academics, writers, raising suspicions about their work. The campaign against the distinguished academic, Wendy Doniger's book, *The Hindus*, is a case in point. The book does not say anything that has not already been said. Clearly, those who were on the forefront of the campaign, have never kept track of the long line of scholarly works in this field. It is just not a question of a book; what is worrying is the fact that such philistines are going ahead with emaciating our history and mythology without authority and with impunity.

Pico Iyer's *Abandon* is a deeply moving novel woven around the pursuit of manuscripts from the liberal Islamic tradition in Iran considered endangered after the Khomeini revolution by a group of scholars in California. There is a poignant account of Islamic scholars on the run from their homeland taking the manuscripts to safety. If the despotism of the thinkpol goes unchecked, their mission of purifying our history and mythology unchallenged, many scholars and writers will have no choice but to live the life of a fugitive cradling vignettes of a culture which once celebrated the extravagance of diversity. ■

Bhaskar Roy